

Voices of Ethiopian immigrant women

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journals.sagepub.com/home/isw**Sarah Moore Oliphant**

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Abstract

This qualitative research article explored the lived experience of Ethiopian immigrant women in the Washington, DC, metropolitan area. Data were collected through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with 14 participants. The themes that emerged included the important role family members who already lived in the United States played in connecting participants with housing, jobs, and educational opportunities.

Keywords

Ethiopian, immigrant, lived experience, qualitative, women

Immigration to the United States from African nations is growing exponentially. Black African immigration grew by approximately 200 percent in the 1980s and 1990s and almost 100 percent during the 2000s (Capps et al., 2012). Female African immigrant populations in the United States are growing faster than male African immigrant populations (Djamba and Kimuna, 2011). Despite the growing population, there has been limited research examining the African immigrant population (Mott, 2006), with most of what does exist focusing on Black immigrant men (Djamba and Kimuna, 2011; Wilson and Habecker, 2008).

Women's roles as wage laborers, family members, heads of households, mothers, union members, and participants in community, school, and church organizations demonstrate the complexity in women's immigration and adaptation processes (Zentgraf, 2002). How these women are integrated into formal and informal systems in their communities has weighty consequences for women individually in terms of standard of living as well as social support and resiliency (Timberlake et al., 2003).

Washington, DC, is an emerging gateway for African immigrants in the United States; 11.2 percent of the metro area's immigrant population is African (Singer, 2004). In order for social workers and other policy makers to provide culturally competent community-based interventions to enable healthy transitions for African immigrant women, it is imperative to understand their lived immigration experiences. This article reports findings from a qualitative study with the

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research aim of understanding the lived experience of one subset of African immigrants, Ethiopian immigrant women.

This article will first review the literature to contextualize the experiences of Ethiopian women. Next, the article will discuss the methodology of this qualitative study and report the findings. Finally, there will be a discussion of the findings and their implications for further research to inform social work policy and practice.

Literature review

Ethiopia is a land-locked country in eastern Africa that is approximately almost twice the size of the state of Texas, with an estimated population of almost 94 million (93,877,025). Ethiopia is the most populated land-locked country in the world. Ethiopia and its bordering nations, Djibouti, Eritrea, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, and Sudan, comprise what is called the Horn of Africa, a region that has been the site of crushing violent conflict during the past half century (Terrazas, 2007). Ethiopia is situated in the Great Rift Valley, which is geologically active and makes the country vulnerable to earthquakes, volcanoes, and frequent droughts (Central Intelligence Agency [CIA], 2013).

The population of Ethiopia is ethnically and linguistically diverse with approximately 80 ethnic groups (Milkias, 2011). The CIA (2013) World Factbook uses Ethiopian 2007 census data to report the various ethnic groups. The largest 11 ethnic groups comprise 88.7 percent of the population, with the remaining 11.3 percent made up of small groupings of people. The Ethiopian 2007 census also identifies 12 languages (with an 'other' category, which comprises 11.7% of speakers) including the official national languages of Amharic, Arabic, and English.

Another important contextual piece in understanding Ethiopian immigrants is the political history of their nation. Unlike much of Africa, Ethiopia is not the product of European colonization. In its 3000-year history dating back to the Axumite Empire, it was occupied for only 5 years (1936–1941) by Italy (CIA, 2013; Terrazas, 2007). Modern day Ethiopia is instead one country comprising many ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups, which at times has been the source of ethnic conflict.

From 1930 to 1974, Ethiopia was ruled by Emperor Haile Salassie, who brought westernization to Ethiopia in the form of secondary schools, airplanes, and radio stations, all the while claiming absolute power according to divine right. During the Salassie empire, there was little emigration from Ethiopia, except for the few elites Selassie encouraged to study abroad to receive Western educations and return home. During the feudalism of the Salassie regime, women were mostly rural subsistence farmers who married early and were of lower status than men. They worked hard at home and on the farm, but poverty and destitution were prevalent among the majority of the population (Milkias, 2011; Terrazas, 2007).

In 1974, revolution erupted in Ethiopia and Salassie was overthrown by a military regime called the Derg, which instituted a socialist state (Milkias, 2011). Hundreds of thousands fled from Ethiopia during the Derg regime (1974–1991) due to the forced resettlement, ethnic violence, drought, and famine, as well as conflict between Ethiopia and neighboring Somalia. In addition, those who were relatively secure were still suffering from oppressive poverty; World Bank estimates suggest that unemployment for men in 1978 was 12 percent and 31 percent for females (CIA, 2013; Terrazas, 2007):

It is impossible to distinguish those individuals who left for political reasons from those who left because of poverty and economic stagnation – often there was an element of both – but, overwhelmingly, the international community agreed that the outflow from Ethiopia was a refugee crisis. (Terrazas, 2007, para 5)

The Derg was overthrown by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) in 1991, a constitution was adopted in 1994, and the first multi-party elections were held in 1995

(CIA, 2013). However, there have been many barriers to the reality of free and fair elections (Milkias, 2011). Additionally, Eritrea's fight for independence from Ethiopia has been a source of violent conflict periodically in the decades since Emperor Selassie declared Eritrea to be a province of Ethiopia in 1961 (Terrazas, 2007). The ongoing war with Eritrea ended in December 2000 with a peace treaty. However, Ethiopia still has not withdrawn troops from all contested areas of Eritrea. One major consequence of the conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea was the forcible expulsion of Ethiopians of Eritrean descent.

Ethiopia deals not only with the history of political governmental abuses, but the current situation in which international observers report many human rights abuses, some of which include the following:

arbitrary killings; allegations of torture, beating, abuse, and mistreatment of detainees by security forces; reports of harsh and at times life threatening prison conditions; arbitrary arrest and detention ... infringement on citizens privacy rights ... restrictions on academic freedom; restrictions on freedom of assembly, association, and movement; ... police, administrative, and judicial corruption; societal discrimination against persons with disabilities; clashes between ethnic minorities ... (U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 2013: 1–2)

Ethiopia's history of political conflict and current human rights violations have had a particular impact on women. The armed conflicts cause women to leave rural areas and head to the urban centers in search of jobs. Often they bring their children with them to the cities. However, the women often do not have job skills or education and face limited job opportunities. There is a '... paucity of food, shelter, spiraling cost of living, and dire sanitary conditions. For survival, many [sic] have no choice but to go into prostitution' (Milkias, 2011: 223). Studies on sex workers in Ethiopia report that 7.1 percent of women in the capital engage in multiple partner sexual contact, with the majority of that involving prostitution. When women and girls leave their rural homes to make a living in the city, they are often initiated into sex work by brokers who literally wait at bus stops. Furthermore, the particular impact on women in Ethiopia include human rights violations: '... violence and societal discrimination against women and abuse of children; female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C); trafficking in persons ...' (U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 2013: 1–2). Indeed, 80 percent of women in Ethiopia have undergone FGM, even though it is illegal and punishable by 5–10 years in prison. However, there have been no prosecutions of the practice, and most Ethiopians believe that girls will not be able to find husbands if they do not undergo this surgical procedure, which seams together the female genitalia (Milkias, 2011). Prostitution and human rights violations, including FGM, offer specific reasons why women, in particular, might choose to emigrate from Ethiopia.

The political history and current situation offer insight into the experiences of the individuals who emigrate from Ethiopia. Indeed, 'Caught in the crossfire, the region's population has shifted back and forth across international borders seeking refuge not only from violence, but also from poverty, famine, natural disasters, failed states, and repressive governments' (Terrazas, 2007, para. 2). This article examines the life of immigration to the United States that many Ethiopian women have chosen and explores their lived experience in the United States, specifically in the Washington, DC, metro area, after their migration journey.

Methodology

The guiding research question is, 'What is the lived experience of Ethiopian immigrant women in Washington DC?' Constructivist and subjectivist inquiry paradigms are the most appropriate

for this study's research questions because only the participant can share her perspective and give voice to her inner thoughts and how she made sense of her immigration experience. It is through rich, emic data that the personally constructed meanings can be understood by the outsider. As each participant told of her experience as an immigrant, the aspects she emphasized and the questions she answered were also influenced by the perspective of the researcher, thus creating a co-constructed reality. The knowledge that is created from this qualitative study is a construction of the participant and her effort to make sense of what she has experienced – within the context of her shared understanding, her biases, her previous experience, and her language. Additionally, the actual interview experience created an opportunity for co-construction of knowledge. The biases of the researcher inevitably shaped the lens from which the meaning of the participants' words were received and the themes that were extracted for analysis.

Qualitative content analysis

The methodological approach for this study is qualitative content analysis, which Hsieh and Shannon (2005) define as 'a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns' (p. 1278). Specifically, the approach is conventional content analysis, which treats the interview transcript as a text to be analyzed through open coding of transcript texts, theme identification, and analysis of themes compared to existing theory (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005; Potter and Levine-Donnerstein, 1999; Teater, 2011). Because the participant is making her own sense of experiences in her life, this methodology clearly fits with the constructivist and subjectivist stances that emphasize the construction of knowledge as well as the importance of the co-construction interaction between researcher and participant. Conventional content analysis is used when a study's purpose is descriptive and when literature and theory on the subject are limited (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). Therefore, the approach is appropriate for this study because there are limited data on Ethiopian immigrant women and no published literature on Ethiopian women immigrants to the United States, as explored in this study.

Sample

The sample size of this study is 14 participants. The focus on interviewing women is designed to address the gap in the literature on African women's immigration experiences. Therefore, there was no inclusion criterion (such as age of immigration, legal or refugee status, or ability status) beyond women emigrating as adults (18 and over) from Ethiopia who can participate in an interview in English.

A non-random sample was recruited through a variety of recruiting methods including the following:

- Posted and distributed copies of a recruitment flyer to a wide variety of individuals, businesses, churches, organizations, and on-line list serves;
- Visited Ethiopian restaurants;
- Visited Ethiopian community centers;
- Visited several Ethiopian/Amharic language service churches to distribute flyer;
- Utilized technology and social media;
- Distributed recruitment flyers at public libraries;
- Talked with the coordinator of the intensive Adult ESL public school program;

- Reached out to the Catholic Refugee Migrant program and emailed the Ethiopian Embassy in Washington, DC;
- Sent recruitment flyers to professional Ethiopian contacts, including academic professors in African studies programs at several local universities.

The recruitment and interviewing process took well over a year, with most outreach resulting in no willing participants. However, the researcher did eventually recruit 14 participants, including one person who was actually born in Eritrea. The researcher included her in the study because she had spent the majority of her adult life in Ethiopia and self-identified as Ethiopian. Furthermore, she did indeed emigrate from Ethiopia to the United States.

Interview guide

The interview guide was developed by the researcher specifically for this study and is informed by social capital theory. The interview guide draws heavily from the household section of the Social Capital Assessment Tool (SOCAT), which is used by the World Bank to measure social capital (Grootaert and Van Bastelaer, 2002). The interview guide and recruitment flyer were evaluated by an expert reviewer for their relevance and beta tested by a panel of three native Ethiopian speakers in order to ensure their language appropriateness for the sample population. The feedback from the native speakers was informative and used to make several changes.

The interview guide included probes – or follow-up questions based on previous answers – which were used to clarify answers the participants gave, steer the interview in a different direction, or deepen particular issues. The researcher utilized probes to different degrees in each interview. Padgett (2008) explains, ‘for some interviewees, one question will release the floodgates ...’ (p. 111). However, at times probes were helpful to return to an issue that was embedded in a longer answer. Additionally, other participants were more reluctant to share and probes were needed to draw out deeper responses.

Data collection

The researcher collected data by conducting individual, face-to-face interviews with 14 participants. She conducted and recorded each interview with a hand-held digital recorder, then submitted the recording to a professional transcription service whose employee had signed a confidentiality agreement.

Interviews were conducted in English. The decision to write the interview guide in English and conduct the interviews in English, not in Amharic with the assistance of an interpreter, was a deliberate choice the researcher made after considering the underlying meanings and implications. The researcher concluded that she wanted to conduct the interviews in English – without an interpreter – in order to engage on a more personal level with the participants. This decision was made after weighing the understanding that restricting interviews to English limited the sample. It could also possibly skew the sample in favor of women who had more schooling before they arrived (and thus a chance to learn English in school in Ethiopia), those who had been in the United States longer (and thus a better chance to learn English), or those who were younger and more educated.

In sum, conducting the interviews in English allowed direct communication between the researcher and participant without the problem of filtering that would be faced if an interpreter were utilized. The presence of only the participant and the researcher also strengthened the confidentiality of the interview process. This is especially important for women who may be refugees or

have other traumatic experiences to share (Dass-Brailsford, 2007). Limitations to the use of English include language barriers in capturing the richness of the data as well as possible class bias in the sample if women of higher socio-economic status are more likely to participate because of greater English language skills. However, although English may not be the first language of the participants, it is the major foreign language taught in schools in Ethiopia (CIA, 2013) and is widely spoken – arguably across the socio-economic spectrum.

The interviews were conducted at a variety of locations based on the preference of the participant. Locations throughout the Washington, DC, metro area (District of Columbia, Virginia, and Maryland) ranged from public libraries (both in meeting rooms and in chairs in the open library), to restaurants, to sitting in the researcher's car.

The first interview served as a pilot interview. The pilot interview also gave the researcher an opportunity to recognize that the interview guide questions sometimes needed to be simplified or re-explained in a less formal manner for the participant to understand. In general, however, there were no major changes needed to the interview guide based on the pilot interview and therefore the data were included.

Data analysis

The transcript data from 14 interviews were analyzed by coding with Atlas.ti scientific software. The data transcripts were analyzed through qualitative content analysis, which requires immersion in the data as a whole, followed by deriving codes in the text that capture key concepts. The researcher derived a total of 315 codes including 'remittances', 'language barrier', 'second shift', and 'share food'. Then, initial codes were sorted into categories with themes arising from related codes and categories (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005; Teater, 2011). The researcher worked on grouping the codes into relevant 'code families' including 'immigration type', 'entry level jobs', and 'student organizations'. Conventional content analysis was used to identify data themes derived not from outside theories, but from the interview data itself (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). As Hsieh and Shannon (2005) explain, 'The advantage of the conventional approach to content analysis is gaining direct information from study participants without imposing preconceived categories or theoretical perspectives' (p. 1280). The researcher identified codes that were repeated 10 or more times in the transcripts as important to look into deeper. Some codes and code families such as 'family in the U.S.' (50 references) and 'comparison between U.S. and Ethiopia' (39 references) emerged as important themes. The researcher organized the interview data into three distinct phases that capture the chronological aspects of the immigration experiences: beginning a new life, finding a place in a new community, and seeking belonging and a sense of home (see Table 1).

Rigor and trustworthiness

In this study, the process of describing the research methodology and content analysis, keeping a reflexivity journal, and peer debriefing were ways that the researcher worked to increase trustworthiness. In addition, it would have been ideal to share a copy of the transcript and/or final write-up with the participants to ensure that the message conveyed was true to the message each intended. However, with the intense focus on confidentiality, member checking was not feasible in this study. Many participants did not give full names or contact information. They were also promised that identifying information would not be kept, thus making re-connecting to review transcripts or analysis difficult.

Table 1. Phases and themes emerging from interview data.

Phase	Theme
<p><i>Phase 1</i> Beginning a new life: The role of family and friends in the lives of Ethiopian immigrant women</p>	<p><i>Theme 1</i> Family members who already lived in the United States were essential in connecting participants with housing, jobs, and educational opportunities.</p>
<p><i>Phase 2</i> Finding a place in a new community: The definitions of community and role of community organizations</p>	<p><i>Theme 2</i> The church community provides a social home and sense of community as women learn to adjust to a new land.</p>
<p><i>Phase 3</i> Seeking belonging and a sense of home: Navigating trust, communication, and belonging in a new world</p>	<p><i>Theme 3</i> The feeling of belonging grows over time and with experiences that help one feel comfortable in new surroundings.</p>

One way to increase the trustworthiness of a study is through the use of reflexivity – or ‘systematic self-awareness’ (Padgett, 2008: 180), which manages the subjectivity of the researcher in qualitative research. In this study, the researcher used the tool of a reflexivity journal to identify bias as well as record the process of recruiting and interviewing. She wrote about each aspect of the research process – writing and beta testing the interview guide, recruiting participants, conducting her pilot interview and deciding which changes needed to be made, continuing her interviews, finding a transcriptionist, and coding and analyzing the data. This process keeps a clear record for the researcher to consult in her own process as well as a detailed record to share in her peer debriefing process. In this study, the researcher also sought to increase trustworthiness and rigor through engaging in peer debriefing – through personal conversations, email correspondence, and sharing her journal entries. The researcher engaged in peer debriefing throughout the research process – research design, recruiting and data collection, coding and analysis, and writing up the findings.

Findings

This article examines the first phase of the women’s immigration experience: beginning a new life. The events of arrival, finding a place to live, securing a job, and enrolling in school are discussed. During this phase, what emerged as an overarching theme was the importance of family members in assisting with the events and challenges of the adjustment to a new life, regardless of age, marital status, or immigration type. Overviews of the demographics of the participants are captured in Tables 2 and 3.

Airport arrival

The moment of arrival in the United States was a vivid memory for the participants. It was the end of a previous life and the beginning of a whole new one. Only two participants [P2, P3¹] arrived traveling with family members; one [P5] arrived with a hired smuggler to help her get into the country. The remainder traveled alone to the United States, but were often greeted by family or friends at the airport. The range of family members who were waiting at the airport included cousins [P4], uncle and grandmother [P8], aunt [P11], sister and brother [P12], uncle and aunts [P14], and sister [P10]. Two of the participants had visited the United States prior to their immigration, so they had past experience to draw upon. However, for several of the

Table 2. Demographics of participants at the time of immigration to the United States.

Descriptor	Frequency
Age of immigration to the United States (years)	
18–19	5
20–25	5
26–30	2
31–39	0
40–49	1
50–59	1
Marital status at the time of immigration	
Never married	10
Married	4
Divorced	0
Parental status at the time of immigration	
Children	5
No children	9
Immigration type	
Family or personal asylum/refugee	4
Diversity visa	5
Student visa	1
Visitor visa	2
Not disclosed	2
Participants with family in the United States prior to arrival	
Yes	11
No	3

participants, the day they immigrated was the first time they had stepped foot in the United States. For one participant [P8], not only was it her first time in the United States, but it was the first time she had left the town in which she had grown up. Both Participants 8 and 10 mentioned it was their first time on an airplane. Participant 10 remembered, ‘When I got on the plane, because that was my first time on a plane, I almost felt like it’s surreal, honestly. It’s like: “Oh my God, I’m going to – this is going to be my first flight”’.

Fear was a strong emotion that was captured as the women shared their first impressions of arriving in the United States. Participant 14 said, ‘I was shocked ... and scared. Because I didn’t know what’s going to happen, you know. It was completely different. I’ve never travelled alone before, so I was scared’. Traveling alone across the world and walking into an airport filled with people can be frightening and overwhelming. One participant shared what she was thinking when she stepped off the plane. She was going to be met by her brother’s wife’s sister’s husband, whom she had never met. She was being picked up by this man who she would later love so much she called her cousin. But that first day, she did not even know what he looked like. She recalled,

I feel like I’m lost because it was crowded in the airport ... So I feel like, oh, am I going to find that person? If I don’t find, what am I going to do? I don’t even know much English ... [P13]

These women were fearful, but also hopeful as they embarked on an entirely new life. Participant 10 described the experience as follows:

Table 3. Personal demographics of participants at time of the interview.

Descriptor	Frequency
Current age at the time of interview (years)	
20–29	6
30–39	3
40–49	3
50–59	1
60–69	1
Years lived in the United States	
5 or less	4
6–10	3
11–20	5
More than 20	2
Marital status at the time of interview	
Never married	5
Married	9
Divorced	0
Parental status at the time of interview	
Children	7
No children	7

There was something ... hinging ... on my throat. It's bittersweet ... You know you have a future ahead of you, that future is uncertain, and yet, you have to get away from that place because you need that change in your life, right?

In addition to being met at the airport by family members, the women had interactions with other people immediately upon their arrival. These initial contacts left indelible marks in the memories of the women. One participant told the story of exiting the plane at the Dulles, VA, airport. The passengers from the flight, which had been a non-stop flight from Ethiopia, were greeted by four or five Ethiopian women employees. She related, 'I was extremely relieved and at the same time, shocked to see, at the exit, women – Ethiopian women – waiting for Ethiopian passengers, to help them. And, that was for me, it was extraordinary ...' [P10]. She said that the woman helped her call her sisters who were elsewhere in the airport waiting to pick her up. She said of the Ethiopian women greeters, 'Those people are like, they save you' [P10]. She also had a positive experience with the customs agent who was familiar with Ethiopian immigrants. As a background, she explained that it is common for Ethiopian people to pack very few clothes and other possessions and to mostly fill one's luggage with Ethiopian spices for cooking upon arrival in the United States. When she arrived at the customs agent, she said,

The guy ... was like, What do you have? berbere and kibbeh? Like those are the butter and the pepper, right? They are so familiar with the whole thing because there's a lot of Ethiopians carrying that stuff every day. [P10]

She appreciated the familiarity of finding women from Ethiopia to greet her and a customs agent who knew the name of her spices.

Participants experienced a range of emotions and impressions that were informed by mainstream media, their own imagination, and reports from friends and family in the United States. Some had expectations, others were trying to limit expectations.

Living arrangements

After the initial arrival, each participant needed basic food and shelter. Those participants with family members in the United States were all met by relatives at the airport and stayed with them for varying lengths of time. Aunts, uncles, daughters, and cousins hosted their family members after arrival [P1, P6, P8, P9, P10, P11, P12, P14]. Being able to stay with family already living in the United States eased the transition for the participants. One participant [P11] said she stayed with her aunt: 'She picked me up from the airport and she gave me all the accommodation and everything. Almost she sponsored me for everything so it was not challenging for me that way.' Participants described staying with family members for 8 months [P1], 1.5 years [P14], and 4 years [P6] before moving into other living arrangements. Others reported that they have lived the entire time since their immigration with the family members who were already living here when they arrived [P8, P9, P11].

Not all participants who had family in the United States lived with them, however. One participant [P2] had a brother and other family in the area, but did not stay with them. She and her family stayed in a hotel for 5 nights and then rented their own apartment. Another [P3] arrived with her family of five; her relatives in the United States rented a basement apartment for them and had it ready for them upon their arrival. She related,

My aunts ... couldn't take us all in ... because there's five of us ... What they did was they rented a basement of a townhouse, and that townhouse was luckily owned by Ethiopians. So it was nice to have some Ethiopians around.

Although one participant [P4] was picked up by a cousin at the airport, she stayed with a close family friend for 4 or 5 months.

Those women without family in the United States found alternative housing solutions. One woman [P13] stayed with family friends whom she considered so close she began referring to them as cousins. Another participant [P7] first arrived in Chicago – assigned to the city by the refugee organization that arranged her first living arrangements. She recalled being very unhappy with the situation. The participant [P5] who described her entry into the United States as 'being smuggled' said she had planned to stay with people connected to the man she had hired to smuggle her. She explained, 'He said he has brothers and cousins who live in Dallas. So I'm going to stay with them until I report to the immigration, and I can ask asylum staying with them'. However, things changed once they arrived at the airport. She continued,

We travelled together and he just disappeared from me at the airport, so I can't say anything. And then I found this Ethiopian taxi driver ... luckily in Dallas, Texas, this taxi driver he took me to his friend's house. [P5]

She felt 'lucky' to find an Ethiopian taxi driver who drove her to one of his Ethiopian friend's place to stay the night. She remembered that first night: 'Actually I was very comfortable because she is a very bubbly person, and she made me feel like home ...' [P5]. This woman was a complete stranger, but shared an Ethiopian heritage with the participant.

The women found housing primarily through the generosity of family members already living in the United States, although others also received housing through family friends and one through the kindness of strangers.

Finding employment

The search for employment – both the first time and throughout the time in the United States – was one of the common struggles faced by the women in this study. Additionally, the types of jobs that

the women secured, especially at first, were labor intensive. The common themes of unexpected, different, and difficult work emerged through the stories of the participants. Another theme that was repeated was the participants' working multiple jobs, second shifts, and long hours.

Some of the women's most poignant memories were associated with their first experiences working in the United States. The participants spoke of taking multiple jobs – a day shift and a night shift. They reported language barriers being particularly difficult in the workplace. They also talked about the process of moving from first job to second job as well as the journey from accepting any work available to transitioning into careers they desired. Overall, the Ethiopian network of friends and family already in the United States emerged as a factor in the participants' ability to secure employment.

Participant 2 worked at a grocery store for more than 6 months while she was searching for a professional job. She said she first started teaching part time with an IT company. Once her work permit was processed, she was hired full time with that same IT company. She is an example of how the Ethiopian community helped her find employment. She said she found the job '... through the community. The guy who owns this teaching place, he's an Ethiopian. That's how I found out' [P2].

Participant 1 worked at 7-Eleven for almost 3 years. She is an example of the participants joining the network in the United States to help future immigrants find a place in the system. She said that she serves as a link for jobs to Ethiopians who arrive in the United States:

Always I hire many people to 7-Eleven. 7-Eleven is my friend, the manager I have experience over there. When it comes somebody from Ethiopia, anybody, let's go. Fill the application here, let's go. I hire a lot of people.

Participant 5 is another example of finding a job through Ethiopian connections. She also demonstrates the theme that many of the women worked more than one job at a time. She got her first job working at a night club that a family friend from Ethiopia owned in DC. She worked that job at night and then found a daytime job through another Ethiopian friend. Her friend had worked for the owner of a holiday shop in the mall and referred her to the shop owner and she got the job.

Participant 7 talked about wanting to contribute financially and send money to her family back in Ethiopia. She put off going to school so she could earn money – working two jobs waitressing and a third as a café cashier. She said that when she arrived in DC after being in Chicago, Seattle, and San Francisco, the situation was better for minorities than it had been in the other cities, and she was able to get a job (or three) right away. These common themes of unexpected, different, and difficult work along with working multiple jobs emerged through the stories of the participants.

One challenge in the employment arena was the language barrier. Participant 13 remembered her interview for a cashier position at Goodwill Thrift Store where they asked her how much a quarter is worth, and she did not know. Participant 12 told of the language barrier she faced in her retail job, a job at a store she compared to a Wal-Mart. She recalled a story of a customer asking for 'Dove'. She told the woman they did not have any. The customer was upset: 'And she tell my supervisor, "She told me that they don't have." "Why did you say that?" "Because we don't sell birds." "No, it's not bird. It's a kind of soap"' [P12]. Clearly, the language and cultural barriers emerged at difficult times for many of the participants in the employment arena.

In addition to learning to count change, use a cash register, and know the brands of products, the sheer physical challenges of many of the jobs available to the participants were overwhelming. As a young 20-year-old, Participant 7 took a job as a housekeeper at the Four Seasons Hotel in Seattle. She said housekeeping is the hardest job and she could not keep up; one day she actually passed out in one of the guest rooms. Participant 8 worked multiple jobs including cleaning airplanes between flights during the night, taking a bus to get home to sleep for 1 hour and then starting a

day job at CVS in the morning. She said she could only juggle working day and night for about 6 months: 'It was really hard for me, like I suffered a lot.'

The physical demands of laborious jobs, long and multiple shifts, as well as the mental demands of overcoming language barriers and cultural differences, were challenges that women faced in the process of seeking and maintaining employment. However, they were almost universally aided in finding employment via a family member, friend, or member of the Ethiopian community who helped connect them to a job.

Pursuing education

One way many of the participants moved from grueling manual jobs or the burden of multiple jobs was to pursue training and advanced education. Similar to job finding, family and friends already in the United States were instrumental in assisting the participants in accessing the educational system.

For some participants, the main reason for immigrating was to pursue their education. Participant 3 immigrated with her immediate family because her parents were concerned about their children being assigned to colleges outside of Addis Ababa to areas of Ethiopia that they did not consider safe. In fact, Participant 2 had already begun college in Ethiopia when her family won the Diversity Visa lottery. She came with them to the United States and 6 months later started attending college. She reported that her aunts who were already living in the United States and her father who immigrated with her were integral in helping her start her American college experience, including admissions forms and language placement tests.

Participant 5 viewed her employment as an avenue to pay for her education, which she had not pursued in Ethiopia. She worked multiple jobs so she could send money to her family as well as enroll in the University of the District of Columbia (UDC) after being in the United States for almost 2 years. After taking a required accounting class, her professor noticed her aptitude for accounting and recommended she change her major to accounting. Although he was not part of her Ethiopian network of connections, certainly it can be argued that this person played an important part in her educational path. She followed his suggestion and graduated in accounting.

Participant 8 was enrolled for college in Ethiopia when she received news that she had won the lottery for a Diversity Visa. She took the opportunity to come to the United States, lived with her uncle, and worked for 3 years in various jobs. Participant 9 also immigrated for the purpose of higher education. She had been assigned to a university that was outside of Addis Ababa and her parents did not want her to go there. Since she had an aunt living in the United States, they decided to send her to live with her aunt and attend college in the United States.

While Participant 13 was working at a Goodwill Thrift store for 2 years, she met friends who were working and going to school part-time. They helped her learn about some of the programs available and encouraged her to sign up for a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) program. In this situation, friends in the United States played a role in helping her learn about educational opportunities and institutions as well as giving her encouragement to try to further her education.

The women in this study comprised a range of educational levels when they arrived in the United States. Some had college degrees already, while others had just finished high school. Furthermore, once in the United States some successfully completed graduate degrees, while others worked on 4-year degrees or associates degrees. Others did not go to school in the United States at all. Those who did pursue educational goals in the United States, however, did rely on support from family and friends who were already there.

Discussion and implications

The findings of this study provide a glimpse into the lived experience of Ethiopian immigrant women in Washington, DC. One contribution of this study was to give voice to 14 Ethiopian women who immigrated to the United States. Their stories have captured rich life experiences. They have talked of finding jobs and seeking education. They have discussed the relationships that have helped them most in their transition to a new world. They have identified institutions like churches and personal interactions with friends, neighbors, and even strangers. They have shared about accepting help at their most needy moments and the satisfaction of being able to be the giver of help to others in need.

The 14 women in this study are an example of the resilience of the human spirit. From political oppression and fear for safety in their homeland to working menial jobs day and night in their new home, these women persevered. They sought education, and they saved money and sent it back to their families. They navigated legal requirements to bring family members here, to gain citizenship, to buy homes, and earn degrees. They relied on family members already in the United States to help them find jobs, housing, and education. They faced challenges including language barriers, physical and mental difficulties, and cultural differences. They relied on family, friends, and even strangers in the Ethiopian community as they began their new life.

Future research

Clearly, the population of Ethiopian immigrant women has been neglected in the literature. There is a need for replications of this study in other communities throughout the United States in order to learn what aspects are unique to the immigrant community in the Washington, DC area. Future research should build on this study to gain more understanding of the lives and experiences of Ethiopian immigrant women. Bringing their voices and experiences to light will enable social workers and the larger society to both assist them in their journey and more fully benefit from their strength and contributions. Micro, mezzo, and macro social work practice with Ethiopian immigrant women can be strengthened by incorporating the importance of extended families and friends when working with Ethiopian immigrant communities. Furthermore, social work policy practice should be informed by the lived experiences of women immigrants when advocating for policies impacting African immigrants.

Social work policy makers would have a greater grasp of the circumstances of Ethiopian immigrant women in the United States if they had data from a large sample that examined indicators such as income level, marriage status, parental status, education level, and legal status. Comparative research by gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status would also help create a clearer picture of the issues affecting these communities, especially given the ethnic/identity diversity within the Ethiopian immigrant community. Suggested research questions include the following:

- Is there a relationship between location of family already living in in the United States and the city of settlement of Ethiopian immigrant women in the United States?
- Is there a relationship between gender, legal status, parental status at the time of immigration, and educational attainment among Ethiopian immigrants in the United States?
- Is there a relationship between religion, ethnicity, English language proficiency, and the city of arrival for Ethiopian women immigrants to the United States?
- What are the most important factors that affect career choice among Ethiopian immigrant women in the United States?

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Note

1. Participants in the study will not be identified by name. Rather they will be identified by participant number, which will either be written out or bracketed following the reference to the participant. For example Participant 1 would be bracketed [P1].

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