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THE CONSTRUCTION OF ERITREAN WOMEN'S IDENTITY IN THE CANADIAN CONTEXT

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts
Department of Adult Education, Community Development and Counselling Psychology
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This research is about Eritrean-Canadian immigrant women and their political and cultural experiences in Eritrea as well as their adjustment experiences in Canada and the impact of these experiences on their identity. While past socio-political and cultural backgrounds construct identities, the complex adjustment process in Canada continuously re-defines identities, resulting in a range of outcomes from new synthesized Eritrean-Canadian identities to culture conflict and resistance. The intersection of race, ethnicity and gender within the structure of power relations in Canada contributes to Eritrean women's roles and identity as they adjust to a Western culture and different socio-political framework with balanced or conflicting allegiances to Eritrean national identity and Canadian citizenship. While the thesis studies the adjustment experiences of Eritrean-Canadian women in Toronto, it also lays some groundwork for understanding Eritrean nationalism and culture through the literature review and through the subject location of the researcher as an Eritrean-Canadian woman.
DEDICATION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research project is dedicated to all Eritrean women and especially to the women who genuinely and openly shared their life histories, thoughts, feelings and recommendations and who therefore made this thesis possible. Their experiences are a testament to the strength and courage Eritrean women embody. My dedication goes to the courageous Eritrean women fighters who struggled to attain independence for Eritrea and liberation for Eritrean women.

I am grateful to my thesis supervisor, Dr. Shahrzad Mojab, for her support throughout my program. I would also like to thank Dr. Joseph Farrell, member of my thesis committee and head of the Center for International, Development and Comparative Education at OISE/UT. I am grateful to Ephrem Woldeyesus for his guidance and words of wisdom. My gratitude also goes to Nazreth Mebrahtu and Amine Goyhteom who directed me to valuable references on Eritrea and Eritrean women and who gave me moral support throughout my studies and research.
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INTRODUCTION

Thousands of Eritreans have been settling in Canada especially since 1981 and increasingly since 1985. Most of these Eritreans prefer settling in Ontario and specifically Toronto with more women than men showing a higher preference for Toronto (Statistics Canada, 1996). This study is concerned with these Eritrean-Canadian immigrant women's identity construction with respect to their cultural values and socio-political experiences in Eritrea and the impact of their adjustment experiences in Canada on their identity. It also studies the intersection of race, ethnicity and gender within the power relations structure whose components shift in both the private and public realms in their adjustment experiences.

The first part of this thesis covers the purpose and rationale for the study which follow this introductory segment while the methodology section is divided into the four components of procedures, instruments, language and problems. The part on theoretical framework explains the analysis procedure. The second section of the thesis is the literature review which is subdivided into Eritrea and Eritrean national identity, Eritrean women in Eritrea, and Eritrean immigrant women in Canada. The third section covers five chapters. The first chapter is on Eritrean identity and covers feelings and views on Eritrean ethnic/national identity, struggle for independence, political experience and conditions of departure from Eritrea. Chapter two is concerned with Eritrean women’s culture and gender issues in Eritrea with respect to domestic roles, marriage and sexuality, education, employment as well as an assessment of both positive and negative aspects of Eritrean culture and focuses on women’s experiences in Eritrea. The third chapter shifts from life in Eritrea or Ethiopia to Eritrean women’s initial adjustment experiences in the Diaspora, including expectations of life in Canada, coming to Canada, education, employment, marriage and relationships, intergenerational issues and their socio-political extra-curricular activities. Chapter four is concerned with advanced adjustment issues and identity and covers the intersection of race and gender in identity construction within their adjustment and current
experiences as well as their sense of belonging in Canada. It also covers culture conflict between Eritrean and Western values and behavior, an assessment of both positive and negative aspects of Western culture, factors that assisted and/or hindered successful adjustment and thoughts on moving back to Eritrea. Chapter Five finally addresses recommendations for the Eritrean-Canadian immigrant community in Toronto to facilitate the adjustment of Eritreans and to strengthen the Eritrean community in Toronto and also summarizes the research findings. All the chapter headings and subheadings include quotations which have been taken directly from the participants as a means to encompass some or whole sections of the theme or gist under discussion.

Purpose

The purpose of this thesis research is to describe and analyze the national and cultural identities of Eritrean-Canadian women within the context of their adjustment experiences and problems in Toronto. The research objectives were to collect data pertaining to a) their personal demographic background as well their past socio-political experiences in Eritrea, Ethiopia, or elsewhere especially in relation to their Eritrean identity, struggle for national independence and gender and b) their adjustment experiences in Canada as well as c) possible policy recommendations that would facilitate the adjustment process for Eritreans and other immigrants from similar socio-political backgrounds.

The findings also help analyze how these Eritrean women view themselves and others in Toronto especially in terms of their cultural values and experiences, their adjustment experiences and mechanisms they have established or not established in dealing with adjustment problems. It also questions to what extent they have synthesized an Eritrean-Canadian identity.

The thesis concludes with possible recommendations arising from the findings which may help the Eritrean-Canadian community, Immigration and Citizenship Canada, Refugee
organizations, other immigrant groups and women’s groups in understanding the common and specific settlement problems encountered by Eritrean immigrants and other similar immigrant groups. Eritrean immigrant women in addition, have the dual task of integrating gender and cultural/national/political alliances from a political context of an identity formed through resistance and a thirty-year civil war. In conclusion, the researcher hopes that the research will introduce the little-known Eritrean community in Canada to the general Canadian public and that it will enable others to recognize and understand the cultural and/or socio-political backgrounds of these recent immigrants who are increasingly growing in number as members of the Canadian public.

Rationale

The majority of Canadians do not know where Eritrea is. They know even less about its long anti-colonial struggle, a fierce thirty-year war of independence from 1961 to 1991 against Ethiopia, which claimed the lives of over one million Eritrean civilians and fighters as well as thousands of Ethiopian soldiers. Eritrea’s history of foreign occupation whether by Egyptians, Turks, Italians, the British or by Ethiopians and especially the thirty year struggle for independence have thus marked Eritreans with a sense of resistance, self reliance and strong Eritrean nationalism.

During the independence struggle, Eritrea under the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF), underwent a radical social transformation where women’s traditional images and roles within a formerly highly patriarchal society were replaced with egalitarian gender relations (Connell, 1993; Silkin, 1990). In 1977 the EPLF introduced a new marriage law which reflected egalitarian relations by banning practices such as childhood betrothals/marriages, arranged marriages and dowries which had traditionally reinforced women’s subservient status. Massive land reforms were also implemented enabling women to inherit land. Moreover, the EPLF
actively encouraged the education of women and their socio-political participation in the liberation movement (Silkin, 1990; Wilson, 1991). One of the obvious manifestations of equal gender relations was the active participation of women in combat. Women comprised thirty percent of the guerrilla fighters. They also participated actively in traditionally male-dominated occupations as mechanics, engineers and doctors within the Sahel military base and in EPLF-occupied areas.

However, in spite of the EPLF's progressive platform, traditional Eritrean society still remains mostly patriarchal. The traditional cultural values pertaining to women are still embedded in the Eritrean psyche. These values are transferred and acted upon in other countries when Eritreans migrate.

During the war for independence between 1961 to 1991, and especially after the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution, a significant number of Eritreans and Ethiopians of Eritrean origin (Ethiopian-born Eritreans) fled both Eritrea and Ethiopia as refugees to various countries in search of peace and safety. Canada has seen an influx of Eritrean refugees and immigrants who have been settling predominantly in Ontario, specifically Toronto since 1981. Overall it is estimated that 40 percent of Eritrean-born males and females in Canada reside in Toronto. However, when the figures are disaggregated by sex, 63 percent of Eritrean-born women in Canada reside in Toronto (Statistics Canada, 1996). Although the official figures given for immigrants born in Eritrea residing in Toronto is 1,870, a large number of Ethiopian-born Eritreans are included in the 7,305 figure given for Ethiopians residing in Toronto. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect the number of Eritreans residing in Toronto to exceed by far the Statistics Canada figure of 1,870. The period 1981 to 1990 has seen the highest rate of immigrant arrivals from both Eritrea and Ethiopia.

The figure for Eritrean-born immigrants arriving in Toronto especially, declined almost by half in the 1991 to 1996 period from 1,130 in the 1981 to 1990 period to only 670 in the 1991 to 1996 period (Statistics Canada, 1996) which coincided with favorable political and
governmental changes in both Eritrea and Ethiopia. In 1991, the EPLF liberated Eritrea and with the joint effort of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) ousted the Dergue regime in Ethiopia. After the two-year Eritrean-proposed waiting period for a United Nations-observed referendum ended in 1993, Eritrea gained independence with a 99.8 percent overwhelming majority vote in favor of independence (Referendum Commission of Eritrea, 1993). However, Canada may see more Eritreans arriving in Canada due to the current border conflict and war with Ethiopia and the deportations of thousands of Eritreans from Ethiopia.

Within the Eritrean community in Toronto, while there is a strong sense of Eritrean identity and nationalism, there are cultural conflicts emerging among and especially between Eritrean men and women as well as between parents and Canadian-born or Canadian-raised children. These conflicts are related to the understanding and acceptance of Eritrean versus Canadian or Western cultural values, attitudes, behaviors and gender roles. As a result, the majority of Eritrean-Canadian immigrant women at community meetings, social gatherings and in private, have demanded the need for workshops and seminars to address and solve adjustment problems such as culture shock, intergenerational conflict with their children, marital breakdown, anxiety, depression, loneliness, unemployment and lack of recognition of their Eritrean/Ethiopian credentials for school and employment. While Eritrean women strive to adjust to Canadian society, they appreciate their Eritrean heritage and culture and are politically conscious since the majority of Eritreans have had first-hand traumatic experience of the war for liberation, the Dergue regime, imprisonment, torture or refugee internment.

Eritrean women in Eritrea are still undergoing a liberation struggle against a still-traditional patriarchal society which has strong implications for Eritrean-Canadian women in Toronto who have strong ties to Eritrea and who maintain Eritrean cultural values, yet who seek egalitarian gender relations. Former female fighters who actively contributed to the liberation struggle within the EPLF’s egalitarian framework are now facing sexist traditional practices and a negation of their hard-earned status. This struggle for women’s rights has now been
overshadowed by the current Eritrean-Ethiopian conflict and war which has sparked the deportations of over 32,000 Eritreans from Ethiopia (Eritrean News Agency [ENA], 1998) pushing Eritreans everywhere to a stronger and higher level of nationalism.

The experiences of Eritrean women in Canada cannot be seen apart from their struggle as Third World women of color resisting the interlocking aspect of race, ethnicity and gender within the context of a Western culture while women in Eritrea experience it from a context of resistance to foreign invasion or domination through an identity that includes the intersection of gender and ethnic nationalism. This intersection and negotiation of gender and ethnicity/race creates diversity among women in how they see and define themselves. Rumble (1990) stresses the need to understand that women of color cannot be simply brushed under the monolithic “Third World Woman” category (Sen & Grown, 1987) but must be seen and heard in their individual diversity.

The adjustment experiences of Eritreans in Toronto are complex and changing constantly. Researchers have identified several identity stages immigrants go through in the cultural adjustment or acculturation process (Berry, 1992; Krimer 1986; Rumble, 1990). As newcomers, immigrants such as Eritreans who are relatively unknown or unrecognized feel their invisibility and lack of voice. Similarly, lack of familiarity with the new social milieu and the loss of their country and loved ones left behind contribute to the need to reshape their identities for survival (Brown, 1987; Krimer, 1986; Rumble, 1990). Moreover, during the adjustment process, Eritrean immigrants are apt to confront the validity of their cultural values, attitudes and behavior especially if these values clash with established Western ones in Canada which may at times be directly contradictory.

The researcher hopes the research will introduce the very-little known subject of Eritreans and Eritrean women in Canada to the general Canadian public. Most of the very limited researches done on Eritreans have not been gender-specific. Moreover, researches done in Canada (Neuwirth, 1989; Tebeje, 1989) in the past have been neither Eritrean- nor gender-specific. Since most researches done in the pre-Eritrean independence period covered Eritrean women under
“Ethiopians” or “Ethiopian Women”, with the exception of Helene Moussa (1992, 1993) who did a study on both Eritrean and Ethiopian refugee women, the political context was muted and their voices were not heard. However, since these pre-independence researches, Eritrean women in Canada have voted for Eritrean independence and acquired Eritrean citizenship with some moving back to Eritrea. This research can therefore address their specific national/cultural identity and adjustment issues and problems. The results of this research can then be used by social service agencies, Citizenship and Immigration Canada, other immigrant groups, women’s groups and by Eritrean women themselves to help implement changes to policies, form networks and discussion forums to address adjustment problems and to get a better understanding of themselves as Eritrean-Canadian women.

**Methodology**

The research methodology is qualitative and descriptive as well as interpretive and uses a theoretical perspective of women’s location and identity construction through the intersection of race, ethnicity and gender in the power relations structure. Since the aim of such research is to understand women’s reality and work towards social change in gender relations, this research will attempt to address ways to enable Eritrean immigrant women adjust to Canadian culture without losing their ethnic identity or heritage as women understanding their location in the power structure both as women and as members of ethnic minorities. As qualitative research, the aim of the study is not to generalize but to describe and interpret the participants’ diverse experiences and adjustment problems as women and as Eritrean-Canadians in the Canadian context.

The research also acknowledges women’s diversity in gender consciousness especially among ethnic minority communities where ethnicity often overshadows gender. It is therefore important to approach the research with an understanding that research on immigrant women means not negating their experience as women and also as ethnic minorities (Ng, 1984a).
This research also acknowledges the researcher’s subject location within the research and the need to “start from one’s experience” which enable researchers to personally understand the research problem(s), define their questions and also create a rapport with participants as well as analyze the findings (Reinharz, 1992). In this research, I have employed my subject location as an Eritrean-Canadian woman in my understanding of my Eritrean identity and adjustment experiences in Canada during my interview interaction with the participants and in understanding the data. Although this may be seen as being subjective and as bringing in biases, Olesen (1994, p. 165) states that a researcher “… can evoke these as resources to guide data gathering or creating and for understanding her own interpretations and behavior in the research…” Similarly, Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992, p. 28) adds:

We cannot rid ourselves of the cultural self we bring with us into the field any more than we can disown the eyes, ears and skin through which we take in our intuitive perceptions about the new and strange world we have entered.

While the research describes Eritrean-Canadian women’s experience, it also attempts to analyze the reasons behind the experiences such as the ethnic, racial and or class contextual framework. Scott (1991, p. 779) sums this by stating, “Experience is at once always already an interpretation AND in need of interpretation.”

**Procedures**

**Instruments**

I used individual semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions to collect personal demographic data, personal and experiential data related to Eritrean national and cultural identity as well as data pertaining to participants’ immigration and adjustment experiences. There were approximately twenty interview questions divided into three major sections, with minor related questions or probes. All the interview questions were pilot-tested in November 1998 on
two volunteer Eritrean women to check their validity and acceptability. A copy of the Sample Questionnaire is included in Appendix B. The first section covered personal demographic data and moved to the experiential and political aspects of the participants' lives in Eritrea. The second section covered inquiries pertaining to initial adjustment experiences in Canada while the last section covered their experiences since settlement and possible policy recommendations regarding the adjustment process.

The verbal consent involved phoning or approaching the participants in person and informing them about my research project and the goals of the research and asking them whether it was acceptable to record the interview conversation and making an appointment. Most of the participants agreed to meet within a week of the phone conversations while one scheduled hers for two weeks and another scheduled it for three weeks after the initial phone conversation and I made sure I did check-ins to remind them of the date. Two women had to reschedule the interview due to their working schedule and bad weather, resulting in my having to undertake two interviews one afternoon on the same day. Fortunately, one of those interviews lasted a little over an hour while the other one took three hours.

Before the interviews started I informed the participants about their options and interview procedures both verbally and by written consent. A copy of the Consent Form given to the participants outlining the procedures and their options is included in Appendix A. The interviews were taped with the consent of each participant. None of the participants declined being recorded. Moreover, I asked each participant to choose an Eritrean name which she liked as her pseudonym. Two of the participants said they did not mind having their real names and identities used but their names have been changed for anonymity. The fact that I did not take notes but listened or conversed freely ensured a smooth flow of conversation and less interruptions with some participants commenting that they forgot they were actually being interviewed until I changed tape cassettes. Participants had the option of not having all or some of the interview recorded and in such cases were told that written notes would replace the tape recorder. In some
cases, the women told me to stop the tape recorder while they recounted very personal experiences or problems that they did not want included in the thesis or whenever they mentioned their real names while recounting previous dialogues with others. In some cases, the women were overtaken by emotion as they recounted painful or sad experiences and memories that I had to stop the tape recorder until they were composed.

The semi-structured interviews ensured the flexible use of related minor questions and probes which facilitated the easy flow of conversations. They also allowed flexibility in the questioning style and sequence of questions depending on each participant’s individual experience, communication skills, conversational style and pace. Some participants spoke faster and longer at times covering several of the themes before the questions were asked. Some chose to speak freely by starting from what they considered to be important in their lives. At times I realized that I too had become a participant as they asked me questions about my own personal life and experiences. A few of the participants also lent some advice from their experiences.

The interviews were scheduled to be one hour to an hour and a half in duration and were all carried out in a location of each participant’s choosing. However, due to the relaxed atmosphere and conversational style, most of the interviews lasted longer than one hour. Most ranged from one hour and a half to three hours while only two took approximately an hour each. All of the participants were very cooperative and some went out of their way from busy schedules and despite bad weather to come to the interviews. Most of the interviews were carried out in restaurants and cafes. Some were at the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education of the University of Toronto while one was at the participant’s home. Both the participants and I preferred a neutral setting to ensure confidentiality and a relaxed atmosphere during the interviews.

The Dictaphone transcriptions of the interviews were time-consuming and exhausting. Some transcriptions took longer than twenty hours especially if the interview participant spoke fast. In some cases the conversations were not as clear due to background noise and also due to some participants’ low voice. While transcribing the interview I had to rewind and listen to the
conversations repeatedly to clarify words or phrases. As a result, each transcription was different. Some participants spoke slowly while they organized their thoughts while some expressed their thoughts in fragmented ways without completing some sentences. Surprisingly, I discovered that the Tigrinya and Amharic transcriptions were easier than the English ones in spite of the additional work of translations they entailed. I found the interviews with fluent English longer to transcribe but I believe this coincided with the participants’ generous conversational style as well as the nature of English syntax.

Participants

The participants were selected out of a group of women that I know or those referred by other Eritreans in the Eritrean community in Toronto that I know as women willing to be interviewed about their Eritrean identity and adjustment experiences in Canada. After the initial group list was created, I finally selected ten participants who varied in their personal demographic backgrounds such as age, place of birth, religion, educational level, occupation, marital status, family size, English language proficiency and length of residency in Canada. However, the initial list of interview participants was altered slightly. One of the initial original candidates changed her mind and withdrew from the research as she felt she did not have enough knowledge of Eritrean culture to contribute to the research. One had a death in the family and was not available at the time of the interviews. Two potential candidates left on vacation and were out of the country during the interview schedule. However, since I had had a list of standby participants I selected three others who were as diverse as possible and secured their approval and participation. The final ten participants were all between the ages of eighteen and seventy, residing in Toronto. The need to retain the participants’ anonymity and safeguard privacy means that no single/individual participant profile has been built. Unfortunately, in order to safeguard
anonymity, some interesting examples, incidents and projects concerning the participants have been omitted acknowledging the limitations of doing research within a small community.

In terms of the breakdown of participants' backgrounds, one of the participants was in her twenties, three were in their thirties, three in their forties, one in her fifties and two in their sixties. Of these women, eight were born in Eritrea, while two were born in Ethiopia. Of these, five were raised in Eritrea until they were adults or until they had reached the age of eighteen while two were raised in Ethiopia and one in Canada. Two were raised in other countries after leaving Eritrea as teenagers. At the time of arrival, one had been under the age of ten, three had been in their twenties, four in their thirties and two in their sixties. On arrival, their marital statuses also varied. Four had been single, four married, one divorced and one widowed. Their family composition on arrival was equally divided. Five came alone and five came with their families. Two of those who came alone joined siblings, two joined their children and one had no family members on arrival. At the time of the interviews three of the women were single with no children. Three were divorced single mothers. Three were married with children. One was widowed with children. None of these women lived alone. One lived with a roommate while another lived with her siblings. One lived with her parents. Three lived with their spouses and their children. Four lived with their children. Of those who had children, two had Canadian-born children.

Nine of the participants were Christian from different denominations: Orthodox, Catholic and Lutheran, while one participant was Moslem. Before arriving in Canada, one was illiterate, one had been in kindergarten, one had completed Grade 11, one had completed high school, two had completed secretarial college, two had attended approximately one to two years of university, one had completed college in the Natural Sciences, and one had completed master's graduate studies. At the time of the interview, one participant still had no formal education and was illiterate, one had completed high school, two had gone to secretarial school after high school, one had completed college, five had completed university with one having a masters degree and
another working on hers on a part-time basis. At the time of arrival three had been students in Eritrea or Ethiopia, three had been secretaries, one a domestic worker, one a housewife and two social workers. At the time of the interviews two of the participants were unemployed. One worked in healthcare services, two worked in financial institutions, one was in tourism and one was a student. One was in a management position while another was in a clerical one. Another was self-employed and had her own business, which she operated from home.

In terms of English language proficiency, one understood some English but could not speak it. One had a low level of English. Four had good proficiency while four had excellent command of the English language, with one being bilingual in French and another who spoke three international languages in addition to English and French. Length of residency in Canada varied from six months to over fifteen years. One had been in Canada for six months. Six had been in Canada for six to ten years. Two had lived in Canada between eleven and fifteen years while one had resided in Canada for over fifteen years. Eight of the participants entered Canada as landed immigrants while one came as a refugee and another one came on a student visa. Four were sponsored by family members who were already in Canada while another four arrived in Canada as landed immigrants with their family. Eight first arrived in Toronto while two initially arrived in two other large Canadian cities before moving to Toronto. All but two were Canadian citizens. The other two were landed immigrants.

During my interview sessions and afterwards I realized how similar and yet how different the participants were from each other. Some had the same perspective of an issue while others saw the other perspective, at times standing as polar opposites and at times complementing one another, completing the whole picture like a finished jigsaw puzzle. I also realized that research involves self-discovery and that as a researcher I was also learning more about myself and having my views and values challenged or strengthened through the discussions. I realized how wrong some assumptions about Eritrean culture and women’s status are. I also realized how relative the definition of “sexism” is in Eritrea and in the Eritrean-Canadian community. One woman’s view
of sexism differs greatly from the next one. Interestingly, some of the younger participants did not find certain aspects of Eritrean culture sexist while some older ones did, contrary to my assumptions.

**Language used for Interviews**

I had anticipated that the majority of the participants would prefer to be interviewed in Tigrinya, one of the official languages of Eritrea or in Amharic since their language proficiency level might not be sufficient for a full scale interview. All the participants were therefore given the option of having the interviews conducted in English, Tigrinya or Amharic, whichever of these languages the interviewees were fluent in or more comfortable with and I did not require translators. I had also anticipated that some of the participants would use a mixture of English and Tigrinya or Amharic, which was common throughout most of the interviews all of which have been indicated in some parts of the thesis with quotations from the participants. During the actual interviews though, five of the women chose to be interviewed in English, while one woman used a combination of English, Tigrinya and Amharic. Three of the women used Tigrinya while one used Amharic. I have translated the Tigrinya and Amharic interviews into English with some Tigrinya and/or Amharic words and phrases of significance added to the final transcriptions to grasp certain nuances.

**Anticipated Problems**

The problems that I had anticipated in the interview process were related to the Eritrean cultural values and tendencies to modesty and secrecy in revealing one’s innermost feelings and real thoughts for fear of being judged or evaluated negatively or because of cultural upbringing. I had believed that this might be aggravated by the fact that I too am a member of the same Eritrean community as the participants and might make the latter feel exposed by someone who
may intimately know their experiences, feelings and thoughts and identify other community members. As a result, I felt that it was very important to interview willing and articulate participants who were not apprehensive about being judged by the researcher. This anticipation had further been confirmed by Helene Moussa’s doctoral (1992) research in which some of her participants had admitted that had she been Eritrean, they would not have been as willing to be open and honest about their experiences. However in my research, I was amazed by the warmth and openness the women showed. They were candid and expressive, recalling everything they could remember with a paradoxical combination of enthusiasm, humor and pain. Some of the women were more open than others who were more guarded which reflected personality differences more than anything else. However, I noted that the divorced participants were more candid about their relationships and aware of issues concerning women’s roles and status followed by the married ones although some of the single and married ones were also open and conscious about women’s issues.

One problem which I encountered was the need to edit very interesting and relevant accounts, incidents or projects because presenting them in their entirety would compromise the participants’ anonymity and identities. Since the Eritrean community is not only one of the smaller immigrant communities comparatively speaking, but also one where people know each other, the need to change names of places, dates and specific references to occasions was necessary.

**Theoretical Framework**

**Analysis of Transcriptions**

Once the interviews were transcribed, my next step was to search for conceptual categories from which common themes emerged. Three major conceptual categories emerged with themes that have been subdivided into sub-sections as outlined in the introduction. The first chapter or conceptual category is based on themes related to Eritrean national identity and
political experiences in Eritrea. The second chapter is concerned with themes involving women in Eritrea while the third one covers themes related to initial adjustment in Canada. The fourth chapter covers themes on race/ethnicity and gender identity as well as culture conflict while the last chapter is concerned with recommendations for the Eritrean-Canadian community in Toronto. These themes have been analyzed and interpreted using a theoretical framework based on a gender perspective of women’s location through the intersection of race, ethnicity and gender in the power relations structure in Canada. It has also analyzed the findings based on cultural resistance to Western culture and the contradictions or dynamics of gender equity and culture conflict in identity construction.

The experiences of immigrant women can be analyzed only through an analysis of gender within the context of historical, political and racial/ethnic difference which a Liberal Western Feminist framework might not address (Kirby, 1991). The majority of researches done by women of color (Collins, 1990; Davis, 1978; Dill, 1979; Lourde, 1981; Quintanalis, 1981) acknowledge the diversity among intersecting variables in women’s realities and the need to represent that diversity. The analysis will therefore be unable to divorce gender relations from racial or ethnic ones since they cannot be understood in isolation. Oppressive relations work simultaneously by reinforcing each other and by ensuring their constant reproduction. Both gender and racial/ethnic hierarchies are also intricately tied to class marginalization as evidenced by immigrant women’s position in the job market hierarchy and poor working conditions in the Industrial West and those of women in developing countries under Structural Adjustment programs.

The conceptual categories have also been analyzed through the various theories of immigrant adjustment (Berry, 1992; Brown, 1987; Michalowski, 1987) by using the synthesized Rumble (1990) model of adjustment and the impact of adjustment on identity construction. Eritrean women’s adjustment experiences have also been studied in relation to studies done on other immigrant groups (Boyd, 1987; Estable, 1986; Maraj, 1996; Modibo, 1995; Ng, 1984b,

**Literature Review**

**Introduction to Literature Review**

In order to give background information on Eritrean national and cultural identity as well as the adjustment experiences of Eritrean women in Toronto, the Literature Review has been divided into three summarized sections covering major areas. The first section covers theories of Eritrean national identity and gives a summarized historical analysis of the events leading to self-determination. The second section deals with women in Eritrea with the first part covering traditional Eritrean society and women’s roles and the latter part covering changes in their roles during the social transformation in the struggle for independence. The last section covers a review of theories and researches on adjustment/acculturation and the adjustment experiences of immigrants including Eritreans in Canada and the impact of adjustment on identity construction.

**Eritrea and Eritrean National Identity**

Eritrea is perhaps known to many as the nation that waged one of the longest and fiercest wars in its thirty-year struggle for independence against Ethiopia from 1961 to 1991. Located in East Africa on the west coast of the Red Sea, it is surrounded by Ethiopia to the south, Sudan to the west and north, and Djibouti to the southeast. With Asmara as its capital, it is composed of 420,000 square kilometers and boasts a unique variety of land surfaces (Eritrean Liberation Front [ELF], 1976).
The working languages of Eritrea are Tigrinya, Arabic and English with the former having its own written system being a Semitic language derived from the ancient Sabean language of Ge’ez (Nadel, 1944). Other languages spoken in Eritrea are Tigre, Saho, Bilen, Danakil, Kunama and Barya. The Eritrean population of 3.5 million is equally divided between Christians and Sunni Moslems although there are some animists. Eritrea has nine nationalities that fall under the Semitic, Hamitic and Nilo-Saharan language families. Of these, Tigrinya speakers who number 1.5 million are found predominantly in the highlands. The majority are Coptic Christians with a small minority of Catholics and Protestants and the Jeberti who are Moslem (Yohannes, 1991). Other groups are the Tigre in western and northern Eritrea, the Saho, a Moslem nomadic group in the Red sea coastal areas (Bender, 1976), the Afar in the coastal region of Dankalia (Yohannes, 1991), the Bilen of whom three-quarters are Moslem and the remaining Catholics, who are bilingual in Tigre and Bilen and sometimes Arabic and located around Keren in the Senhit region and the predominantly Moslem Beja of eastern Eritrea, sometimes called Beni Amer (Yohannes, 1991). The Kunama, the only matrilineal group were once animists but have recently converted to Islam and Protestantism and are located in southwestern Eritrea (Nadel, 1944). The Barya or Nara live near the Sudanese border and speak both Nara Baba and Tigre (Thompson, 1976; Yohannes 1991). The Rashaida who are a small minority in the northern Red Sea coast are Moslem and are recent immigrants from Arabia, speaking Arabic (Yohannes, 1991).

Theories of Eritrean National Identity

The debate surrounding the distinct identity of Eritreans as separate from Ethiopians has been strongly connected to Eritrea’s relations to the Abyssinian Kingdom and/or its predecessor the Axumite Kingdom. Since the fall of Axum, Eritrea and Ethiopia are believed to have evolved into distinct historical, geographical and socio-political entities (Yohannes, 1991). However
several theories have emerged in explaining Eritrean nationalism and identity. Those like Stephen Longrigg (1945) and Haggai Erlich (1983, 1986) advocate the significance of “Greater Ethiopia” and focus on the strong cultural, religious and linguistic links between Ethiopia and the “northerners.” Erlich (1986, p. 12) believes Eritrean nationalism is a recent phenomenon and is imply a “negation of Ethiopianism.” Donald N. Levine (1974) similarly believes in the unity between the 3,000-year old “Greater Ethiopia” and Eritreans, stressing their strong cultural bond.

Another theoretical framework views the emergence of Eritrean national identity through external influences, namely neighboring Islamic Arab countries. Christopher Clapham (1988), one such proponent, does not believe in the validity and maturation of Eritrean nationalism and focuses on the funding the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) received from Islamic states. Like Clapham, John H. Spencer (1987) stresses the financial aid and “propaganda” from Arab states, which fostered Eritrean nationalism in their bid to dismantle an Eritrean-Ethiopian alliance while Paul B. Henze (1990) focuses on the economic interdependence of Eritrea and Ethiopia. Ruth Iyob (1995, p. 15) gives a good critique of the flaws inherent in these theories of Eritrean nationalism and identity. She states that those in the “Greater Ethiopia” camp have selected only the linguistic, ethnic and historical affiliations between Eritreans and Ethiopians and have mixed them with “legendary exotica.” Those such as Spencer, Clapham and Erlich have focused only on the external religious influences on Eritrean nationalism, namely the Islam/Arab influence. Iyob critiques this by stressing the secular nature of the Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM) and the radical Marxist Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF). She states that these theories have completely divorced the Eritrean struggle for independence from its social, political and economic African context.

Another approach is what Iyob calls the Eritrean anti-colonial or resistance school of thought as an analytical framework for understanding Eritrean national identity. One such proponent is Bereket Habteselassie (1989, p. 54) who sees the “Eritrean question as a colonial question and not one of secession.” One of the founders of the 1958 Eritrean Liberation
Movement (ELM) Mohamed Said Nawud (1975) in an interview also stated that Eritrea was an African country colonized by another. Similarly, Roy Pateman (1990a) sees the Eritrean struggle as one of anti-colonial resistance against the Ethiopian colonizer and that this resistance helped develop a definite Eritrean national identity and strong military power. A. M. Babu (1985) calls Ethiopia’s annexation of Eritrea “black-on-black colonialism” and criticizes Ethiopia’s hypocritical stand against Apartheid-era South Africa to deflect attention from its own oppressive policies. Both Edmund Keller (1988a, 1988b) and Leonard Cliffe (1988) also categorize Ethiopia’s claims on Eritrea as one of a foreign colonial power, the latter referring to Ethiopia’s violation of the 1952 federation when it annexed Eritrea in 1962 making it Ethiopia’s fourteenth province. Cliffe also stresses Ethiopia’s effective diplomatic tactics in silencing the Eritrean people’s voice and struggle from international audiences. Although the anti-colonial resistance theory is legitimate on its own, the Eritrean case is unique in its isolated resistance to another African colonial power (Iyob, 1995).

Other independent theories have been emerging. Both John Markakis (1987) and Richard Leonard (1988) approach Eritrean nationalism and identity as emerging through radical revolution and liberation politics (Iyob, 1995). Okbazgi Yohannes (1991) gives a synthesis of Eritrean nationalism as emerging out of Ethiopia’s weakening of the Eritrean economy, political repression, brutal Ethiopian military force against civilians and transformation from a feudal order to a socialist one. Finally, George Nzongola-Ntalaja (1987) summarizes Eritrean resistance and nationalism as emerging within a context of an all-African states conspiracy of silence against Eritrea in favor of Ethiopia which has been a powerful symbol for other African countries since it was never colonized, had defeated Italy in 1896, and was the location of the Organization for African Unity (OAU) headquarters.
**Historical Background**

The Ottoman Turks and Egyptians beginning in the 16th century had occupied the Red Sea coastal areas of Eritrea such as Massawa. By 1869, the opening of the Suez Canal attracted colonial powers, especially Italy which colonized Eritrea in 1890 naming it after the Greek name for the Red Sea, *Sinus Aerithrus*. Although there was much Eritrean resistance to Italian rule in the 1880s, Ethiopian Emperor Menelik II signed the 1889 Treaty of Wichale and later the Addis Ababa Treaty after Ethiopia defeated Italy in 1896, recognizing Italy's claim over Eritrea and fixing modern Eritrea's borders (Connell, 1993; Sherman 1980).

During Italian colonial rule the Italians introduced a racial segregation policy in 1937 when schools, jobs and social services such as hospital care and transport services became segregated (Connell, 1993; Negash, 1997). Because the Italians were aware of Eritrean resistance and emergence of Eritrean national identity, they feared that the Christian population would join forces with their southern Christian neighbors, the Ethiopians. As a result, Negash (1997, p.18) states, “Italian colonialism protected and encouraged the revival and consolidation of Islam.” When the British took over from defeated Italy in 1941, they ended the racial segregation policy and fostered political parties and freedom of speech but dismantled much of Eritrea's manufacturing plants and shipped them to their other colonies (Connell, 1993; Dines, 1982; Houtard, 1982; Wilson, 1991). During this period several strong organizations such as the “Society for Love of Country” or *Mahber Fikri Hager*, the Unionist Party which was pro-federation with Ethiopia emerged. Both the Moslem League and pro-Christian “Eritrea for Eritreans” party became the Independence Bloc and represented themselves as constituencies in the United Nations in the 1940s (Pateman, 1990a, 1990b).

Although the British were aware that 75 percent of Eritreans wanted independence, they advocated unity with Ethiopia (Tseggai, 1988). Emperor Haileselassie also used several tactics to weaken the Independence Bloc including using the Orthodox Church (Firebrace & Holland,
1985). In 1952 the Eritrean case was presented to the United Nations in which the US-backed UN voted for a full federation of Eritrea with Ethiopia under UN Resolution 390AV (Trevaskis, 1960). During the federation period Emperor Haile Selassie, in defiance of the federation agreement, banned the use of Eritrean languages, relocated industries to Ethiopia and forced the Eritrean parliament shut down at gun point after replacing the Eritrean police with the Ethiopian army (Cliffe, 1988). In addition to this violation, high unemployment and Eritrean dissatisfaction with social services created uprisings (Killion, 1985).

In 1958 the secular Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM) or *Harekat Tahrir Eritrea* was founded by a group of five Moslem Eritrean exiles after 500 Eritrean civilian protestors were wounded or killed in a 1957 protest in Asmara and Massawa. By 1961 Emperor Haile Selassie had annexed Eritrea forcefully and on September 1, 1961, the Eritrean Struggle for Independence began when Idris Hamid Awate, a former Moslem League member and leader of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) founded in 1961, and ten of his comrades fired shots in the air to signal the beginning of the war (Connell, 1993; Tseggai, 1984; Yohannes, 1991). By 1965, the pro-Islamic ELF had crushed the ELM and gained support from Libya, Syria and Iraq giving Ethiopia total US-Israeli support. By the mid 1970s the more powerful, secular and Marxist Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) was founded with its leader as Isayas Afwerki, now president of Eritrea. The ELF, its factions and the EPLF turned against each other until they were reconciled in a 1974 powerful alliance against Ethiopia at the urging of 30,000 to 50,000 Asmara residents who walked to Woki near Asmara (Erlich, 1983; Henze 1990; Moussa, 1992). By the 1980s the EPLF had pushed the ELF into Sudan and emerged as the strongest and well-organized front.

With its military base in the Sahel mountains, the EPLF established one of the most well-organized and sophisticated systems of military training, weapons maintenance, manufacturing plants, hospitals and schools with unparalleled self-reliance and determination. Not only was it determined for independence but it was also committed to social transformation of Eritrean
society. This popular mobilization and self-reliance has been the source of all other achievements. Not only were its advanced skills observed but also its self-confidence, rarely seen in other African countries (Cliffe, 1988). The EPLF stressed its African identity instead of an Arab one favored by the ELF and also advocated secular nationalism and made its Marxist stand against colonialism and American Imperialism known which, however, contributed to its lack of US support. Iyob (1995) gives four characteristics that contributed to its military and socio-economic success: flexibility, discipline, pragmatism and innovation.

During the reign of Haile Selassie and the period leading to his downfall, Ethiopian troops burnt and destroyed several villages, killing thousands of civilians. In November 1970 when Eritrean fighters killed an Ethiopian general, Ethiopia killed 1,000 Eritrean civilians in retaliation (Gilkes, 1975). In 1975 Ethiopian troops destroyed 110 Eritrean villages while tens of thousands of Eritreans died as the use of internationally banned napalm and cluster bombs intensified (Erlich 1983; Yohannes, 1991).

In 1974 Emperor Haile Selassie was overthrown and replaced by the Socialist 120-man Provincial Military Advisory Committee (PMAC) popularly called Dergue, a Ge‘ez word meaning “Council” (Moussa, 1992). Dissatisfied by the weakened Ethiopian military efforts in Eritrea and eager for socio-economic and political change, all sectors of Ethiopian society went on strike (Lefort, 1981; Iyob, 1995). This was further fueled by British photojournalist Jonathan Dimbleby’s exposure of the great famine of Wello, which the Imperial government had kept under wraps from the rest of the world. The Emperor was arrested on September 12, 1974 followed by his ministers. The Dergue’s members then turned against each other with its chairman General Aman Andom, an Eritrean who advocated Eritrean independence, being murdered followed by sixty former ministers (Wolde Giorgis, 1989). Mengistu Hailemariam later emerged as the uncontested leader (Keller, 1988a).
Between 1974 and 1977, the Eritrean forces had liberated 95 percent of Eritrea and were backed by the Eritrean people but the new government refused to give Eritreans the right to self-determination (Yohannes, 1991). Armed with the Soviets who had replaced the US, Ethiopia’s army which had been composed of 45,000 soldiers swelled to 300,000, three times the size of the Eritrean forces by 1991, and was considered the largest in Black Africa. The 1970s also saw the emergence of the radical Marxist Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party (EPRP) which advocated civilian rule, land reform and nationalization as well as Eritrean self-determination which was a point of contention with the pro-military All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement, with its Amharic acronym MEISON (Connell, 1993, Moussa, 1992).

The Dergue later officially unleashed the Red Terror in Ethiopia in retaliation for what it termed the EPRP’s White Terror. It is estimated that over 300,000 people were killed during this period (Luckham & Bekele, 1984). Those killed were left in the streets as a lesson to others. Relatives who came to claim bodies were charged one Ethiopian Birr for the bullets used and banned from mourning (Amnesty International, 1991). In Eritrea, Ethiopian soldiers terrorized, raped and killed civilians. In 1975 in a three-day killing spree, 2,000 people were butchered in Asmara (Gebrai, 1988). Women’s breasts were cut off and their pregnant bodies mutilated. In many cases their gold nose rings and earrings were wrenched off violently (Magos, 1981). Some women contracted sexually transmitted diseases while others became pregnant after the rapes. Those suspected of having EPLF connections were imprisoned and tortured (National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW), 1984). The use of napalm and cluster bombs continued in 1978 maiming innocent women and children and devastating land and towns as Ethiopian bomber planes deliberately searched for human targets (Moussa, 1992).

As Mengistu Hailemariam forcibly recruited young peasants to join the Ethiopian army, he stationed half of his army in Eritrea and put Ethiopia at a 4 Billion military debt to the Soviets (Yohannes, 1991). Forty-six percent of Ethiopia’s Gross National Product (GNP) was spent on
the military activities in Eritrea (Valley, 1985). It is believed that the Ethiopian Famine of 1984 was partly due to the government’s expensive military efforts in Eritrea.

The fierce battle of Afabet in Eritrea marked the beginning of the end for the Ethiopian army when the Eritrean forces defeated one third of the Ethiopian army and captured several weapons as well as three Soviet advisors (Wilson, 1991; Yohannes, 1991). By 1988 only, Ethiopia had staged nine military offensives in which the Eritrean forces defeated the Ethiopian army (Delhi, 1988; Gebrai, 1988). In the monumental 1990 battle of Massawa, the EPLF “captured 80 tanks, over 20,000 light arms, 8 rocket launches and put 35,000 Ethiopian soldiers out of commission.” (Interview with EPLF Secretary General, 1990, p. 6). Yohannes (1991, pp. 272-273) states that within the ten-year period from 1981 to 1991, Ethiopia lost 150,000 soldiers in Eritrea and adds that “Ethiopia subsidized Eritrea’s military operations against Ethiopia as it kept losing the war.”

The EPLF also captured thousands of Ethiopian prisoners of war and maintained their security giving them medical attention, food and also educational training to the extent that many chose to remain with the EPLF while others went to Sudan. By May 1991, the EPLF defeated the Ethiopian army and with the joint endeavor of the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) of the Ethiopian People’s Democratic Front (EPRDF) marched into the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa as Dictator Mengistu Hailemariam fled the country. In 1993, a United Nations-monitored referendum assured Eritrea of independence with an overwhelming majority vote of 99.8 percent in favor of independence (Referendum Commission of Eritrea, 1993). Eritrea finally became Africa’s fifty second state on May 23, 1993.
Traditional Eritrean society is patriarchal with the exception of the matrilineal Kunama ethnic group. Women’s reproductive roles are fixed and the value of a woman is inherently linked to her role as a wife and mother. The traditional feudal system of oppressive gender relations is embedded even within the urban Eritrean society. Traditionally women did not own or inherit land except in the highland region of Seraye pushing them to dependence on male kin such as fathers, husbands or brothers. Similarly, their lack of education, early arranged marriages and subservient roles in marriage denied them any access to socio-political participation and decision-making. Some of the following descriptive parts on women in Eritrea will use the past tense with the implication that certain cultural practices are changing in favor of gender equity.

Traditionally and especially in rural areas, women were betrothed while they were in their mothers’ wombs and normally married much older men by the age of twelve in arranged marriages sanctioned by the married couple’s fathers (Silkin, 1990; Wilson, 1991). Parents were required by custom to pay a dowry to the groom and in some cases such as the Moslem lowlands, the groom’s family was expected to pay the bride price which was commensurate with the bride’s beauty (Magos, 1981). Dowries normally ranged from cash, gold jewelry and clothes to cattle (Wilson, 1991). Comparatively, unlike in India, the value of education was not negotiable in dowries due to the low levels of literacy and education among Eritrean women. Due to the high value placed on dowries, families went into debt and poverty. In the past some women settled for the positions of second or third wives of rich men or migrated to the cities and ended up in domestic work or in bars as prostitutes (Magos, 1981).

Married life marked an arduous life for women whose daily activities were based on reproductive and domestic duties where gender oppression was manifested in the smallest social unit - the family. The desire for male offspring coupled with high infant mortality rate meant
endless pregnancies that wreaked havoc with their health. In addition to their reproductive roles and domestic duties, rural women in the highlands are expected to help in agricultural work while lowland women are usually confined to the home and help in animal husbandry.

Traditionally, marriage ensured "the consolidation of patriarchal lines and family property" through the production of sons, the control of sexuality and reproduction of the control of women by older men in their decision-making powers over arranged marriages, financial transactions and land rights (Wilson, 1991, p.123). Because Eritrea has seen a shorter period of the feudal mode of production and feudal relations compared to Ethiopia, not all areas share rigid rules regarding virginity and premarital sex and there are diversities in dowry/bride price payments (Wilson, 1991). Since marriage and motherhood are traditionally the center for women's identity in terms of socio-economic survival, their relationship to work, property and other public affairs are thus related to wifehood and motherhood. Although wifehood depends on motherhood, motherhood without wifehood is despised (Berhane Selassie, 1997) and both are invariably tied to social norms and expectations. Both Tigrinya and Amharic speaking societies in Eritrea and Ethiopia are ambilineral by which descent is traced through the father and mother, therefore the capacity of wifehood to attain motherhood is crucial (Berhane Selassie, 1997). However, ancestry and lineage are passed on through the male line. Traditionally, a woman's ethnic or tribal identity was always linked to her father's (Iyob, 1995). Similarly, a family's nationality and citizenship was assessed through the father's or husband's ethnic heritage, also meaning those he inherited from his father. An Eritrean woman who married a non-Eritrean was deemed to have forfeited Eritrean nationality while the reverse was not true.

Traditionally, although Christian Eritrean marriages are monogamous, it was not uncommon for husbands to have mistresses and illegitimate children, monogamy being in name only (Magos, 1981; Wilson, 1991). Moslem men can marry up to seven wives. Traditionally, only men could initiate divorces. A woman in an abusive marriage was urged to stay with her husband especially if the bridegroom’s family had paid a hefty bride price since her parents would have to
refund the bride price. Divorced women re-married if they were fortunate or ended up in bars in the urban centers or as domestics. Sometimes husbands labeled their wives *nashiza* in Islam and *beki* a term used by Christian priests to forbid them from remarrying (Magos, 1981).

Female sexuality in Eritrea is mostly a taboo subject. Women are taught at an early age about the virtues of sexual restraint and passivity (Silkin, 1990; Wilson, 1991). Wilson (1991, p.127) comments on this fear of women’s sexuality:

In accordance with these fears, a girl is taught from early childhood “to be shy” not to look at or speak to men, and as she grows older, not even to speak when men are around. She is taught to be withdrawn, restrained, obedient and passive. Her mother is given the responsibility of keeping her in line.

Even public displays of physical affection are rare among traditional married couples (Druce & Hammond, 1990). The control of women’s sexuality was reinforced by practices of virginity tests and subsequent annulment if the girl was not a virgin. Child marriages were a common practice where young brides were given to in-laws at a young age to protect them from other men’s advances. In both Eritrea and Ethiopia if a prospective bride objected to marrying, her parents would arrange an “abduction” by the prospective groom (Druce & Hammond, 1990) in which case she had no choice but to comply with sexual relations and marriage. Rape was not considered a crime and was in fact a means to secure and legitimize marriage and sexual relations.

Infibulation, the removal of the clitoris, labia minora and majora and the sewing of the entrance to the vagina was practiced in the lowlands while clitoridectomy, the removal of the clitoris was common in the highlands. Infibulation, often called female genital mutilation, has been the cause of sexual and medical problems for millions of women in approximately forty countries in Africa, the Middle East and some parts of Asia. It has contributed to the high maternal mortality rate in Eritrea, which is 1,400 per 100,000 live births (Neft & Levine, 1997). The root of FGM is the repression of women’s sexuality and reinforces women’s subordinate
status. It is believed that approximately 90 percent of Eritrean women have undergone various forms of FGM (Neft & Levine, 1997).

Religion has also played a significant role in fixing and reinforcing women's secondary roles by stressing women's obedience, passivity and chastity. Within the Eritrean Coptic Church, religious leaders, priests and deacons or kahnat and diakon have always been male and hagiology or stories of the adventures of saints have always been those of men. Thus rituals and the salvation of women are in men's control. Since historically education was tied to the ability to read liturgy or the scriptures and to recite mezmere Dawit (the Psalms of David), only males were expected to gain literacy. Even at present, women are banned from many monasteries as the "descendants of Eve" and are traditionally not allowed in church during menses. In a society where every day of the month marks the celebration of a Deity or Saint, only St. Mary or Mariam is revered on the 1st, 3rd, 16th and the 21st of each month of the Gregorian Calendar within the Eritrean and Ethiopian Orthodox and Catholic Churches while other days are reserved for male saints such as Gabriel, Mikael and Abune Aregawi. As a result, communal associations are almost same-gender ones with women naming theirs after St. Mary. Moreover, formal religion and spirituality for women are tied to a belief in the supernatural healing powers and spirit possession cults such as zar and jin (Bishaw, 1991). However these common practices are not advertised publicly and are guarded with some secrecy (Berhane Selassie, 1984).

The traditional gender-segregated congregations in the Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant churches as well as in Mosques during worship means the process of learning the scriptures is gender-conscious and has been duplicated in modern classroom settings. While missionaries gave women more access to education, they sometimes reinforced sex differentiation in education with Catholics lagging behind Protestants in providing women with literacy due to their aversion to co-education (Kelly & Elliott, 1982). The more progressive Swedish Lutheran Mission in Eritrea converted many women of the Coptic faith while raising their literacy levels (Aren, 1978).
The number of females in education especially in higher education has been very low. Before the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution women’s illiteracy rate was a disturbing 90 percent while the primary school enrollments for girls was only 18 percent (Berhane Selassie, 1984). In the 1986/1987 academic year the female enrolment in undergraduate university programs was 7.7 percent (Tefera, 1991) while it grew to only 8 percent in 1989/1990 with only 6.45 percent in graduate programs (Husen & Postlethwaite, 1994, p. 2039). In contrast, in Eritrea, total female enrolment was 49.9 percent in urban areas and 43.2 percent in rural ones in 1985/1986 while it was 51.9 percent in Addis Ababa (Tefera, 1991). In Ethiopia, female teachers comprised only 23 percent in primary education and dwindled to .62 percent in higher education (Belachew, 1995).

In addition to lack of education opportunities, poor academic performance was a problem. Parents believed education was wasted on girls who were required to master domestic skills for marriage. Domestic chores also took up their valuable time for studying. Gender expectations and stereotype education also contributed to their low performance. In 1987 for example, of those that passed the Grade 6 Ministry examination only 35 percent were females (Zewde, 1991).

Textbooks are gender-biased depicting women as mothers and housewives while depicting men as professionals. The language used in textbooks also reflects linguistic and cultural gender bias while the reader is referred to as a male. Moreover female students are not encouraged by instructors to participate and voice their opinions in class. They are discouraged from pursuing science subjects since science is seen as detached from their lives (O’Doyley, Blunt & Barnhardt, 1994). They have no voice in educational issues that affect their lives in the economic and political sector (Tedla, 1995). Wagaw (1990) states that no group advocated women’s participation in higher education and the pervading belief was that women belonged at home (Amare, 1982).

Most women in the Third World are actively engaged in rural agricultural work and their economic participation is difficult to record compared to the urban modern sector (Momsen,
Since subsistence farming and domestic work are not seen as economic activities, their unpaid labor is unrecognized (Waring, 1988). Women are believed to be engaged in 80 percent of agricultural work. In Ethiopia, which included Eritrea, the 1991 figure was 55 to 74 percent of the female population (Momsen, 1991). However, despite this, women in Eritrea were traditionally denied the right to plough land. They were denied inheritance and participation in financial transactions. They were also denied access to agricultural development projects as they were seen as less credit-worthy and were not taught technologically advanced farming methods but were left to cope with traditional ones which were “eroded” by lack of educational skills and competition from the modern sector (Lindsay, 1980; Momsen, 1991). Tadesse (1982, p. 105) appropriately comments, “The degree of women’s access to technology is a consistent index of a country’s level of socio-economic development.”

During the colonial period, colonialism superimposed Capitalist exploitative relations on feudal and semi-feudal ones. Rural women whose family’s land had been appropriated by the Italians migrated to the cities to work as factory workers, domestics or prostitutes. It is believed that prostitution and alcoholism were encouraged during the reign of Haile Sellassie (Johnson, 1979). Working class women emerged in the textile and food industries earning as low as forty to fifty cents for ten to twelve hours of work, earning half of their male co-workers’ earnings (Magos, 1981; Tadesse, 1976). Domestic workers were employed by Italians and middle class Eritreans. These women were also sexually exploited by Italian employers and earned as low as thirty to fifty Birr, the equivalent of three to five US Dollars and worked fifteen to eighteen hours a day with alternate Sundays off (Magos, 1981; NUEW, 1983). By the 1960s educated women in Asmara were recruited by employment agencies for domestic work in Saudi Arabia, Italy and the US (Berhane Selassie, 1984).

With the advent of the Ethiopian Revolution and promises of Socialism, cultural gender constructions were left intact (Brydon & Chant, 1989). Women were still concentrated in traditional “feminine” fields with little employment benefits and security. Maternity leave was
under sixty days depending on the private and public sector. Widows lost their pension if they remarried while widowers did not with the implication that men were always the financial supporters (Gender and Law: The Ethiopian Context, 1997).

Social Transformation in the Struggle for Independence

Although Eritrean women may be depicted as victimized by the triple oppression of national, class and gender oppression (NUEW, 1989), a positive facet of their national history and rich culture presents them as patriotic, politically conscious, rebellious and dynamic as well as spiritual and family-oriented. Illen Woldu, wife of feudal lord Ras Woldemichael led an army of 10,000 and defeated her enemies after his death (NUEW, 1989). Eritrean women participated in agitation activities and espionage against colonial Italians (NUEW, 1983). During the federation period, they engaged in labor riots, donated portions of their income for the liberation cause, gave food, shelter and vital information to fighters. Once they joined the EPLF, women’s liberation became a key issue which had been initially overshadowed by national liberation (“Women’s liberation in Eritrea”. 1988).

The EPLF is given much credit for its social transformation of Eritrean society in its belief in women’s equal rights and participation in decision-making and nation building. As a political and military front, its Marxist and Pan African line focused on the unity and equality of all ethnic groups, languages, religions, regions and classes and advocated economic self reliance, pragmatism and discipline (Eritrean People’s Liberation Front [EPLF], 1977). Unlike other revolutionary movements, it rejected all oppressive practices directly without trying to appease proponents of these practices (Wilson, 1991). The EPLF’s military environment therefore created a space where women asserted their autonomy.

Unlike in the ELF which focused only on political independence and not social
transformation (NUEW, 1984; Wilson, 1991), in the EPLF female members rose to 30 percent of the force. In November 1977, civilian women backed by female fighters staged a mass rally in liberated Keren never seen in Eritrean history, demanding equal rights (Connell, 1993). In 1977, the EPLF adopted new progressive marriage and family laws which were also to apply to civilian society. The following is a translated quotation from Articles 1, 2 and 3 of the General Principles of the EPLF National Democratic Programme Marriage Laws (Wilson, 1991):

Article 1
The feudal marriage norm based on the supremacy of men over women, haphazard and coercive arrangements, and which does not safeguard the welfare of children shall be banned. The new democratic marriage law based on the free choice of both partners, monogamy, the equal rights of both sexes and the legal guarantees of the rights of the interests of women and children shall be implemented.

Article 2
Polygamy, concubinacy, the betrothal of children, interference in remarriage of widows as well as dowry and other gifts connected with marriage shall be abolished.

Article 3
Marriage must be based on the absolute will of two partners. Neither partner should use any form of pressure. Nor should any third party interfere in the matter.

The age of marriage for women was raised to eighteen and twenty for men. Divorce could be initiated by either one (Silkin, 1990; Wilson, 1991). These policies were however more difficult to implement in deeply traditional civilian society as they were contrary to traditional Eritrean patriarchal culture (Connell, 1993; Houtard, 1982; Silkin, 1990).

In the early stages of the EPLF women were given assistance positions after a six-month training period and faced celibacy rules and were required to wear androgynous clothes to avoid sexuality but this was overturned as it was viewed as sexist. They cut their hair short as a symbol of cutting ties with the patriarchal past and introduced the gender-less shoulder kiss, replacing the traditional three kisses (Gebreyesus, 1992). Open sexual relations and intermarriages flourished ("War gains", 1996). The dangers of FGM were addressed and denounced. The military environment changed traditional gender roles as pregnant women ploughed land and men cooked. In addition to military skills, they learned various non-military skills and became radio operators, mechanics, truck drivers, carpenters, electricians and squad doctors (Dines, 1982; Magos, 1981;
Wilson, 1991). Squad doctors were trained by medical doctors and also practiced in the liberated areas travelling several kilometers a day (Abraham & Debas, 1984). The implications of male fighters and civilians seeing female fighters capturing prisoners of war and “manning” tanks were obvious. Comparatively, they enjoyed more equitable gender relations than women in for example the US military where women were excluded from combat duties in the Gulf War (Vickers, 1993; Worthington, 1999). They also organized into baito or People’s Assembly and participated in social reform policies and in Legislative Judicial Committees to handle marital and property disputes (Wilson, 1991). The EPLF also assured women of land ownership by abolishing the old feudal and semi-feudal land-owning systems that had denied them the right.

In spite of these progressive measures however, after independence in 1993, 20,000 female fighters were discharged from the military and faced a still traditional sexist society where they were expected to revert to their old roles and where preference for males in employment was evident (Egensteiner, 1995; “War gains”, 1996). The majority has had low rates of formal education and professional experience (Eritrea: Rising from the Ashes, 1995). In spite of the EPLF’s progressive policies, oppressive family customs have not been eliminated in the private realm (Stefanos, 1989). Researches done on women in liberation movements in Algeria, Mozambique, Nicaragua and Vietnam have shown similar lapses in women’s status (Rentmeesters, 1989).

At present although women comprise 21 percent of the national legislature, 4 percent of the cabinet, 13 percent of ministers and 50 percent if Constitutional Commission, the literacy rate for women is only 10 percent (Eritrea: Rising from the Ashes, 1995; Neft & Levine, 1997). However, these figures show some progress compared to the basic voting rights denied women in the 1952 federation elections (Iyob, 1995). Adult literacy is one of the EPLF’s mandates and in the EPLF bush schools several subjects used to be taught in various languages with an emphasis on Eritrean history and geography.
At present, the female enrolment in primary school is 47 percent while it is 22 percent in middle school and only 14 percent in secondary school (Eritrea: Rising from the Ashes, 1995). There is wide gender disparity, high withdrawal rates and poor academic performance for female students. Since 65 percent of all students are urban, rural women’s lack of access to education is obvious (Eritrea: Birth of a Nation, 1993). Currently, there are 261 elementary schools, 49 junior schools, 19 high schools and one university. The return of Eritrean refugees from Sudan may overburden the shortage of schools and educational resources. It is estimated that between May 1991 and 1995, 100,000 refugees have returned among whom 37.5 percent are female-headed households (Eritrea: Rising from the Ashes, 1995).

Eritrean Immigrant Women and Adjustment in Canada

The literature on immigrant adjustment has normally been divided into the two broad categories of external interaction with new social conditions and internal psychological development (Rumble 1990). Berry (1992) states that the more contact an immigrant has with the dominant society, the less acculturative stress s/he will face. He gives the variables of motives for migrating, attitude towards the new country’s racial/ethnic views, previous knowledge of host country, health, age, gender, religion, education and access to social support network. He refers to acculturative stress such as anxiety and depression (Berry et al., 1987, 1989) caused by acculturation which is not always a negative and traumatic experience (Beiser, 1988).

Searle and Ward (1990) refer to psychological adaptation as immigrants’ strong sense of personal and ethnic identity and mental health while socio-cultural adaptation refers to successful social interaction. According to Michalowski (1987) there are three models of adjustment. One is the assimilationist one where time determines an immigrant’s upward success. His ethnic stratification model states that an immigrant’s racial/ethnic background determines his/her socio-
Brown's (1987, p.128) intra-psychic development theory states that an immigrant's first stage is excitement followed by culture shock, slow recovery and full recovery. He defines culture shock as "ranging from mild irritability to deep psychological panic crisis." Krimer (1986) suggests seven stages immigrants go through. In the emigration stage immigrants favor the new host country. In the encounter stage they go through a "contradictory shift" and favor their country of origin and face ambivalence. In the beginning stage they face identity crisis. The mourning stage marks longing for the past and loved ones. In the accommodation and integration stages, final adjustment is achieved. Rumble's (1990) synthesized approach summarizes the adjustment process into five stages of excitement, confrontation, culture stress, mourning and recovery and as changes occurring over time and with attitudes changing towards the individual's country of origin and ethnic and cultural identity.

Most studies on immigrant women in Canada have focused on the integration of immigrants into the workforce and the various forms of racial and gender discrimination they encounter in the work place and with social service agencies (Arnopoulos, 1979; Boyd, 1987; Estable, 1986; Ng, 1984b, 1996). Immigrant women were found occupying the top and bottom rungs of the occupational hierarchy with non-English speaking immigrants concentrated in "non-skilled" less secure, dead-end jobs (Arnopoulos, 1979). They were found mostly in service industries such as restaurants, hotels and food industries (Ng, 1984b). Ng states that the Canadian State plays a role through immigration policies in creating hierarchical "slotting" of immigrants. Women often immigrate to Canada as dependents in the Family Class category and are not eligible for certain social services and are considered outside economic labor force participation although it is known that out of economic necessity they will join the labor force. Employment agencies also help reproduce discriminatory labor relations by what Ng calls "commodifying"
immigrant women's labor as a product. Their gender, ethnicity and English language proficiency level become criteria used to match them to hierarchical positions in the job market.

In one study done by the Ontario Women’s Directorate and the Ontario Human Rights Commission (The Visible Minority Woman, 1983, p.42), it was discovered that immigrant women “...are subjected to overt labelling and stereotyping which have a negative impact on their integration to the organization.” Moreover due to the competition for scarce jobs, both male and female immigrants are pitted against the White working class by socialization, education and mass media (Li & Bolaria, 1983). In the pre-recession early 1980s for example, according to one study done by Henry and Ginzberg titled, Who gets the work?, “...Whites had three job prospects to every one for blacks.” (Estable, 1986, p.24). In another research, 28 percent of White employers doubted the ability of their non-White employees’ performance while 88 percent of complaints by White co-workers were about negative attributes of which 54 percent were derogatory (Billingsley & Muszynski, 1985). Another study discovered that White Canadians tolerated visible minority immigrants in low-paying manual jobs than in managerial or professional ones (Berry, Kalin & Taylor, 1976). Modibo (1995, p.52) adds that the ideologies of racism and sexism and their impact on successful integration are due to the view others have of Black women as inferior workers because of their race, gender and “natural disposition to mothering.” The double oppression immigrant women face as members of a minority in the public realm, oppresses them as women in the private one especially in domestic life. The home which is a “...refuge for male immigrant workers becomes a trap for immigrant women...” (Ng & Ramirez, 1981, p.25).

Researches done on immigrant groups stress various factors that affect successful adjustment. Fan-Cheong-Lun (1990) suggests an immigrant’s intention to stay permanently in Canada is one factor. Another research approaches successful integration of immigrant women through Second Language Acquisition (SLA) in this case English, from a power relations framework (Peirce, 1993). The research argues that because of the unequal power relations in the
home and at work, women's opportunities for speaking English are limited and disempowering. Similarly, acculturative stress was related to the two variables of English proficiency and "feelings" about reasons to immigrate (Kimura, 1993). Another study (Maraj, 1996) has concluded that non-accreditation and the "occupational dislocation" of immigrants contributes to more psychological difficulties in their adaptation than it has in their economic life. Finally, one research which approached identity formation within adaptation, observed that women from non-Western cultures in Canada evaluate their conflicting cultural values and redefine their gender roles and relationships and "create" new identities (Sieber, 1992).

The first piece of literature on Eritrean immigrants in Canada was a small research report prepared for the Policy Analysis Directorate of the Immigration branch by Ainalem Tebeje (1989) in which Eritreans were included under the category of "Ethiopians" since the research was done before Eritrean independence. Although the research was neither gender-specific nor addressed problems specific to Eritrean immigrant women, it addressed some important cultural traits shared by both Eritreans and Ethiopians and their limited interaction with Canadians. Cultural values and attitudes have contributed to Ethiopians' perception of Canadians as "cool and unconcerned about others" (Tebeje, 1989, p.16). In addition, Tebeje says Canadians have misconstrued Ethiopian cultural values and behaviors such as respecting elders and politeness as a sign of inferiority. She adds that job-search strategies such as selling oneself by exalting one's qualities, which are a pre-requisite in the Canadian job market, are abhorred in the Ethiopian culture. While such cultural differences affect successful adjustment for Eritreans and Ethiopians in North America (Moussa, 1992, 1993; Tebeje, 1989), some researchers believe that most Ethiopians have adapted successfully in their new environment and do not need to be part of a community. According to one doctoral research done on Ethiopians in Los Angeles (Moran, 1996) the lack of community may be caused by ethnic or nationalistic separatist tribal differences among Ethiopians, a tendency experienced also by those in Canada (Moussa, 1992, 1993).
Researches done on Eritrean immigrants in Canada are not gender-specific as in researches done on the health status of Eritreans in Calgary in which the research concluded that Eritrean women have lower perceptions of their health status (Ghebrehiwet, 1995). Helene Moussa (1992, 1993) however, has done research on both Ethiopian and Eritrean refugee women in Canada. Since the research data was gathered before independence though, the quantitative data was not specifically Eritrean. Citizenship and Immigration Canada had not yet recognized Eritrea’s autonomy and therefore Statistics Canada data included Eritreans under “Ethiopians” while the participants did not have Eritrean citizenship nor the ability to return to Eritrea then.

Moussa describes and analyses the traumatic experiences her participants underwent in the Eritrean-Ethiopian war, the Red Terror and imprisonment, their brush with death and their flight from Eritrea. She has also covered their childhood upbringing where women’s sexuality was controlled by authoritarian parents. She has presented their adjustment experiences as refugees in other countries and in Canada. The Eritrean participants had very strong nationalistic feelings of Eritrean identity as distinct from Ethiopian and expressed ambivalent feelings towards life in Canada. They all valued their heritage and struggle for independence expressing a desire to return to Eritrea at some time but wanted to pursue their education in Canada first. Moussa has concluded that the earlier life experiences of Eritrean women refugees do not disappear nor are they replaced in Canada and that the maintenance of identities helps them resist and solve difficulties. In her abstract she defines and summarizes the process of identity formation as “a sequence of discontinuities, continuities, resistance and reconstruction.”

In conclusion, the Literature Review has given an overview of Eritrean national identity and historical background to understand Eritrean women’s national and ethnic identity while the section on Eritrean women lays some groundwork for understanding Eritrean culture and women’s status in Eritrea as well as the changes in their status to understand the cultural background Eritrean immigrant women come from. The section on adjustment has been presented to understand the complex adjustment process and problems immigrants encounter and also
establishes a framework for understanding the intersection of Eritrean women’s national/ethnic/cultural identity and gender and the shift to the intersection of race/ethnicity and gender where the dynamics of identity negotiation is played in both the private and public realms when they immigrate to Canada.
Chapter I

**Eritrean Identity:** “We can be as spicy and wonderful as our food.”

**Feelings and Views on Ethnic/National identity:** “I feel very proud to be an Eritrean.”

Eritrean national identity is of paramount importance and the source of patriotism and pride for many Eritreans. Eritreans usually define their identity in terms of national or ethnic heritage rather than by race or religion and are often consciously resistant to and exclusive of any attachment to Ethiopia. All the participants in my research expressed their identity in terms of being independent Eritreans who struggled for freedom and many referred to suffering for many years under foreign rule. One participant Muna exclaimed, “Being Eritrean means suffering at the hands of several enemies!”

Resistance to invading foreign powers such as the Ottoman Turks and the Egyptians who later leased the Red Sea Port of Massawa from the Turks in 1848 (Erlich, 1983; Connell, 1993) is often seen as a starting point when Turks invaded small villages and burnt churches in Eritrea to the extent that the Tigrinya phrase “Rule of the Turks” denotes brutality. The impact of Italian colonial rule on Eritrea and the emergence of a distinct Eritrean consciousness in resistance to colonialism cannot be denied. Thousands of Eritreans were active in anti-Italian resistance movements. The racial segregation policy which the Italians introduced in 1937 formed Eritrean resistance while the racial policy also made a distinction between Eritreans and Ethiopians (Negash, 1997). The shortage of Eritrean labor during the economic boom of the 1930s also bestowed value on Eritrean labor further adding to their distinct identity (Negash, 1997). The Italians’ divide and rule policy in an attempt to split Christian and Moslem Eritreans, was also later duplicated by the British Military administration with some success.

Most of my participants however, were particularly conscious of their identity in terms of Eritrean resistance to and victory over Ethiopia whom they saw as a foreign power (Babu, 1986;
Cliffe, 1988; Habteselassie, 1989; Keller, 1988a, 1988b; Nawud, 1975; Pateman, 1990a) while they were also particular about Eritrean self-reliance and isolated revolutionary struggle as well as other African countries’ indifference to the struggle (Nhongola-Ntalaja, 1987). One participant Misrinesh stated, “Being Eritrean means being a determined person, progress without handout…” in reference to the Eritrean struggle’s and government’s unique self-reliance policy.

All of the women in the research expressed extreme pride in their Eritrean identity with one participant, Winta exclaiming, “I can’t imagine being anything else!” When I first asked them to discuss their Eritrean identity, almost all of them used the word “pride” immediately. In addition to their feelings of pride, one said that being Eritrean meant, “Feeling blessed. Being courageous, very hard-working, persistent, sharp thinking and independent and not looking back.” Another said she felt lucky to be Eritrean while another stated that all Eritreans had a strong interest in themselves as Eritreans. One participant said that although she was never told she was Eritrean she just knew she was Eritrean and developed a very strong sense of Eritrean identity. Another woman said that being Eritrean meant sticking to one’s own people and not marrying out of the group. She exclaimed, “Always stay with your own countryman.” She was referring to the independence struggle where all Eritreans regardless of religion, language or region fought side by side in unity. She added that being Eritrean meant “…not being divided.” She believed that since independence was gained by unity, Eritrean identity would also be maintained through unity.

Although most of the participants were born in Eritrea, some were actually born in Ethiopia or raised there. Such Ethiopian-born Eritreans are often humorously called amice, (pronounced “amiche”) in reference to an Italian car assembly plant in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia to which spare parts are brought from Italy but assembled in Ethiopia. It is estimated that before the start of the July 1998 deportations of Eritreans and Ethiopians of Eritrean origin by the Ethiopian government, there were approximately over 500,000 Eritreans residing in Ethiopia. One of the participants who was born and raised in Ethiopia stated that while growing up in Ethiopia, she
had not been aware of her Eritrean (national) identity but rather her Tigre (ethnic) identity, referring to the Amharic word for Tigrinya-speaking people which covers Eritreans and Tigrayan Ethiopians. She had believed that she was a Tigre Ethiopian and did not feel singled out as an Eritrean while growing up in Ethiopia. She was only aware of being a Tigre, slightly distinct from Amharas. She added, “Other than that nobody cares about whether you are Eritrean, Ethiopian and so on, as separate. I don’t recall anyone singling me out saying, ‘You are Eritrean.’” She spoke Amharic fluently and had Ethiopian friends and believed that all people in Ethiopia were treated equally whether they were Eritrean or not. She concluded, “I’ve never heard of anyone having problems because they were Eritrean.”

This particular participant changed her views on her identity when she came to Canada and was exposed to the news and images of the Eritrean-Ethiopian war. While growing up in Ethiopia, she had been shielded from the atrocities of the war taking place in Eritrea and had not been exposed to Eritrean history. In Canada while in university, her sense of Eritrean identity began to evolve and she became active in the Eritrean Students’ Association and fund-raising activities. She began associating with other Eritreans although she still had Ethiopian friends and spoke Amharic. It is important to mention here that the Tigrinya word Habesha or Amharic Abesha derived from the Arabic habesh for “mixed”, refer to both Eritreans and Ethiopians. In her initial experiences as an Ethiopian, this particular participant had accepted her Habesha/Abesha identity irrespective of the Eritrean national one. An analogy to this would be classifying all ethnic Arabs under one national identity.

Eritrean identity as distinct from an Ethiopian one was stressed by many participants. Most recalled feeling upset when they were called “Ethiopian” and made sure they corrected the person addressing them. They also felt that when they told people they were Eritrean, people would not be able to identify them and would simply classify them under Ethiopia since Ethiopia’s ancient civilization and history were more recognized. Here the politics of language is evident when Tigrinya is used to resist Ethiopian political and cultural hegemony and when the
use of Amharic by Eritreans is viewed with negativity. Such resistance stemmed from Emperor Haile Selassie’s violation of the Eritrean federation when he banned the use of Tigrinya and other Eritrean languages, replacing them with Amharic (Cliffe, 1988; Negash, 1997). This was also fueled by the Ethiopian army’s atrocities in Eritrea as well as Ethiopian teachers and *kebele* (Urban Dwellers’ Association) cadres who advocated the use of Amharic over Tigrinya. One participant who was born in Ethiopia spoke Amharic as a child and when her family moved to Eritrea, whenever she used Amharic words, people would look at her with disapproval or comment why she was not using Tigrinya. She would refer to her uncles and aunts in Amharic, which other family members in Eritrea found odd. She later learned to speak Tigrinya fluently.

Another aspect of the definition of Eritrean identity was seen in terms of ethnicity versus race. One of the participants, Yordanos said that she felt she saw herself as an ethnic Eritrean and not as an African or as Black while another participant was adamant about Eritreans denying their color and being part of the color block by considering themselves Semitic. Almost all of the participants saw themselves in terms of their Eritrean ethnic identity and not in terms of race especially when they first came to Canada. As members of the same racial majority group in Eritrea or Ethiopia, race had not been an issue for Eritreans except in Italian colonial times in Eritrea and the emphasis had been on ethnicity and nationality. One woman made an interesting observation that Eritreans as a large immigrant group are being recognized as an ethnic group rather than as a racial one in large metropolitan areas such as Washington DC, Atlanta, and Los Angeles much like other ethnic groups like Mexicans because they also tend to stay in the same communities without mixing with other racial or ethnic groups.

Another participant felt that she was a mix of many identities and that she had created her own culture. “It’s not pure Eritrean, it’s not pure Canadian... but a combination of so many cultures.” She added, “It is confusing, to tell you frankly. Sometimes you feel you are Eritrean and you don’t act as Eritrean and you are a Canadian citizen but you don’t act as a Canadian as well.” She had gone to Eritrea for a short visit after independence and felt like an outsider
because the language and culture had changed while her “image of Eritrean Culture” had remained somewhat intact. In spite of her ambivalent feelings about her Eritrean versus Canadian identity, she added that she felt she saw herself mostly as an Eritrean woman and made sure her children spoke Tigrinya and always reminded them of their Eritrean identity.

The current Eritrean-Ethiopian war and deportations of over 53,000 Eritreans and Ethiopians of Eritrean origin made a big impact on the participants’ sense of Eritrean identity, national patriotism, and self-perception. All the women felt that the conflict had brought stronger feelings about their Eritrean identity to the surface when faced with a common enemy or oppressor and that they felt more connected to other Eritreans at this critical period in Eritrean history. Most of the participants felt that the current war was not really about the border conflict but a guise for Ethiopia to disrupt Eritrea’s speedy economic progress. Abeba was angry with the Ethiopian government and emotionally overtaken as she said, “If they want to destroy themselves, they can go ahead but we will not give them our land!”

Senait, one participant, admitted being depressed over the war while Muna said there were times when she would sit and cry. Others expressed anger and called the deportations of Eritreans from Ethiopia “ethnic cleansing” a term they used quite often, “You don’t even treat someone who’s committed a crime like this.” Over 53,000 Eritreans and Ethiopians of Eritrean origin residing in Ethiopia had been rounded up from their homes, some imprisoned, their property confiscated, their bank accounts frozen, and driven by bus to the Eritrean-Ethiopian war zone at the Eritrean-Ethiopian border. Many were mothers, including pregnant and nursing women, young children and the elderly. In many cases, parents and children had been separated.

Many of the participants used a “Canadian citizen” analogy and asked how Canadians would feel if they were suddenly told by the Canadian government to pack their bags and leave Canada regardless of whether they had been born in Canada or not and how it would feel to be separated from their children or be away from home for even one night. According to a study done (Legesse, 1999) 83.3 percent of those deported were legal Ethiopian citizens with Ethiopian
identity cards. Several had been stripped of their Ethiopian passports and identity cards so that they could not prove to international organizations or the media that the Ethiopian government was deporting its own citizens. Others who applied for an exit visa or who left Ethiopia by plane had their Ethiopian passports stamped with the words, “Deported. Never to return.” This was in violation of International Citizenship Laws which stated a citizen could not be deported from her/his own country of citizenship. In fact, in the 1996 Ethiopian federal elections, the majority of these ethnic Eritreans as Ethiopian citizens, had voted for and given more power to the current Tigrayan-dominated government which had now turned against them. Since the government had recognized their citizenship rights then, it was contradicting its own laws now and this directly meant that the validity of the government should now be questionable if these voters were not Ethiopian citizens. Most of my participants felt that what hurt most was that those Eritreans being deported were the ones who had contributed greatly to Ethiopia’s economy. Winta added, “…they’re kicking out the people that literally kept the economy going.” According to Dr. Asmerom Legesse, director of Eritreans for Peace and Development, one in three Eritreans deported from Ethiopia to the Eritrean border during the early conflict had had business corporations and extensive property in Ethiopia while this ratio gradually dwindled to one in every fifteen, revealing the strong link between the deportations and economic motives.

A positive facet to the current war however, was its ability to draw together all Eritreans and especially those who had grown up in Ethiopia unaware of or in denial of their Eritrean identity. All of the women agreed that the deportations were a wake-up call for these Eritreans to embrace Eritrean identity and bury ambivalent feelings. Several of the women recalled conversations they had had with cousins who lived in Ethiopia who had believed in their Ethiopian identity and culture advocating the similarity and unity of the Eritrean and Ethiopian peoples and cultures (Erlich, 1986; Levine, 1974; Longrigg, 1945). They said that they noticed that all the *amice* (Ethiopian-born Eritreans) were beginning to feel their Eritrean national identity after being deported to Eritrea or after having seen family members dispossessed of their
property, imprisoned or deported. The participant who had been raised in Ethiopia said she now accepted her Eritrean identity and asserts her Eritrean nationality with her Ethiopian friends with whom she has had heated arguments and disagreements over the current war. As a result, she and her Ethiopian friends have agreed not to discuss politics in order to continue their friendship. Winta added that she had no ill feelings to Ethiopians as such and blamed colonial powers. However she did believe that the atrocities were worse because “Ethiopians and Eritreans are ethnically closer like brothers.” Again she added that the Italian colonials and the British were to blame for the current conflict and the thirty-year war “because back then Amharas and Bilen did not argue.”

A significant point for the participants was that Canadians and North Americans in general are not aware of global socio-economic issues especially those pertaining to Africa and that the world media including Canada, had totally ignored the Eritrean struggle for thirty years and was doing the same now during this current conflict. They all felt upset and helpless since the world was oblivious to the Eritrean-Ethiopian war and the human rights’ violations being committed by the Ethiopian government against innocent Eritreans. All of the participants highly commended Toronto Sun journalist Peter Worthington whose December 1998 five-part series on Eritrea shook the Eritrean and Ethiopian communities with polar reactions in his report of Eritrea as a self-sufficient and progressive nation and in which he addressed the current conflict and deportations as Ethiopia’s aggression. The general feeling among the women was that the world was oblivious to Eritrea’s achievement attained without any outside help and that the atrocities against Eritreans were being overlooked because the world was pretending not to know Eritrea. One woman, Rahwa, insightfully concluded, “The British used to know. The Italians used to know. When it was time to plunder her wealth, she was known but when they have to inquire about human rights violations, they suddenly forget.”
Struggle for Independence and Political Experience: "We all fought like we were children of the same mother."

Rahwa exclaimed, "Politics raised us as children!" summing up almost all the women's reactions to my query about their experiences in Eritrea. Another woman recalled earlier times during the Fascist Italian rule of Eritrea when Mussolini was in power. Her father had been an askar or soldier under the Italian army. Negash (1997) states that there were about 500,000 such Eritrean askars in the Italian colonial army in which they were addressed as "Eritreans" instead of as "Natives", a term used by the Italians to refer to Ethiopians, ironically contributing to a distinct sense of Eritrean identity. This participant stated that she remembered her father talking about the racial segregation policy of 1937 (Connell, 1993; Negash, 1997) when Italians used to beat up Eritreans for minor mistakes. At that time Eritreans could not walk to downtown Asmara. Her father used to ride standing in the back of the buses as seats were reserved only for Italians. As she spoke she also recalled the British who tried to divide Christian and Moslem Eritreans by favoring one over the other at different times.

The British had suggested the division of Eritrea into two before the Eritrean case was formally presented to the United Nations. They proposed that the Tigrinya speaking Christian highlands join Ethiopia while the Moslem lowlands be given to Sudan (Negash 1997). During this time, Emperor Haile Selassie used several strategies to weaken the Eritrean Independence Bloc by financing and organizing armed bandits or shifas in the northern Ethiopian province of Tigray to scare Independence Bloc members. As an autocrat or "King of Kings", he had authority over the Orthodox Church which he manipulated into threatening Coptic members of the Independence Bloc with excommunication if they opted for independence (Firebrace & Holland, 1985). In 1952 when the Eritrean case was presented to the United Nations, a six-country committee made proposals: Norway voted for complete union with Ethiopia, South Africa and Burma voted for some federation with Ethiopia while Guatemala, Pakistan and the former Union
of Soviet Socialist Republic voted for full independence. The UN instead agreed to a federation at the urging of the pro-Ethiopian US (Trevaskis, 1960).

The same participant said she experienced oppressive feelings especially at the hands of the Haile Selassie government and contemplated joining the independence struggle at meda (war front). She recalled having to line up near the Asmara airport with thousands of other women and children to greet the Emperor who was arriving from Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian capital. She remembered seeing children dying from sunstroke on the backs of their mothers who were standing with the crowd. This period coincided with the United Nations agreed upon federation of Eritrea with Ethiopia for a period of ten years after which time a permanent decision would be made concerning the status of Eritrea. Eritrea was to retain its own parliament or assembly and constitution with a US-style Bill of Rights (Negash, 1997). However, the Emperor violated the agreement by banning trade unions and independent publications, arresting newspaper editors, banning Eritrean languages, replacing the Eritrean flag with the Ethiopian one, relocating industries to Ethiopia and forcing the Eritrean parliament shutdown backed by the Ethiopian army (Cliffe, 1988).

Many of the women, especially those raised in Eritrea, recalled growing up with terror as they recounted stories of their close encounters with death. One woman who grew up in the Eritrean lowlands experienced horror as a child when Ethiopian soldiers or tor as they were often referred to, would kill villagers where she lived, and throw the rotting corpses in the middle of the village square with flies buzzing over them. They would then order the villagers to strangle the already-dead corpses. This was a method used by the Ethiopian military to identify the corpses by seeing family members’ reactions when that happened. She recalled one particular incident etched in her memory:

...it was the time of Id. Many people were ordered killed. Five thousand people were just killed near our town...After the third day we went to that town and the Amharas [soldiers] ordered us to bury them so it was a very bad situation. I saw a dead mother who had been clasping her two children trying to protect them.
This incident did not take place during the time of Dictator Mengistu Hailemariam as many would imagine or assume, but rather during the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie in the 1970s. During this period Ethiopian troops were sent to destroy “the few Eritrean bandits” as the government chose to refer to them. The Ethiopian government also shrewdly created a special Israeli-trained commando unit of Christian Eritreans against Eritreans called Commando 101, which created a rift between Moslems and Christians in the ELF (Sherman, 1980). At the Emperor’s command several villages were burnt and destroyed with civilians murdered. Villages such as Om Hajer were totally destroyed. She also recalled Ethiopian soldiers blocking the routes to several villages, which created food shortages. In one incident during the time of severe food shortages, her village residents were advised to come to the grain warehouse to buy whatever was available. She said women would fight for the few sacks of grains in the scorching sun only to discover at the end of the day the babies they had been carrying on their backs had died from either the heat or the stampede. At one time there was a sugar shortage in her village and the villagers would all dip candy into their tea and coffee until all the candy in the village was exhausted. She also remembered soldiers knocking at people’s doors and killing people. To this day her past haunts her in the present in her fear of the police even in Canada, a sentiment shared by many who have had similar traumatic experiences at the hands of repressive and brutal governments. She stated, “When I’m driving on the street and their car is passing by I feel that they are going to stop me and that’s the end of me. So I feel that the police do nothing but kill.”

This particular woman referred to the Ethiopian soldiers as Amhara, a significant point among Eritreans raised in Eritrea where the ethnic Amhara stands for “Ethiopian soldiers” or tor as a symbol of Ethiopian hegemony. She recalled the time Tigrinya for Christians and Arabic for Moslems were banned in schools and both replaced by Amharic which none of the students could understand or ever used at home. As a result people resented the linguistic imposition as it symbolized Ethiopian oppressive hegemony.
Almost all the participants became emotional as they talked about the independence struggle. Abeba spoke out loud with emotion as she expressed her pride in Eritreans who shed their blood for independence. She stated, "We all fought like we were children of the same mother!" She referred to Eritrea as the mother nation that embraced all her children as one in unity regardless of any differences. She added, "We never asked each other, 'What region are you from? Whose daughter are you?'" This is a crucial point in the Eritrean independence movement where religious and regional differences especially between Moslem lowlanders and Christian highlanders created a power struggle. The ELF's pro-Islamic militant stand had alienated others as it gained support from Islamic countries such as Syria, Libya and Iraq. Since the Ethiopian crown was Christian, the implications for a power struggle were based not on faith but on which religious group had access to economic or political power (Iyob, 1995). The EPLF adopted the ELM's secular nationalism and Moslem-Christian reconciliatory stand as its socio-political framework while advocating the equality and unity of all Eritrean languages, religions and regions.

Almost all the participants said they had lost close family members or cousins who had fought in the independence struggle within the ELF or EPLF or had had close family members or cousins who fought in the struggle. One woman broke down during the interview as she remembered her three siblings who died in the war as freedom fighters and that she found out about their deaths over the phone after her arrival in Canada. Another participant whose family members were in meda (war front) recalled her own experience of life when she was a child in meda as she and her family were leaving Eritrea. She had listened to a lot of popular Tigrinya Eritrean liberation songs and asked her parents to explain the EPLF political songs and what they were saying. Her mother would just tell her it was politics. "I think she told me more that way," she concluded. After liberation she discovered that many of her family members did not come back but had given their lives for the cause.
The women who lived in Ethiopia during the Mengistu regime said they experienced terror through the *kebeles* (Urban Dwellers' Associations) whose cadres would force them to attend Marxist-Leninist *niqat* (consciousness-raising) political meetings. During the Red Terror Campaign in which thousands of people were murdered, the *kebeles* recruited cadres to hand out tortures or executions and transfer detainees to the central prisons. At that time there were approximately 4,770 prisons in Ethiopia with 355 of them in the capital Addis Ababa alone (Bekele, 1979). One woman said there was the added factor of being Eritrean in Ethiopia, which contributed to her fear as Eritreans were arrested and killed. She was careful to conceal her Eritrean identity in fear of imprisonment. When her husband was imprisoned, she told no one in her office. Another woman recalled a cadre getting into their family car with a gun and forcing her father out of the car. Another woman was taken to court over her husband's failure to return from a visit abroad. The *kebele* cadres came to her house and repossessed her property. "They told me to give them all my household property, even *finjal* [coffee cups]...they said, ‘This belongs to *wenbedey* [anarchist rebel].’" Another woman also said she and her family were terrorized because the Ethiopian government was forcibly conscripting youngsters to go to war and she feared for her sons' safety. Although Ethiopians were also terrorized and victimized, she found it more so because of her Eritrean identity and the fact that Ethiopia was at war with Eritreans. "There were slogans saying, ‘We have to finish them!’" She was referring to the famous Mengistu slogans of "Down with *Jebha!*" and "Down with *Sha'bia!*" when he tactfully referred to the Arabic names for the Eritrean fronts associating both the ELF and the EPLF with the Islamic Arab world. She added that the fact that the Ethiopian troops were being defeated was an ironic backlash for Eritreans in Ethiopia who constantly faced the government's growing hatred towards Eritreans.

Although most of the participants stated that they were politically conscious and aware of what was happening in Eritrea, some said that their parents shielded them from politics in order to protect them. Yordanos said, "We never knew anything about politics." Her father never turned
the radio on in the presence of his children and he would ask them to leave the room before he did so. Many Eritreans and Ethiopians listened to several international radio broadcasts such as the British Broadcasting Services (BBC) and the Voice of America (VOA) as well as more local broadcasts from the EPLF in Sahel and the Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU) in Omdruhman in Sudan. Parents were afraid to have their children listen to these broadcasts in case they repeated them to others jeopardizing everyone’s life. Some parents were also afraid to have their children socialize with other children in case they motivated each other to join the liberation fronts as thousands of youth were doing especially if other siblings were already enlisted.

Those who lived in Eritrea during the Mengistu period went through more difficult times. The curfew in Eritrea was lowered to 6 p.m. while it was mostly 12 a.m. in Ethiopia. Women in both Asmara and other smaller Eritrean towns and the rural areas were raped, their breasts cut off, their gold nose rings and earrings torn off by Ethiopian soldiers (Magos, 1981). Women suspected of having EPLF connections were imprisoned and/or tortured (National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW), 1984). By then thousands of men and women were joining the swelling ranks of the EPLF while others fled on foot and by camel to Sudan. The shortage of running water and electricity as well as basic food items such as cooking oil, sugar and grains further contributed to physical hardship, depression, anxiety and fear.

Leaving Eritrea: “Five thousand people were just killed near our town... We hid in the bushes. If they spot you, they throw the bombs.”

At the time the Eritrean war for independence was raging and Mengistu Hailemariam was leading Ethiopia with an iron fist, thousands of Eritreans and Ethiopians were clambering to leave Ethiopia. The majority of Eritreans were leaving on foot and on camel to Sudan while others in Ethiopia were using other borders such as Kenya and Djibouti. Fortunate ones were able to obtain tourist or student visas and made it out legally after several attempts and after departing, chose to remain in exile.
All the women in the research were divided in their conditions of departure. All but two left for political or safety reasons. One woman came to Addis Ababa from Asmara for a short visit and to try to see whether she could obtain a passport and exit visa. When she had finally obtained them, she became conflicted about leaving her family behind and made plans to return to Asmara. Unfortunately, the Asmara airport was under military attack at the time and she was unable to return and decided to go to Europe as planned earlier without seeing her family.

Another woman’s departure conditions were very dangerous. She and other family members made arrangements to leave Eritrea for Sudan by camel after making the necessary payments of approximately seventy Ethiopian Birr each. Their travel guide was highly skilled in such travel and was aware of the Ethiopian troops’ movements and time schedule. He led them out of their village just as the soldiers were napping. Their journey was very difficult as Ethiopian bomber planes were deliberately targeting civilian travelers. They traveled for nine days amid heavy aerial bombing and almost got killed. They would travel from 4 a.m. in the morning until 10 a.m. after which time the aerial bombing would start. The bomber planes would leave at 4 p.m. and then the travelers would resume their journey. She remembered the bomber planes being very fast that she would hear the planes first and before she knew it they would be hovering over them throwing deadly bombs. She added, “We hid in the bushes. If the spot you, they throw the bombs.” One of their camels was killed by such bombs a few feet from where they had been. At one time she was dragged by a hyena as all the travelers were sleeping by a fire. Fortunately, their guide reacted fast and hit the hyena with a metal crowbar and saved her life. At times they were so discouraged that they would sit and cry. On their journey they would also meet freedom fighters or tegadelti with whom they would cook meals and chat for a while. Some travelers decided to join the freedom fighters and enlisted in the front. Until they reached the Sudanese border the remaining travelers were shaking with fear never sure whether they would make it alive since the border areas were heavily patrolled by both Sudanese and Ethiopian soldiers. She said Ethiopian soldiers would simply shoot those who had made it to the border.
She recalled the leader being very strong but she said she noticed at one time that he too was trembling slightly and wondered how many times he had crossed the border like that. She added:

The prayers we said then were filled with fear and truth, the moment of truth. Another time was when we entered Sudan. This was the Ethiopian and Sudanese border. The Sudanese side won’t kill you. They might turn you back or let you in. The Ethiopian ones just killed you. The valley there is very long, sort of on top of a mountain. So the leader would be nervous and tell us not to make a sound. He had calculated the exact time the soldiers would be asleep from experience but he still was shaking with fear because if they spotted us they would just kill us. We were saying our prayers shaking. And then we were worried that when we reached Sudan, they would rob us of our money.

Another woman recounted a similar experience when she traveled to Sudan with her family who left every valuable property they had behind in Eritrea in favor of freedom. They later discovered that their guide was later found out by the Ethiopian government, arrested and executed in 1990.

Two of the women in the study had difficult experiences with government officials in their conditions of departure. Both were harassed by Dergue government officials in Ethiopia and had their homes and property repossessed. Surprisingly both of these women’s husbands’ had left the country earlier and had “failed” to return to Ethiopia and consequently their wives were paying the price. One of them even noticed that she was being followed when she was driving. She was denied access to her home by her own guard who had been given instructions by the government. In a fit of rage she appealed to a high-ranking officer who out of sympathy, was able to get the decision revoked. After she had secretly made her travel plans, she told her co-workers that she was transferring to another company and told no one that she was leaving the country. She had actually obtained a position in another company as “a form of alibi” for the days she missed from work while working on her departure papers for her and her children. The other participant also had to pretend she did not know where her husband was although the kebele had repossessed her belongings. She went to court over the case for three years until they finally accepted her as a “deserted wife.” After that she hastily made plans to leave with her children in the guise of some family emergency she had to attend to in Europe and left to later join her
husband in Europe. Two other women left Ethiopia legally. One obtained a student visa and another a tourist visa.

Another woman’s departure was slightly different than the former two since she left fairly recently during the recent Eritrean-Ethiopian conflict. After being dismissed from her job as an Eritrean with thousands of other Eritreans residing in Ethiopia and though she was an Ethiopian citizen, she awaited her time to be deported after her sister and brother had been jailed and deported by bus to the war zone(border. Fortunately, her Canadian landed immigrant visa was ready and she was able to leave Ethiopia although she was detained for questioning at the airport. She was psychologically traumatized by the conditions of her dismissal from work, her family’s deportation and from leaving all her property behind and coming to Canada with just two bags.

Although all these women experienced different conditions of departure, they all share the fact that they left Ethiopian rule under oppressive conditions whether the period was under Emperor Haileselassie as one participant left for domestic work abroad rather than stay in Imperial Ethiopia, under the brutal Mengistu regime or under the current EPRDF/TPLF government and its ethnic cleansing policy. Eritrean identity and resistance have thus been constantly redefining themselves in various ways, conditions and periods as seen in the experiences of these women.
Chapter II

Eritrean Women-Culture and Gender Issues: "You make your bed. He makes the stew."

Domestic Roles: "It is her duty. She has to work as a woman."

A woman’s identity in Eritrea was traditionally fixed in her role as a wife and mother. As a result, her domestic productive skills and reproductive roles were used to assess her value as a potential wife and mother. Even within the urban Eritrean society, the traditional feudal gender relations that subordinate women are evident (Wilson, 1991). In rural areas especially, women get up earlier than other family members to fetch firewood and water by walking several kilometers a day carrying heavy loads. In addition to cooking and childcare, they are expected to help their husbands in agricultural work. Thus women’s productive and reproductive roles are tied to their gender roles which Rosaldo and Lamphere (1974, p. 80) state are related to the conflict between culture and nature. Although women are solid carriers and transmitters of culture, women are seen to have more direct connections with nature biologically. They are thus "seen as situated between the two realms." Gender as a social construct is thus associated with women’s biological connection to nature to legitimize their subordinate status.

The women in my research identified with being raised with domestic skills as "befitting" a woman. In Eritrea, this does not simply entail cooking but rather having more sophisticated skills such as knowing how to grind grains, preparing various spices and hot pepper or berbere, baking injera (traditional sponge-like bread), and brewing sewa (barley beer with gesho) and the honey-based mes. Yordanos recalled her mother telling her to learn all the necessary cooking skills in order to be a skilled wife who would make her mother proud. Said her mother, "Once you are on your own, when you get married, I want to be a proud mother that taught everything." Yordanos laughed as she commented that she believed her mother was more worried about what her daughter’s in-laws would say more than anything else. This also reveals the strong link
between domestic skills and “marriageability” which the mother was culturally very conscious of. Yordanos said that eventually she began to dread marriage because she equated it to endless domestic chores. Like Yordanos, Abrehet also grew up feeling that marriage meant domestic burden and oppression especially since she saw women doing all the housework and being abused. Girls were always expected to help in the kitchen. Winta remembered her grandfather’s home where all the family women would pamper him. One would take off his jacket, another his shoes, another washed his feet and no one ever ate until he came home. She added with a smile, “I know girls that when they were eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, they literally lived next to the stove.” Mitslal, another woman, also said that although her parents were liberal and more concerned with her education, they still showed sexism in the way her brothers were not expected to do domestic work.

Many parents in Eritrea viewed domestic chores as a woman’s responsibility. Whenever the validity of their views were questioned as to why men did not work in the home, they would respond with, “But he is a man!” Muna explained:

So he feels superior and he grows up like that with that feeling in his blood. So when he marries, his wife becomes his servant and their children’s servant ... So when a woman is cooking *tsebhi* [stew], it never occurs to him to help her. He thinks it is wrong. He doesn’t know it. He was raised differently.

She stressed the psychological benefits of a man sharing in domestic life even if he did not actually have to do any domestic work. She gave a very interesting account of a woman in her town who was in labor for three days in her house. When the midwife insisted on having the husband come into the delivery room, the other women complained since it was taboo but the moment the husband entered the room, the psychological support enabled the woman to deliver right away. Muna added with a laugh that the typical father-to-be in Eritrea instead, “…stands outside wondering if she’s going to have a boy or a girl…If it is a boy, then he yells, ‘Me! I am the father of sons!’”
Although all the women mentioned domestic chores being viewed in their culture as women’s responsibility, they varied in their personal childhood experiences. One woman had a very positive childhood in Eritrea in which she was treated equally with her brothers. Her parents did not expect her to do housework but at one time her mother began to worry whether her daughter would be able to cook. This woman believed that her parents’ equal treatment contributed to her self-confidence and active participation in male-dominated fields. Another woman brought up in Eritrea came from a family that believed in both gender and class equality stating:

We were all treated equally... My parents, when we were growing up, we used to help even though we had some maids and if we are cooking, my brothers would cook. If they are cooking, we would wash the dishes or vice versa.

Her childhood experience has been duplicated in her married life where she and her husband equally share the domestic work while teaching their children the virtues of sharing.

Marriage and Sexuality: “If you have a daughter and I have a son, we will be united as one.”

Traditionally, marriage assured women of socio-economic status in Eritrean society. Their status as wives and mothers determined their access to money, property and social status. Since in both Tigrinya and Amharic speaking societies, descent is traced through both parents, motherhood is an important aspect of wifehood (Berhane Selassie, 1997). Motherhood becomes the highest attainable status for wives, with infertility being a woman’s annihilation. Wilson (1991) states that traditionally, marriage sealed the preservation of patriarchal lines through the production of sons, the control of sexuality, land rights, financial matters and decision making.

Early arranged marriages were a usual custom in Eritrea where fathers would arrange to have their children marry each other even before their children were born (Silkin, 1990; Wilson, 1991). One woman referred to her childhood arranged marriage pact as kidan. Long before she was born, her bachelor father had gone to war as an askar in the Italian army. While stationed
abroad he met another bachelor Eritrean askar whom he befriended. They made a pact that when they returned to Eritrea, they would arrange for their children to get married in the future. The other man told him, “If you have a daughter and I have a son, we will be united as one.” This was also a way of showing their friendship and love. When the two men returned the other man got married much earlier and had a son and began reminding his friend of their pact. When the participant was born, she was much younger than her fiancé. The kidan marriage took place when she was only twelve years old and she went to live with her in-laws for a few years before consummation. She recalled her experience:

I didn’t know him as a husband. I was young and because they were afraid that I would be traumatized, they had a wahas [guarantor] and I stayed with my mother-in-law under her care in their house after I got married. Then I returned home as a virgin. I was a child. I used to go to the forests and so on even while I was married. I didn’t know anything. From my family to tending cattle. I was a shepherdess. I didn’t grow up in the city.

She used to sleep on the same bed as her mother-in-law who treated her like her own daughter. This was a common practice where the protection of child brides from sexual advances and rape was in the hands of the in-laws who now controlled the bride. Although her husband was not abusive, the woman confessed that he was much older and that she screamed whenever he approached her. She did not have any knowledge of sexual matters and tended sheep near their family home. After a few years, she fled her village with a group of other child brides without consummating the marriage and went to the city to look for work. Her kidan marriage was dissolved by the family. She later remarried another man for love and had several children but her husband started cheating on her. As she reminisced about her marital life she stated that her notions of traditional Eritrean marriages were those of “hardship where men bring in other women into the marriages.” This backed the assertion that marriages were monogamous in name only (Magos, 1981; Wilson, 1991).

Although this woman’s second marriage was not arranged, she believed that traditional cultural expectations in both marriages had victimized her in different ways. She stressed that
Eritrean women did all the domestic work at home and that their husbands did not share in marital duties. Her assertion was that women carried all the productive and reproductive roles and managed to keep the family together through commitment and hard work. She said women in her generation would feed their children with whatever leftovers they had while they would serve the best meat dishes to their husbands who had squandered their salary and grocery money on liquor. As she recalled her own painful memories she sang in Tigrinya, “You are children! On shiro [porridge] you thrive, and your fathers, on bira [beer] they thrive!” Her songs echo the similar trends observed among rural women who during get-togethers whether for coffee breaks or during domestic chores or wood collecting, create a space to voice their oppressive gender and class relations through traditional songs (Druce & Hammond, 1990). When this woman discovered her husband’s infidelity, she said, “I threw the meshrefet [straw fan] against the wall!” in a symbolic defiant gesture of liberation from domestic slavery in which she had stoked fires with her fan. She divorced him and went in search of women’s equality and political national freedom. Her divorce coincided with the early liberation movement and she felt all the oppressive conditions and liberation in her life as a woman and as an Eritrean were happening simultaneously as one.

When I asked her about how easy it had been for her to obtain a divorce she said she had encountered no problems. She added that as long as a couple had followed the “seven-generation” rules in marriage, had married in front of witnesses/guarantors or wahas and had no illegitimate children, they could be divorced easily. The seven-generation rules refer to the Eritrean tradition by which close Eritrean kinship lines are determined and in which a couple related by blood within seven generations would not be allowed to marry.

She expressed her views on domestic work:

When you work, your husband has to work…You make your bed, he makes the stew.
You bake the injera, he has to wash the dishes, clean the house, take care of his children.
And you can be like a man. Bring in the salary.
This particular woman who was raised in the rural areas referred to the domestic burden rural women face in addition to cooking and child-care such as tending cattle and sheep. Both rural and urban women also participate in basket-weaving, brewing *sewa* (local barley-based beer) or the honey-based *mes*. During coffee “breaks” such as coffee ceremonies, they simultaneously do other chores such as breast-feeding, plaiting hair or sifting grains.

In traditional marriages, in addition to showing respect towards her husband in public, a woman addressed her husband as *atum* the Tigrinya equivalent of the singular pronoun “thou” with deference and often refrained from calling him by name, opting to address him as “sir” or “lord.” In the Eritrean lowlands women were forbidden by custom to mention their husbands’ and male-in-laws’ names out of respect and referred to them by association as their children’s father, grandfather, or uncle.

Another woman, Winta, remembered an older girl friend she had when they were in Sudan. Her friend was only fourteen when her parents decided to marry her off to a much older man who was living in Germany. Winta admits she could never understand the bride’s anguish until she got older. The significance of the arranged marriage to an older man had not dawned upon her since she had been too young to comprehend it then. She had thought that the girl’s life was going to be better in Germany and had not understood the girl’s lack of choice and strict parental control.

All the participants had different experiences as girls but shared similarities in the way society tried to control them and almost all referred to the term *newri*, the Tigrinya word for “shame.” This was the underlying theme of life for women: avoiding *newri* and being respectable and decent. Most of them mentioned being told to be obedient and passive when they were growing up. Misrinesh was critically aware of all the rules of behavior (Silkin, 1990; Wilson, 1991) imposed on girls like herself, “Don’t laugh. Don’t talk out loud. Don’t talk to strangers. You’ll be considered easy.” Muna added she was told, “Don’t laugh with people you don’t know.”
Have a serious look. Don’t wear a short dress.” This control of women’s behavior and sexuality was to ensure their good reputation and to maintain the family’s honor and name. Several women had similar experiences in the way their parents controlled them. Their neighborhoods felt more like “all-eyes” communities where everyone knew what was happening. One woman had a difficult time convincing her father to let her go to school because he was afraid she would socialize with boys. Whenever there was a rumor that a girl had gotten pregnant, her father, like the other fathers in her village, would forbid her from going to school. She would plead for a few days and would be back in school. Her father wanted her to be a nurse but was conflicted. Part of him wanted a professional educated daughter while part of him wanted a decent “marriageable” daughter. Whenever she walked home from school with her male classmates, neighbors would report her to the family and her father would punish her.

Socializing with men was seen as a carnal sin. If a female student got pregnant as a result of a rape or non-consensual sex by a teacher or another adult, she was always the one to be blamed. Although some of the participants suffered because of the strictness and prying eyes of the neighborhood, they said that they also felt protected and loved. One woman said that when she was growing up, she had to answer to even the young neighborhood boys who wanted to know where she was going and with whom. Despite the gender restrictions, she felt the strong kinship ties and caring attitude. Rahwa said that although she liked the fact that people cared and showed it, women were seen as passive and weak and developed a lack of self confidence because of that and stated, “You don’t believe in yourself.”

Most parents were afraid of their daughters losing their virginity and reputation and therefore, their chances for a decent marriage. Dating was often not acceptable though some of the women admitted dating discreetly. The assumption was that if a girl dated or even socialized with men she would lose her virginity. Many parents therefore did not allow their daughters to stay out so late and monitored their activities and social life. Yordanos’ parents were rather strict and would not allow her to stay late. Yordanos told her mother, “It can happen in the morning. I
can skip school and go and do a lot of things.” Yordanos stated that the more strict parents were with their daughters, the more willing the daughters were to venture into the “forbidden” world. Her father, who was educated, used to give an insightful analogy to express his views on raising daughters:

Girls are like a spring. If you keep them so tight and then you let your hands go, they will jump and they will end up somewhere. If you let them go a little one at a time, loose, loose, loose, and then at the end it will be okay.

An interesting point that is usually observed in parental authority is that older daughters usually face more strict rules as they are used as models whom younger female siblings are supposed to emulate and who are used as measuring sticks by which the younger ones are judged. True to this observation, Yordanos felt that her mother was more lenient with her than with her older sister.

Misrinesh felt that girls were not treated like responsible adults but rather like babies whose decisions were made for them, similar to Rahwa’s assertions. Yordanos added that her parents seldom gave them pocket money for fear that the money would be used for dates to go to the movies, for cigarettes or for drinks. She questioned this attitude since she could have used the money for basic necessary items girls needed such as toiletries. She felt sad that her parents assumed the worst. Since daughters were seldom given pocket money, this aspect of denying them money was later reproduced in their marital life where their husbands controlled financial transactions. These women would have no knowledge of financial matters or the state of their husband’s finances. One woman who had earned a good salary and had led a comfortable life in Ethiopia said she used to give her money to her husband for management because she had no idea how to handle finances. “I used to be treated like a child, not a wife….I did not know wifehood. You just go to work, come home. Even your salary is not in your hands… I had no experience in managing that.” This lack of women’s involvement in finances has also been evident in the recent deportations of Eritrean men from Ethiopia whose wives left behind are in the dark about their family’s finances and legal matters.
While discussing marriage, most of the women unanimously associated marriage for women with domestic responsibilities and reproductive roles and saw inequality and lack of recognition as principal problems. One recurring theme was the lack of recognition of women’s domestic role. Senait said:

I don’t see any reason why we can’t be equal, from my experience. In fact we as women we could be a bit more because we are in charge: we raise kids, we can start from conception, I mean pregnancy, breast-feeding, raising children, housekeeping itself, trying to work outside at the same time. So it is a double role actually that we have... if we can’t even get recognition more, at least for Heaven’s sake, we need to be treated equally.

Abrehet backed Senait’s belief that the institution of marriage would be happier if women were given the recognition they deserved. She stated that while growing up she noticed that husbands took their wives for granted and “…threw salary money for groceries once a month…” She noticed that husbands did not give their wives any acknowledgment for their hard work and expected to be waited on and served food cooked by their wives even if there were maids. She said that although she had dreaded marriage when she was younger, she was fortunate enough to marry an educated and broad-minded man who treated her with respect. He was a much older and well-traveled man with who she had a good marriage.

Zufan’s notion of equality which she had learned from her family’s views of equality was duplicated in her marriage. She and her husband share domestic duties. She said their mutual agreement was due to the fact that he had similar views on gender equality and was also educated as well as broad minded. He was very supportive of her education and career. Although both Zufan and Abrehet’s happy marriages may be attributed to marrying educated, liberal-minded men, some of the other women disagreed. Although having an education may be one aspect of understanding gender discrimination, it was felt that upbringing is also a very crucial factor in the way a man is raised seeing gender roles.

One important point some of the women raised was that regardless of any other factors, many Eritrean women and families in Eritrea prioritized marriage over compatibility, education,
career or happiness and that this trend was transferred abroad. Zufan, who was never aware of gender issues or sexism was appalled by the scope and level of sexist attitudes such as parents in Canada discouraging their daughters from attending university. When Zufan confronted one father in Canada for discouraging his daughter from attending university, the response she got was, “Who’s going to marry her?… It doesn’t matter if she marries a drunkard or whatever…She has to get married.”

Some women raised domestic violence in Eritrea. One woman in particular, believed that Eritrean women were very patient and tolerated physical abuse for their children’s sake and to save their marriages at any cost. Eritrean women believed in working on their marriages and sacrificed a lot. This woman had grown up in Ethiopia and had seen Eritrean women being abused by their Eritrean spouses. She noticed that a battered wife would hide out with the neighbors until her husband’s temper had “cooled off.” The wife would then sneak in the house to tend to the children after he had gone to bed. This participant also gave an interesting cultural observation regarding differences between Ethiopian and Eritrean women. She believed that Ethiopian Amhara women were less tolerant in receiving such abusive treatment at the hands of their husbands than Eritreans. This was due to two possible reasons she gave. One possible reason was that Ethiopian women may have viewed the institution of marriage with less loyalty and were prone to leave an unhappy marriage and start another one. Related to this is the second possible reason: the fact that Eritrean men married to Ethiopian women were more reluctant to abuse their wives because they knew their wives would not tolerate their behavior and feared their wives would walk out on the marriage.

Education: “They used to show more respect to the girls.”

In Eritrea, as in the majority of Sub-Saharan African countries, girls are a minority especially in higher education. Most of the participants in this study attended higher education
during the Haile Selassie and Mengistu periods before Eritrean independence. In Ethiopia, before the 1974 Ethiopian revolution, the female enrolment rate in primary education was only 18 percent (Berhane Selassie, 1984) and grew to 40 percent by 1989 while the secondary school enrolment was 39 percent (Zewde, 1991). The percentage of female enrolments was very low as it approached higher education with the percentage being only 7.7 in undergraduate degree programs by 1987 (Tefcra, 1991). The graduate program enrolments saw the shrinking figure of only 6.45 percent (Husen & Postlethwaite, 1994). In Eritrea, the general female enrolment rate was 49.9 percent in the urban areas while it was 43.2 percent in the rural ones for the 1985/1986 academic period, comparing favorably with Addis Ababa whose urban female enrolment rate was 51.9 for the same period (Tefcra, 1991).

All the women in the study valued education highly and had families that wanted them to get an education which they themselves had not had the chance of getting. Education was seen as a means to better their lives while at the same time it was also seen as an obstacle that would impede their chances for marriage. This conflict was evident in the way parents were lenient towards their daughters if the girls were doing well in school. Yordanos' grandmother was keenly aware of the importance of education and allowed her and her sister to socialize with friends as long as they had done their homework. On the other hand, another woman said her father wanted her to be a nurse and to go to school but was afraid that this would bring newri or shame to the family name if she was found socializing with men at school or in her profession.

Another woman had very a positive experience in school. Since there were few female students, the ratio being approximately three boys to one girl, she felt the teachers were very respectful, attentive and helpful towards girls encouraging them to speak up and to ask questions. Mitslal also admitted that although her cousins in the rural areas in Eritrea showed some favoritism in giving their sons an education over their daughters, she said, "There is a part that distinguishes between the girls and boys but also there is another one that distinguishes between
motivated and non-motivated." She explained that although males were favored overall, some girls were also given educational opportunities if they showed the potential.

Seven of the women had completed high school in Eritrea or Ethiopia. Two went on to secretarial school to pursue secretarial work while one attended college and two attended university. Only one completed college while the two withdrew from the freshman program to leave the country. The last two did not feel they were treated differently than the male students. The only time they felt their gender was when they noticed that they were a very small minority. Surprisingly, both women were enrolled in the Natural Sciences program, which was male-dominated. One of them said the only problem she encountered was that when she or other female students missed a class, the teacher would notice immediately and comment on it. This participant scored high grades and was later motivated to do the same when she came to Canada.

Although there is a general assumption that women are concentrated in traditional "feminine" fields such as Home Economics, Nursing or teaching (Wagaw, 1990) and that certain feminine fields such as flight attendance were seen as glamorous by many (Berhane Selassie, 1984), the women in this study were divided in their educational background and fields of study. Only two had not completed high school while only two had pursued the traditional field of secretarial work. Three had gone to higher education in non-traditional male-dominated fields. Although women were normally discouraged from attending school by parents due to domestic work obligations, none of these women dropped out from school or were discouraged from pursuing their education by their families and teachers or by other responsibilities with one exception.

One of the women was illiterate. She had had no formal education and had married at the young age of twelve. She had been raised in the rural areas and had spent most of her time tending sheep. She had helped her mother with domestic work and had had no access to schools at that time which was in the 1940s. After she had left her arranged marriage, she went in search of domestic work to the city to support herself. After her second marriage and children she had to continue working and remained so after her divorce. Her early arranged marriage, her location in
the rural areas and family responsibilities as well as economic priorities were clearly a hindrance to any school opportunities had they come her way. Had there been schools in her area, her parents would not have allowed her to attend for fear of her losing her virginity and also because her attending school would mean losing her valuable domestic labor. She was among the millions of Eritrean and Ethiopian women who comprised the 90 percent figure for illiterate women during the Haileselassie period (Berhane Selassie, 1984). This woman though, learned Italian and some English while working as a domestic. In spite of being unable to write except sign her name in Tigrinya, she expressed much knowledge about global issues, politics and gender-relations and was very articulate.

Two other women expressed having gone through a positive and happy educational experience in Eritrea. They had attended private schools where the teachers though exerting some authority, fostered egalitarian gender relations and were not feared by the students. They both expressed much gratitude towards their teachers for influencing their positive educational and career outcomes. One woman remembered having many foreign teachers including Canadians. She later left Eritrea and married abroad and was able to pursue her university education including graduate studies. However, she faced some opposition from the Eritrean community where she lived. People approached her husband and asked, “How can you allow her? You know, when women have extra education, you will have a lot of problems...you should stop her.” Although her husband was supportive, the notion that only men are supposed to pursue higher studies while women are supposed to take marriage as the priority became an issue and she started to become critically aware of gender power dynamics within the Eritrean community. Her education was not seen as contributing to the family future earning potential or quality of life, but rather as a gender power “coup” in defiance of her husband’s authority.
Employment: "Whether I am a woman or not, I am capable."

In both urban Eritrea and Ethiopia women are concentrated in traditional "feminine" fields such as secretarial work, nursing, teaching, and domestic work while their participation in rural farming work comprises a large percentage. It is estimated that there was between 55 to 74 percent of female economic participation in Ethiopia, including Eritrea by 1991 (Momsen, 1991) although most official national and international statistical records do not classify women's unpaid domestic and subsistence farming work as economic activities (Waring, 1988). In the past, women in both Eritrean and Ethiopian rural agricultural communities were denied the right to inherit land with some exceptions such as in the Eritrean Seraye region.

In Eritrea, the three major feudal and semi-feudal land-owning systems which denied women land inheritance but which were later banned by the EPLF, were the diesa or communal village ownership, the meriet risti or family ownership, and the inda or clan/tribal ownership (Firebrace & Holland, 1985; Magos, 1981; Silkin, 1990; Wilson, 1991). Because of this, even widows and divorcees who managed to run farms were economically dependent on male kin for assistance such as plowing land which they were culturally banned from doing, since they had to pay taxes (Berhane Selassie, 1984). In addition, since land and property were passed from father to son, only men were able to participate in family property or financial transactions. Such gender constraints later delved into banking transactions in which women were considered financial risks or incompetent. They were also denied participation in agricultural development projects and left to cope with their manual out-dated farming methods while men received technologically advanced agricultural training (Lindsay, 1980; Momsen, 1991). As a result, women faced heavy competition from the modern economic sector's technologically superior products and labor which devoured their traditional roles (Lindsay, 1980).

In Eritrea with the expansion of the Capitalist mode of production introduced by Italian colonialism, thousands of families were impoverished as their farm lands were confiscated and
turned into manufacturing plant sites. Women began migrating in large numbers to cities such as Asmara, Massawa and Addis Ababa, looking for employment in factories, bars, or as domestics. Such women who were first exploited by feudal and semi-feudal relations under the oppressive traditional feudal system then faced Capitalist exploitative relations reinforced under colonialism. Prostitution rose in Ethiopia in the 1950s. The term *shermuta* (prostitute) even applied to single women living alone as more and more women were migrating to the cities alone in search of employment. By the 1950s tourism rose with the opening of the naval stations such as Kagnew Station run by the US in Massawa, bars, hotels and nightclubs in Asmara and Addis Ababa. For example in Ethiopia, just before the 1974 revolution, 8 percent of the female population was engaged in prostitution and by the 1980s a growing number of free-lance prostitutes or streetwalkers between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five were actively working for a wealthy Middle Eastern clientele (Berhane Selassie, 1984).

The colonial period saw the emergence of working class Eritrean women employed in the food and textile industries earning as low as forty to fifty cents for ten to twelve hours of daily labor, earning half of their male co-workers’ earnings (Magos, 1981; Tadesse, 1976). Those who worked as domestics worked for middle class Eritrean families and Italians, the latter exploiting them sexually while it was not uncommon for domestics to have illegitimate children from such unions. Their earnings were as low as thirty to fifty Ethiopian Birr, the equivalent of three to five US dollars for fifteen to eighteen hours of daily labor while they earned half a day off on alternate Sundays (Magos, 1981; NUEW, 1983).

One of my participants left her village and family in the rural areas while still a teenager and went to Massawa to look for domestic work, where she was able to find employment with Italian and American families. She said they treated her well but that her life was marked by hardship. She had to raise her children on her own when her marriage broke down while she worked as a domestic. She admitted, “Thanks to poverty. Thanks to domestic labor, I’ve never gone to bed hungry. I do anything.” Although her life of poverty and struggle was a very difficult
one, she believed that her domestic employment experiences gave her a sense of identity as well as gender and national awareness with their interlocking oppressive nature. While struggling to make ends meet with the meager income she had, she donated portions of her salary to the Eritrean liberation effort like hundreds of other women who were also providing food, shelter and information to freedom fighters (NUEW, 1983) and became very politically conscious of every issue at hand.

Two of the women had worked as secretaries in Ethiopia. By coincidence, both first started working in foreign-owned companies. One woman admitted feeling like herself and being free in the workforce than at home. Her European employers treated her fairly and she called her work environment “a paradise.” She never felt belittled or discriminated against because of her gender. In fact whenever her boss left on a business trip, he would delegate her to carry on his responsibilities and she would repeatedly carry out all her duties superbly. He would even leave her in charge of the office in his absence. As a secretary and customer service representative, she was also responsible for sales details in the company. She stated that although her boss never showed any gender favoritism, some male co-workers, both foreign and Ethiopian or Eritrean would occasionally show some subtle sexism by questioning her participation in male-dominated sales transactions. She said they were rather skeptical about her competence and not too comfortable that she was handling large sums of money and dealing with clients. She retorted, “Whether I am a woman or not, the fact is I am capable of doing the calculations and the sale. I am capable of convincing the customers so you can’t tell me what I can do and I can’t.”

Similarly, another woman who had also worked for a foreign company in Ethiopia had a very favorable work experience as a secretary. She left the company to start a family and became a housewife for several years. After her husband retired, she upgraded her secretarial skills by enrolling in a commercial school and rejoined the work force after competing with younger candidates for a position. She later found a better job in a large Ethiopian company as the executive secretary of the general manager. She experienced no gender discrimination but faced a
different kind of discrimination when she was barred from entering her office one morning and dismissed from her job for being an ethnic Eritrean at the start of the Eritrean-Ethiopian conflict.

Another woman worked in a male-dominated field in Ethiopia. When she had finished her studies, she decided to travel within Ethiopia as a volunteer helping famine victims. Her father objected to this at first but later agreed since he believed it would give her good work experience. She said her father objected not because she was going to work in a male-dominated field but because he feared for her safety while she traveled in dangerous, war-ravaged zones. She gave much credit to her father who was supportive and understanding.

Positive Elements of Eritrean Culture: “We are very strong. We stick to each other.”

One of the most significant cultural traits the women admired in themselves as Eritrean women was the fact that Eritrean women are natural nurturers and family-oriented. Yordanos believed that Eritrean women embody the natural state of womanhood and that they possess the fundamental characteristic of maternal instinct and devotion which was a point seconded by Abrehet. Abrehet believed Eritrean women to be completely loyal to the institution of marriage, their husbands and children and said that no where in the world has she seen such love and devotion in women. She stated that Eritrean women were self-less and sacrificed their lives for their children and would do anything to hold their marriages together.

Another woman said, “Woman is the nurturer naturally, and I like that.” She admired women’s capacity for motherhood and Eritrean women’s traditional roles in the home. She admired women who breast-fed their children and nourished them with love and attention. She preferred being a housewife which she believed was the state a woman could manifest her nurturing side. She said people thought she was rather “crazy” for preferring to be a traditional housewife. She wanted to stay at home and prepare fresh food for her family in Canada as she would if she lived in Eritrea. Although a housewife could be depicted as an economic dependent,
she believed that a husband with a good income would assure his family of this nurturing from his wife.

All of the women agreed that they appreciated Eritrean family values. They felt that Eritreans had very strong family ties and supported one another emotionally and financially even in Canada and that even extended family members lived together. Senait stated, "We are very strong. We stick to each other." The feeling was that Eritreans were like a big family with a complex support network system in which every member was accounted for. Related to this aspect was the caring people had for one another or watching out for one another similar to the experiences many of the women had encountered while growing up. Some women mentioned the support Eritreans give to each other in lieu of government established social welfare programs. Zufan commented, "...you can go to Eritrea. It is a peaceful nation. What makes it peaceful? Not the police officers. It's not the army. It's the people. It's like Neighborhood Watch." This watching out for one another as though each person were a family member is a common African cultural trait magnified in Eritrean society in which families tend to know each other. Mitslal added, "In our country, there is cooperation and help. If anything happens to you your neighbor comes to help you. Here in Canada if you fail, you end up sleeping in the streets so you have to think of yourself first."

The aspect of "Me first" was a prominent aspect the women raised when comparing Eritrean and Western culture in Canada. Yordanos added, "We have a neighbor that lives next door but he doesn’t know if you’re alive or dead. At least when you see that person in the elevator say, ‘Hello. How are you?’" Many feared that the Eritrean social support system would be eroded in Canada and would be replaced with a more individualistic one. Rahwa commented on how crucial the strong support system was during stressful times, "During times of sadness, it is a stressful time so that’s when people need others. We are not used to counselling because this cultural aspect is our form of counselling." Eritreans, like Ethiopians and other Africans, do not believe in getting professional counselling since the traditional social interaction system enable
them to voice their opinions, problems or sorrows and obtain consolation, support and advice from others including experienced elders. When faced with professional counselling services, they feel overwhelmed by having to express their feelings or problems to a stranger who is often unaware of the cultural context of the issues.

Many women also raised the Eritrean cultural traits of being respectful, polite and humble as very positive although Misrinesh like Ainalem Tebeje (1989) felt that such traits are misconstrued in Canada. Misrinesh explained, “Yeah, when I’m working in Canada I found here being polite, they consider you stupid.” In her research Tebeje (1989) had also concluded that this Ethiopian cultural trait was viewed as a sign of inferiority by Westerners. Similarly, the positive Eritrean and Ethiopian cultural trait of generosity was another element misunderstood by Canadians. Misrinesh said that at work her cultural conditioning to share whatever she had was viewed with some skepticism. “When I am eating my lunch at work, if I have more or whatever I have, I offer it. They consider me stupid because they think why am I spending this money for others?” She later added that certain cultural aspects that were considered positive by Eritreans backfired on them in Canadian society because of differences in cultural expectations and concluded, “Too much politeness doesn’t work...Go according to the environment. Be flexible.”

Not surprisingly, any behavior detached from its cultural context is interpreted differently and judged by the norms of that host society. Qualities such as assertiveness instead of politeness, frugality instead of generosity were thus viewed as positive Canadian characteristics and the polar opposites of the two Eritrean qualities admired in Eritrea.

Respecting parents and the elderly merits a separate category as one of the most important Eritrean cultural characteristic the women appreciated by virtue of it’s being a subject raised by all the women who had a lot to say by comparing Eritrean and Canadian family values. All the women respected their parents while some admitted that the respect bordered on fear as well. The women believed that Eritreans respect and obey their parents. This element compared positively with the way they perceived Westerners or Canadians mistreating their parents. Said
Muna visibly upset, "Even your mother, even if you know she's wrong, you show her respect! Here frail and old mothers are confronted by their children!...They bring lovers in front of their mothers and sit and make out in front of her." She was however comforted by the fact that Eritrean children in Canada understood the significance of disrespecting elders as newri or shameful, revealing the positive side of the notion of newri which in the women's earlier experiences had been used to control their behaviors as females.

Almost all the women were appalled by the practice of putting parents in retirement homes which was prevalent in Canada. They felt that the close-knit extended Eritrean family was by far superior and happier. Not only are elderly parents and grandparents not sent away to nursing homes in Eritrea, but also become patriarchs and matriarchs with strong decision making powers in the family.

Another positive Eritrean cultural element mentioned was the traditional courting and marriage practices. Like Muna, Abrebet advocated Eritrean discreetness in dating and sexual matters. Abrebet appreciated marriages which were negotiated by elders or shemagile who approach the prospective bride's parents and ask for her hand "the proper and honorable way" while she felt that a woman should not be sexually promiscuous. She added, "She presents herself to him the proper way." To Abrebet, the honorable way is when a woman is, in her words, "handed to her husband" with honor or kibri compared to what she termed as "Western custom of lovers initiating and finalizing their relationship without their parent's involvement or approval."

She believed that the traditional Eritrean marriage custom sealed a marriage with true love and permanence. On love and marriage in Canada, she had this to say, "Love has lost its image or essence here. It has ceased to be love...It has gone of the right tracks. Everything is open. They do everything here. You see them kissing the whole day." Although she did not necessarily advocate arranged marriages, she felt that parents should approve of marriage partners and bless their children's marriage, which was customary in Eritrean culture.
Misrhesh and Rahwa both admired Eritrean women for sticking to their culture in terms of national dress, spirituality and reverence for God in church. Abrehet too said that Eritrean culture was so strong and resisted Italian cultural hegemony at a time when Eritrean women could easily have discarded their traditional Habesha dress with the netsela, the thin gauze-like cotton shawls, in favor of shorter Western dresses. She likened Eritrean women to urban Indian women, who resisted British cultural imposition by wearing the traditional Indian saris to work.

Winta stressed her pride in the written Tigrinya language with its ancient writing system which it shares with other Eritrean Semitic languages and Amharic. She felt however, that the Tigrinya language was being devalued by some Eritrean parents in Canada who felt they should replace it with English to assure their children of academic success. She noticed that some Eritrean mothers in Canada wanted to learn English themselves and were trying to disassociate themselves from Tigrinya by pushing their young Canadian-born or Canadian-raised children to communicate with them only in English. She felt that parents should start appreciating their Tigrinya language and writing system and encourage their children to learn how to read and write it.

**Negative Elements of Eritrean Culture:** "They see a woman’s servitude as their right.”

Most of the cultural elements the women raised as being negative were related to women’s subordinate status and cultural practices that reinforced their subservient roles. Gender restrictions on women in the form of newri or shame were mentioned by a few. Most of the women recalled events from their childhood when they were told to follow strict orders in what they could or could not do. These restrictions they felt, affected their self-confidence and created dependence on their parents and others for opinions and decision-making even at the basic level. One woman said she was never sure about the validity of her thoughts and always had to confirm ideas or feelings with others before accepting it.
One of the women who had been raised in Ethiopia said she went to post-independence Eritrea for the first time to attend her uncle’s funeral and was traumatized by the cultural gender restrictions and notion of newri especially in the rural areas where she went. As she and other female cousins approached her uncle’s grave, they were told that as women they could not come close and were instructed to observe the funeral procession from a distance. They were told that, “Women do not talk at the funeral... Women don’t stand near the elders.” She had to be accompanied by male relatives as she traveled in the village as it was considered shameful for a woman to travel unaccompanied. Before her trip she had believed that women's status had improved in terms of cultural gender restrictions through the EPLF’s initiatives but realized that some civilian communities had remained intact in spite of the EPLF’s 1977 National Democratic Programme policies (Connell, 1993; Wilson, 1991). Because of such cultural restrictions, she was constantly criticized and got into fights, which was similar to the experiences of another participant who went out of her way to show women how invalid cultural gender restrictions were by deliberately slaughtering chickens in her family backyard in the presence of neighbors, a practice reserved only for males. Rahwa was saddened by such cultural practices that still favored a man over a woman and added, “They even oppress her in little things like that.” Gender specific practices had been abolished and even reversed by the EPLF during the liberation period when female fighters had plowed land and “manned” tanks while men took up domestic duties within the front but little was reversed within civilian society.

Women’s domestic labor burden was listed as the number one complaint almost all the women expressed irrespective of their marital status. However, the issue was discussed at length by both the married and divorced participants. One woman said that men “...see a woman’s servitude as their right.” While all the women with the exception of one recalled having to do domestic chores as children while their brothers did not, many felt that the sharing of domestic duties does not or did not become an issue for women until after marriage where gender power dynamics comes to play. Mitslal commented that even the most liberal of Eritrean men are raised
with the understanding that domestic work is reserved for women. However, in an effort to participate in domestic work, these men will comment, “Oh, I help around the house.” Mitslal stated that this statement is a contradiction and rather summarizes the notion that the husband is doing his wife a favor by helping her with her duties. She added, “In our country if a woman is not working, that’s understandable...but now they bring that culture to this country and implement it...While you work outside the home equally like he does, he still wants that.” In Eritrean and Ethiopia, domestic duty sharing does not become as crucial an issue in many marriages where the wife works outside the home since there is the extended family support system as well as hired domestic help. In Canada, it becomes a decisive turning point in many marriages. Four of the participants in this study stated that this issue created a strain in their marriages and three divorced as a result of that among others. Most of the women stressed that the majority of Eritrean women in Canada complain about this the most and many end up in divorce courts as a result.

Not surprisingly, arranged marriages topped the list as one of the most negative cultural aspects of Eritrean culture for most of the women. Although one can argue that Westerners view arranged marriages negatively detached from its social context, the fact that children are involved in arranged marriages was the major issue here. In traditional African societies, arranged marriages may be a way of securing family ties and an institution where a couple’s similar family backgrounds may be more compatible to forge a lasting marriage. However, when marriages are arranged for children to older men, the women felt that the practice was more of a crime than a cultural practice. One of the women who had been in an arranged kidan marriage at the age of twelve, recalled her horror as she remembered how loud she screamed with fear whenever her much older husband approached her. She admitted he and his family were never abusive but she said she had had no knowledge of sexual matters and was terrified. Several of her child-bride friends in the village were in similar situations before they all decided to run away to the city. Although the EPLF has implemented laws banning child and arranged marriages by raising the
age of consent for women to eighteen (Silkin, 1990; Wilson, 1991), it is believed that the practice continues in some rural areas.

Some of the women felt that women’s subordinate status and oppressive relations were felt more in the institution of marriage. One woman stated that a woman’s identity was that of a daughter or wife, similar to the wifehood/motherhood notion of Berhane Selassie (1984). She added, “Their identity is not respected at all. They are using somebody else’s identity. They are treated like an object.” This shifting from one identity to another, based on a relation to a male relative was what she referred to as the “yo-yo” syndrome. Women are expected to mold themselves to whatever identity is imposed on them as daughters, wives and later as mothers all in relation to male kin and not as individuals with their own interests, ideas or autonomy.

One cultural practice that some of the women mentioned was the different attitude to the entrance of baby boys and girls into the world. When a baby boy is born women ululate seven times to signify joy while they ululate only three times for girls. Rahwa added, “Why? Don’t they have the same life? Why do they make distinctions like that?” Similarly, within the Orthodox and Catholic churches, baby boys are baptized after forty days while girls wait for eighty days. Traditionally, in feudal Ethiopia, for example, when male children died in infancy, parents sometimes gave their newborn male babies girls’ names to drive away evil-spirits. Both religion and spirituality are powerful aspects of Eritrean and Ethiopian women’s identity. Superstition is embedded in religious beliefs and is tied to their fear of the unknown with superstitious beliefs being common among less educated women especially in rural areas. Both religious and superstitious practices operate within the context of oppressive gender relations. Practices such as zar possession cults or buda, the evil eye, are often seen as women’s practices (Bishaw, 1991). Superstitious practices such as zar seances also create a space for women to obtain material goods such as valuable jewelry like gold charms, which for example, are worn by pregnant women to ward off the evil eye or buda. Moreover, traditionally women are not allowed in church during menses as they are then considered unclean and popular anecdotes are rife with stories of
menstruating women in church who received divine punishment for their sacrilegious act. Similarly, several monasteries in both Eritrea and Ethiopia ban women from entering their compounds as “Children of Hewen [Eve].”

Inheritance laws which discriminated against women were raised as a negative element by some although this practice was banned by the EPLF in 1977 (Firebrace & Holland, 1985; Magos, 1981; Silkin, 1990; Wilson, 1991). In the past a woman without brothers would be left penniless as she saw what was rightfully hers being given to male cousins after her father’s death. Rahwa commented bitterly, “Why? Didn’t he father her too?” At present although women have been given the right to own land which was allocated to those who could farm, some parents still favor passing on land to their male heirs. With land ownership, women are assured of economic independence and severance to male kin as well as the use of land as collateral for loans and investment.

Although the general belief is that women were denied land inheritance before the EPLF laws, one woman objected to this assumption and said that the inheritance laws had been changed years earlier than the EPLF era although she could not recall the exact year. She was adamant about the inheritance laws being fair to both sexes before the new EPLF laws and recounted a story about two wealthy sisters who were impoverished after their parents’ death a long time ago. While traveling on camel with no belongings they came across a group of notaries who demanded to know what these young women were up to unattended and without any property. They noticed that there were a lot of cattle accompanying them. Asked the gentlemen, “Whose camels and whose cattle are these?” The girls replied, “They used to be ours. Now since our father and mother died, our father’s brother inherited them.” The notaries were moved by the girls’ unfortunate condition and held a meeting at the Commissario Hamasen in Asmara. So in Kebdi Adgi in the town of Tselima half way between the regions of Hamasen and Seraye, a law was passed allowing women to inherit land if they did not have brothers. At first I had understood this law to refer to cases in which there were no male children but the participant concluded with, “No
uncles, no aunts. Whether a woman from Akeleguzai is married, if her father dies, she inherits with her brothers. A Hamasen woman the same. A Seraye woman the same!

Mitslal raised the issue of dowries or *gezmi* which were also banned by the 1977 EPLF National Democratic Programme Marriage Laws under Article 2, which proclaimed, “...dowry and other gifts connected with marriage shall be abolished” (Wilson, 1991). Dowries were viewed as practices that impoverished families and pushed women to migrate to the cities to become domestics or prostitutes or become second or third wives of wealthy men if their families could not afford the dowry (Magos, 1981). The word dowry is sometimes interchangeable with bride prices since dowries could be paid by either the bride’s family or the groom’s while bride prices are paid by the groom’s family. Dowries often ranged from jewelry, clothes, cattle to actual cash. Magos (1981) states that bride prices were commensurate with the bride’s beauty, beauty becoming a commodity for sale. The implications of bride prices similar to the purchase and ownership of property, are obvious. An extended aspect of bride prices is evident in India where a husband who has paid the bride price gives his wife to his creditors, much like collateral, if he is in debt. His wife would not be free until she had “worked off” her husband’s debt. Thus there is a strong link between bride price and prostitution where a woman’s services are for sale. This bondage form of bride prices was also strengthened by women’s lack of access to land and their economic dependence with the imposition of the Capitalist mode of production on feudal or colonial ones (Patniak, 1985).

Mitslal had an explanation for the validity of dowries in the past:

They are putting a price on women... Way back then women did not work and when they gave dowries it was believed the woman would have something to contribute towards the marriage and that makes sense, but now sitting down and asking for two thousand, ten thousand will ruin your family life and it means pasting a price.

In other words, parents gave their sons-in-law dowries as a form of assurance that their daughter would be taken care of financially but in modern times when women are working outside the
home, dowries become oppressive requirements for working women who can contribute to the family income.

Several women mentioned domestic violence as being prevalent in Eritrean society. The subject was taboo and the practice accepted as a way of life. One woman saw women being physically abused by their husbands but never saw them responding or leaving their marriages. Instead the women would hide out with sympathetic neighbors until the husband’s rampage was over and would return home after he had calmed down assuming that perhaps they were to blame for his behavior. They would pretend nothing had happened until the next round of physical assaults. She was convinced that men treated women that way because the women accepted it and gave her observation that Eritrean men seldom abused their Ethiopian Amhara wives because the latter were less tolerant to abuse and would not sacrifice themselves as did Eritrean women to save the marriage especially if abuse was involved. (See section on “Marriage”)

Mitslal also connected domestic violence to that of rape which in the past had never been addressed as a violent crime. In both Eritrea and Ethiopia, women who were raped were often given to their rapist in marriage due to the cultural constraints of leaving the rape victim with no choice. Once she had been raped, her status as a virgin would be lost and the family name could be restored only through her marriage. She was therefore urged to marry her rapist. Because of this, men who wanted to marry women who had rejected their proposals would often rape them and legitimize their sexual relations through marriage. Parents often arranged such “abductions” with potential bridegrooms if they felt their daughters would resist the union (Druce & Hammond, 1990). Mitslal was visibly upset as she added, “If he rapes you, they marry you off to him! Have you ever seen a man accused of rape? You only see people getting married.” At the same time she added that women in Eritrea could not live outside their cultural limitations. Rape was not seen as a violent crime as it is in Europe or North America but as a form of “proposal”, however violent, to secure a marriage. Many women married their rapists and had several children having accepted and understood it within their cultural norms.
Female genital mutilation or FGM as it is popularly known merits a separate discussion due to its severity, global scope and controversial nature. Although many of the women in the study mentioned it, not all had similar views or experiences related to it. Although it is estimated that 90 percent of Eritrean women have undergone various forms of FGM (Neft & Levine, 1997), infibulation, which is the serious form of FGM, was the practice that all the women associated it with. Infibulation, which is the removal of the clitoris, labia majora and minora and the sewing together of the vaginal entrance, is practiced in the Eritrean lowlands by both Christians and Moslems. It is a deeply embedded socially constructed cultural practice tied to a woman’s social and economic survival since it guarantees a woman’s “marriageability” in her society. For many it marks a woman’s coming of age. The removal of the clitoris is also said to cleanse and bestow womanhood on a girl.

One of the women in my study called her experience with FGM one of the horrors of her life. She had been infibulated in Eritrea as a child and had moved to Ethiopia. When it was time to deliver her first child as she went into labor, she was admitted to a large hospital in Ethiopia where the nurses told her that her cervix was not yet dilated. She spent a considerable length of time in terrible labor pain as the nurses checked her and said it was not yet time. She recalled her experience:

They never knew I was infibulated. They didn’t know. In the end one woman who was from the lowlands passed by like she was sent by The Lord. She gave one look at me and started screaming. She ran around to get me into the delivery rooms which were all occupied. Then she brought all the necessary equipment and strapped my feet and delivered the baby. The baby had pushed and pushed and was weak and did not cry as normal babies. If she had waited another fifteen minutes he would have died. It was just a few minutes that saved his life.

Her baby had pushed through the birth canal and had almost died of asphyxiation due to obstructed labor as its head could not push through the sewn barrier. The woman felt that such practices should be totally outlawed and shuddered as she remembered her traumatic experience. She stated that since millions of women from FGM practicing countries are now travelling abroad to countries like Canada, many women would face similar problems in healthcare since Western
medical doctors and healthcare workers were not familiar with the FGM anatomical changes. Her experience in Ethiopia (though another FGM society itself), was one example of the dangers of being an infibulated woman in non-FGM societies although FGM itself is the cause of high maternal deaths in FGM countries which is 1,400 per 100,000 live births in Eritrea (Neft & Levine, 1997).

The eradication of FGM has not been an easy one since it cannot be understood and approached outside its cultural, political and economic context. Any approach that commences by calling it “backward” or “barbaric” will by association attack its cultural foundation and is bound for failure. Although Western women such as Fran Hosken and Alice Walker have contributed positively to a world-wide awareness of its dangers, divorcing FGM from its importance to women for physical, emotional and psychological acceptance in their cultures and making “inflammatory” remarks about FGM are counterproductive (Cloudsley, 1981; Hicks, 1993). The campaign to eradicate FGM has therefore seen fierce conflicts between African women and Western women activists who have been viewed as patronizing. The solution has been seen in consciousness-raising discussions and education presented in a sensitive graded system to change people’s attitudes instead of simply through legislation banning the practice (Koso-Thomas, 1987). This method has made dents in changing cultural practices among Eritrean women through the EPLF’s anti-FGM policies and initiatives in which squad doctors lectured women in liberated areas about the dangers of FGM as well as in nutrition, prenatal and child care. Virginity tests were also denounced along with FGM since both controlled women’s sexuality.

Another woman raised her experience in Canada with patronizing teachers and classmates who had eurocentric views of FGM. Once she attended a Humanities class in which a famous professor was giving a lecture on FGM. Throughout the lecture all the other students participated in the discussions while she kept silent. After he had finished the lecture he looked up at her since he had recognized her as a Northeast or East African and asked her directly, “Do you have any comment?” to which she replied:
Yes, I’ve heard everything you’ve all said. I mean, a mother does not circumcise her daughter out of hate or even a father, although most fathers didn’t know much about the practice or what was happening to a girl but my main emphasis is that the main reason is to protect the daughter so she doesn’t bring newri [shame] to the family. At that time, there were no contraceptives or if a bride is discovered not to be a virgin, she’s returned home, right? Like I said, a girl is discriminated against. She doesn’t have a right to do this and that. So one of the things she is forbidden from is pre-marital sex.

This woman was upset because the professor and students had discussed FGM divorced from its socio-economic context and had attacked the cultures that practiced it. Such attacks hinder cooperative campaigns against the practice. Although she herself had undergone the practice, she condemned it, but within a space that acknowledged the validity and value of her culture as opposed to approaches that attacked FGM cultures. Many people also assume that FGM is related to Islam. Although the severe form of FGM, infibulation, is practiced mostly in the Eritrean Moslem lowlands as it is in Islamic Sudan and Somalia, Christian lowlanders such as the Bilen Catholics in Eritrea practice it too and the Koran does not call for it. The Koran permits Sunna, the removal of the prepuse or whole clitoris and it is believed that the Prophet Mohamed did not advocate it (Sa’dawi, 1980). Again, although one can argue that Islamic Fundamentalist countries like Saudi Arabia and Iran do not practice FGM, sexual control of women by way of mutilation in those countries is unnecessary since women are segregated in purdah and are heavily veiled thus escaping it. Similarly, the practice of FGM (clitoridectomy) in Europe coincided with the patriarchal Victorian period and its obsession with female chastity revealing FGM’s strong patriarchal oppressive characteristic.

Many of the women in the study were against FGM with one woman exclaiming, “This has to stop! I say that! You should not put your child under the knife... As long as girls are well-raised, if they take care of their hygiene, there is nothing wrong! Even Bilen women have abandoned the practice.” Another woman said she was appalled after hearing about some Eritrean women in Canada who had recently taken their young daughters to Eritrea to have them circumcised, meaning to have a clitoridectomy, which was very common in Eritrea. She added,
"The irony is that the government of Eritrea is against the practice while the women themselves are not." For many African and some Middle Eastern societies, FGM creates a space where women with some relative power can exert power over other women under them such as daughters, granddaughters and daughters-in-law. Efua Dorkenoo (1994) states that women are the "gate keepers of traditional power bases" and that the reason women practice FGM with fervor is found in their own suffering. Surprisingly, one of the younger women in this research said she was not reluctant or afraid to admit that she did not see circumcision as a wrong cultural practice although people viewed it as "barbaric" and that she was speaking against mainstream beliefs. Her view was that Eritrean women who had had clitoridectomies did not experience any sexual dysfunction nor childbirth labor complications and that the practice was one that could be passed from generation to generation. This raises another issue. If clitoridectomy has no serious sexual or medical side effects, can it be attacked as a violation of women's rights if its "victims" themselves believe they are not victims? Proponents of cultural relativism may argue that FGM cannot be addressed by those outside its culture or that such cultural practices are relative in terms of acceptability. Perhaps this is one reason why the campaign against FGM has been a challenge and will remain so for a long time.

In Eritrea within the Bilen group in the Eritrean lowlands in addition to FGM which they are abandoning, there was also a practice in which brides were placed in a house in isolation for a period of three months after their wedding where they were immobilized until their muscles atrophied but this practice had died out. One woman explained that several women used to become physically incapacitated by this practice but said she was glad women had started to abandon practices that they found detrimental to their health.

The impact of Eritrean gender cultural expectations were raised by several of the women as affecting their behavior even in Canada. One woman who smoked said she would never smoke in front of elderly Eritreans in case word got around because she did not want her family name smeared. Since Eritrean society is close-knit, her fear that her family would find out was not
unfounded. Although she believed in her right to smoke as an adult, her main concern was her family’s honor and name. Another woman who believed in living an independent life without any gender restrictions also said that although she did not care about what people thought of her, there were limits when her reputation affected her family and family name. She said she would not do anything that her family would not be proud of. In other words, she was referring to any behavior in Canada that would be considered newri by her family in Eritrea, showing strong cultural links across generations and geographical borders.

The gender cultural expectations and their impact on the former female fighters was raised by some women. One woman was disappointed by their “devolved” status. As a child she had seen them with their big afros which they had cut short as a way to part with patriarchal society (Gebreyesus, 1992). When she went back after Eritrean independence, she noticed that the women had started to perm their hair. She gave the example of her own cousin who used to be a fighter with the EPLF and who used to inspire her with her independence and Engineering background. After independence this fighter became a housewife with two children and stayed at home. The participant added, “It’s like as soon as they got back, they said, ‘Okay, lets go back to the kitchen and make injera.’” Many of the fighters were also divorced by their fighter husbands at the urging of family members who wanted wives they had selected for them. This particular participant however said in her family the opposite was true. When one of her cousins had returned from meda (war front), he wanted to divorce his fighter wife because “she was not from the same region as he was and that she was not Tigrinya-speaking.” His father responded, “Well you have a responsibility. You’ve made a child. You can’t divorce now. You have to stay in the marriage.”

When I raised the issue of deserted female fighters with another woman, she responded that the women were not typical female victims. When their spouses brought other women into the marriage, the female fighters gunned them down in revenge. Such cases, she said though common at the beginning immediately after independence, had stopped. Senait, in conclusion,
said that these women were victims of gender cultural expectations and needed the support of every Eritrean woman and added, “Don’t forget while me and you were doing our education, most of these women, where were they?” referring to the 30,000 female fighters who participated in the liberation war.

Yordanos gave one negative aspect about Eritrean culture which was not gender-specific. She stated that people tended to try to appear knowledgeable in areas which they were not knowledgeable in. There was also the tendency to embellish facts in discussion without presenting the actual facts point by point. Some Eritreans have mentioned this as a problem they encounter even in essay-writing because of cultural conditioning to link issues that may not be relevant to the topic at hand. As a result, many feel that they are incapacitated academically first, by English not being their first language and second, by cultural differences in narration or description.

All the women gave different perspectives on Eritrean cultural practices but had a balanced view of what they wanted preserved and changed. They feared that life in Canada would threaten the positive Eritrean cultural elements while the negative ones would create obstacles in their successful adjustment in Canada. They all felt that it was important for Eritreans to know what to select and what to leave out as they adjusted in Canada and that the balance of both Eritrean and Western cultures was necessary for a well-adjusted life for Eritreans in Canada.
Chapter III

Coming to Canada: “Cream of the Crop”

Life in Exile - Expectations of Canada: “We didn’t come with high expectations.”

The majority of Eritreans who arrive in Canada are either government-sponsored or family-sponsored landed immigrants while a few are refugees and very few are visitors or students. Before pre-Eritrean independence, Eritrean refugees were included in the Ethiopian refugee group which was considered the largest African refugee group to be landed in Canada and among the ten highest refugee groups by country in terms of origin (Moussa, 1993). Most immigrants are under the age of forty due to Immigration Canada’s immigrant selection criteria’s preference for younger candidates who will integrate successfully into the Canadian socio-economic system through the labor force. Of Eritrean immigrants, married women almost always arrive as dependents of husbands (Moussa, 1993). In fact 66 percent of all sponsored immigrants are women (Seward & McDade, 1988). Those who arrive as neither landed immigrants nor refugees, come as visitors or as students and apply for permanent resident status within Canada. Most immigrants prefer to settle in larger cities where there is a larger concentration of immigrants and especially members of their own ethnic group. In Canada, the province of Ontario and especially the city of Toronto have the largest Eritrean population.

For the women in my study, leaving Eritrea and Ethiopia was traumatic both physically and emotionally. Both the political situation at home and the conditions of departure added to their painful separation from close and loved family members as they arrived in strange countries miles away from home. For the majority, Canada was not the first destination after leaving home. Thousands of Eritrean women had to travel to another country or even several countries first before finally settling in Canada. Some of these women became displaced convention refugees recognized under the United Nations while others did not have the official title but were actually by definition, refugees, displaced from their homes unable to go back and without any official
status in the host country. Eritrean-Canadian women, therefore have had the added experience of adjusting to other countries and cultures which have affected their self-perception and identity.

Most of the women left home for political reasons. After leaving home, most were racked with nostalgia and fear of how their family back home was managing in war-torn Eritrea and Ethiopia under the Dergue. However, because thousands of people had left Eritrea and Ethiopia, most Eritrean communities abroad were united, close-knit and drawn to one another for support. One woman said in her country of exile, Sudan, the host country of one-third of the Eritrean population in exile, people were very warm and friendly and that every Eritrean home was open to others. People would simply drop in and have a meal and stay over. She felt like she belonged to one big family. Social life was better since everyone had the same goals of leaving and going to another country. Another woman who was in Europe said that in the city where she lived, she made many friends because of their similar experiences and expectations of coming to Canada or the US.

The initial employment experience in the Diaspora for these women was manual work. Those in European countries such as Greece and Italy did domestic work such as cleaning homes while the men worked in restaurants or other manual jobs. One woman said that after work, all the young Eritrean men and women would socialize in popular squares and discuss who was going to Canada or the US and how their immigration process to Canada or the US was coming along. Although they were anxious at that time, looking back they feel that they had a positive experience especially in terms of social life although there was uncertainty in their immigration/residence status and since they were unable to attend school.

One woman who went to Europe was taken back by strangers’ warmth and help when she and her family were in exile. One kind European family her family knew professionally in Ethiopia went as far as letting her stay with her family in their relative’s luxury apartment overlooking the city for as long as she wanted. They would visit her regularly bringing gift baskets and would give her emotional support and advice about her immigration status. While
talking about that family, she became emotional and said that she is still amazed and emotionally moved by their kindness. Because of that experience she believes nationals of that particular country to be the most humane and pleasant in Europe and shows a strong liking for their ethnic group in Canada.

In contrast, another participant was in a small East European city as a university student. Since most of the residents in that city had never seen non-Whites, she was shocked to be referred to as “a monkey” by a young boy who was pointing at her and her friends when she ventured out of the university and into the city. That was her first encounter with the notion of “difference” or “Other.” She did not consider this racist as the little boy did not know any better and had never known anything but Whiteness as the norm. However, she felt different then and became consciously aware of racial difference in Europe.

One woman had a very difficult and painful experience in the Middle East as a foreign woman. Her dual identity as a woman and as a non-citizen foreigner was used against her in several ways which interlocked. Both her gender and foreign status were used to discriminate against her and to deny her basic rights and freedom. Her experiences as a young woman growing up in Eritrea were favorable compared to her experiences as a woman in the Middle Eastern country she lived in where she had to wear the hijab. She could not walk outside unless she was accompanied by a male relative who had to be her husband, father, brother or uncle meaning other than her husband, it had to be a male with whom she could not have sexual relations or marry. Being a non-citizen meant being targeted for questioning. She was repeatedly asked for identity papers to confirm the identity of the person she was walking with as this was a way to find out if the male walking with her also had the same family name. She sighed as she explained how walking down the street was an ordeal full of harassment, “You have no rights to go to court. If you do, the tables turn on you. If you are a foreigner, you are nothing...Citizens have all the right.” On wearing the hijab, she said, “Sometimes it gave me relief”, referring to respite from sexual harassment and advances she encountered. Commenting on Islamic Fundamentalism, she
stated that conditions for women were worsening. When she first arrived there, the situation was not as bad but later deteriorated for women. She said that she had had no rights in obtaining property, renting an apartment or banking which were reserved for her husband. She had worked in an office which had also been an ordeal since female citizens of that country did not work outside the home unless it was in a segregated environment such as in schools or hospitals.

Another woman believed that her life in exile strengthened her marriage. One of the disadvantages of exile is family separation and periods of loneliness for partners. This particular woman had been separated from her husband for several years before she joined him in Europe. She realized that he had changed and this created conflict between them. They would have arguments daily. She explained:

When people are parted for many years, it affects the marriage. The gap brings hostility and tension. You change and he changes. You become like your social environment and so does he and then we clash. You blame him for not understanding but you don’t know what he thinks.

Through some soul searching and maturity she was able to realize that she too had changed and this enabled her to see the blocks they had to work through which had been fueled by their status as exiles with children. She gave credit to her exile period for strengthening her marriage. She added that many marriages were tested during exile and felt sad that many marriages fell apart because partners did not have strong commitments or the vision to stay together through hard times and that they did not understand that many marital conflicts, especially in exile, are temporary and could be worked on. Her comments:

From my experience, when you have problems you vent them out on those close family members. When you are frustrated, you take it out on them. I myself experienced that... You have no neighbors. There weren’t many Eritreans...He also had his problems and worries. We couldn’t understand each other but later I started seeing how things were and then after we came here we came with good spirits. We were renewed. We understood that we had the same objectives.

For many of the women Canada spelt a better life than the one they had. Some had a clear picture of what to expect. One woman who had had Canadian friends before she came to Canada
had a realistic picture of Canada and added, “We didn’t come with high expectations.” She had been advised not to expect getting a job right away and that she should volunteer. She was aware of the economic recession and high unemployment. Another said that she had expected a difficult life in Canada. She envisioned a totally “White Canada” in which she, as an immigrant, “would be expected to work in so many restaurants to make a living.”

Another woman could not decide whether to come to Canada or the US. She said though, that it was her intuition that told her she should choose Canada. She said, “Whenever I thought of the US, I saw tselmat [darkness].” Whenever she thought of Canada, she envisioned her children getting a good education because of the Canadian missionaries she used to see in Eritrean and Ethiopian schools. Another woman too said she felt intuitively that Canada was her home. Upon arrival with her family, she and her family were received well by Immigration officials. She said her intuition was right on track when they were referred to a hotel and given money for accommodation. She recalled her amazement when she walked into their hotel room and saw a crucifix on the wall and exclaimed to her husband, “See this! This is the first sign from the Lord. This is the Lord’s country. This is where we have life.” She said that to this day her initial feeling has remained with her after so many years.

To one woman who came to Canada with her family as a refugee, Canada was a haven. She was visibly emotional as she recounted the kindness of an African-American family who befriended her at the US-Canadian border. They belonged to a church organization and were devoted to resettling immigrants and refugees in the US and Canada. They took her to a house where she and her family were given clean bed sheets and towels and a well-stocked refrigerator at their disposal. Some of the church members came back the next morning to take them shopping for warm clothes at a bargain store. This group also made sure she and her family would be received by their church members at the Canadian border. Once in Canada, their contact helped them apply for refugee status through a lawyer. She said they were very sympathetic and understanding. After she had moved into a refugee settlement home in Toronto, the first thing she
did was ask where the nearest school was and had her children registered in a nearby school because she saw their education as one of the priorities in Canada and one of the main reasons for coming to Canada. The initial arrival for most of these women therefore, is marked by positive accounts of warm reception and feeling welcome. One woman noticed that family values were strong when she and her husband were given priority in a queue and ushered into the immigration booth upon arrival at Pearson International Airport because they had been carrying young children.

For most of the women, although coming to Canada initially was a positive experience considering their Canadian immigration status, educational opportunities and chances of better economic life, for most it was also actually marked with nostalgia, depression and devolved socio-economic status. After their initial excitement period (Rumble, 1990) most of the women experienced financial hardship. Those who had left Eritrea for safety reasons especially, had left behind valuable property such as houses and cars. This lack of closure was evident in their accounts, “When we came here to Canada we were dirt poor. We started there at the bottom.”

Another woman recalled having to live with five other family members in a one-bedroom apartment while another lived with her parents and siblings in a small cramped bachelor apartment. Living conditions were very difficult because of financial constraints due to arriving in Canada without enough money and being unable to find jobs especially for those who came during the 1989 - 1992 recession period. Winta summarized her feelings about devolved status by referring to immigrants as the “cream of the crop” who had left everything behind in their homelands and had come with education and skills and sometimes money to build Canada where they were expected to start from scratch. She stated:

... when people immigrate you have to remember that they have goals, they have money which makes them immigrate. They have some sort of education and those that are coming to progress so they are getting the cream of the crop the majority of the time...
In fact, Warren (1986) states that in 1981 for example, 10.5 percent of immigrants had degrees compared to only 8 percent of non-immigrants.

One woman who came to Canada as a student had been confident that she would use her past educational and occupational background and that she would simply resume her professional career from where she had left off. She was severely disappointed and discouraged to realize that her past identity and experience did not matter and that she would have to start all over again. This was coupled by loneliness as she initially lived in a smaller city where there were very few people of color much less Eritreans or Ethiopians. She would get excited whenever she met Eritreans and was able to converse in Tigrinya. Her loneliness and nostalgic feelings similar to Krimer’s (1986) encounter stage, forced her to make plans to go back to Eritrea until her college counsellor reminded her that the situation back home was dangerous. She said his advice which was a reality check, enabled her to hear the truth from an objective outsider since she had been blinded by emotion. After that she made an effort to consider Canada her home.

After moving to Toronto, she started to take the initiative to socialize with others but had a very difficult time on her own as a student. She did not know where the right grocery stores were and believed that the variety store Becker’s was the only grocery store available. After shopping at Becker’s for six months without eating meat she concluded that meat was not sold in Canada until a friend took her to Chinatown in downtown Toronto. She said she was so excited to see the ducks hanging on the display windows in Chinese-owned stores although she had never eaten a duck in her life. She said, “…after six months I managed to go to Chinatown. I was really, really in Heaven to even view those ducks. I ate till I got sick.”

Another woman who came to Canada was sponsored by her sister and admitted she had neither positive nor negative expectations of life in Canada. The only knowledge she had had of Canada was remembering the Canadian flag from high school when a high school teacher had shown it in class. She had always wanted to go to the US but came to Canada instead because her sister was able to sponsor her. Unlike the other participant who saw “darkness” whenever she had
imagined going to the US, this particular participant saw opportunity and a better life in the US and later moved to the US temporarily in search of employment but returned to Canada because it was very difficult for her to find an employer who could sponsor her from within the US.

One of the women had arrived in Canada as a landed immigrant for the second time. The first time she had gone back home and had failed to inform the Canadian Consulate overseas in Nairobi that she was forced to stay outside Canada for a little over six months, which is the maximum length of time landed immigrants can stay outside Canada without losing permanent resident status. Her children had sponsored her again and she had come to Canada as a landed immigrant for the second time. However, she had had the advantage of coming to Canada as a visitor before she was sponsored even the first time and had had sufficient knowledge of Canada before deciding on settling in Canada permanently. She liked Canada and had initially hoped she could find employment as a secretary and lead a self-sufficient life which is what she dreamed but she said that she felt unsettled and unsure and seemed to be in the transitory period between Krimer's (1986) emigration and encounter stage. For immigrants satisfaction in life is often tied to economic conditions or fulfillment and the impact on her settlement was connected to her inability to find employment. As a result, she felt that she could do better in the US where she felt there were more jobs.

Most of the women associated Canada with cold weather. Said Winta, “I thought of Canada as one big ice rink for skating.” The weather was seen as a serious impediment to successful adjustment. Many of the women admitted being depressed by the gloomy dark weather and one participant admitted that she and her family would often sit and cry when they first arrived. They faced extreme financial difficulties against which feelings were exacerbated by the cold weather and darkness.
Education: "As new immigrants, no matter how educated you are, your background affects you."

In Eritrea education is seen as a means to achieve a high level of socio-economic status and recognition. Since high illiteracy rates are a reality, academic achievement is an exceptional status especially for women. Therefore education has two basic functions: a symbol of high socio-economic status and a means to knowledge in a field (Moussa, 1993). Education as a symbol of socio-economic status is of significant importance for Eritrean-Canadian immigrants who stress the need for some educational achievement before returning to or moving back to Eritrea. Eritrean women therefore face the duality of balancing relationships/marriage and educational achievement.

For many immigrants, coming to Canada is an opportunity to pursue an education while for countless others, it is an opportunity for them to employ their education in various fields. Most of the women in my study had mixed feelings and experiences about their education and Canadian education system. Some a had positive outlook based on the fact that with determination immigrants could achieve anything while others felt that coming to Canada had the connotation of leaving one’s old self and education behind and getting new ones. Accreditation problems were mentioned by some while others felt that the Canadian education system itself discriminates against students of color from the Third World at different levels and in different forms. It is worth noting however, that although Eritrean women may face accreditation problems, the majority arrives with some high school education or has completed high school while only a small minority has had a university education (Moussa, 1993). For example in her study, Moussa (1992, pp. 306-308) states that in 1990 for example, 42 percent of Eritrean and Ethiopian Convention Refugee women had some secondary education while 1.10 percent had some non-university certification and only .42 percent had a bachelor’s degree.

It is also worth noting that literacy, education level and English language proficiency are congruent with immigrant status since Immigration Canada’s selection criteria favor higher
standards among candidates in the Independent or Assisted Relative classes compared to the Refugee or Family classes. In their study, Seward & McDade (1988) stated that 80 percent of women in the Refugee class compared to 43.9 percent in the family class and 19 percent in the Assisted Relative class spoke neither English nor French. Moreover, Eritrean immigrants have been disadvantaged by having left Eritrea or Ethiopia under stressful conditions without completing their education and residing in exile in non-English speaking countries such as Sudan, Italy, Greece and the Middle East where they worked in service or manual jobs which further affected their educational future and marketability trends in Canada.

Immigrants who arrive in Canada are most often advised to look for employment and discouraged from going to school or continuing their education since most host family members are eager to have economic support and also see employment as a means to gain economic independence and establishment in Canadian society. One woman who had made plans to join university as soon as she had arrived was ridiculed and advised to work at least for three to four years before even contemplating going to school. She was saddened that no one had bothered to show her the location of the University of Toronto School of Continuing Studies. She nevertheless, disregarded people's comments and contacted university counsellors who advised her to upgrade certain courses and not to bother with others that she had thought were required. When she told her plans to one neighbor, he jokingly referred to her in Amharic as tikus hayl or "hot force" (with fresh energy) and told her to cool her young dreams of going to school and to look for a job instead. He advised her that he too had once been like her with so many dreams and that he had learned to be realistic. She ignored his advice and went to university full-time while she also worked full time. She completed her undergraduate studies in the Natural Sciences. Her determination was so strong that she never compromised her studies while she was working full-time. She said the man who had called her "hot force" was "stagnant"; he was still where he was several years ago, at the same job and the same apartment. She said she had plans to continue her
graduate studies on a part-time basis but realized it would take her up to five years to complete and first wanted to start a family.

Another participant had a similar positive experience. She had some university background from Ethiopia and applied to two Canadian universities in the west Canadian city she lived in. One of the universities accepted her into the freshman year. Although she had wanted to switch to the other university, the fact that she could not get her university transcripts from the university in Addis Ababa in time, was an obstacle. However, once she had scored good grades in the first university, the university of her choice accepted her into the second year. She stated that initially she was asked for course descriptions. Transcripts from Ethiopian universities and schools often do not have descriptive or specific course titles but are rather general such as posting “Math 101” instead of “Intermediate Statistics” or “Introduction to Calculus.” There were therefore, several formality procedures to follow. Her school experience was a positive one. The university was multicultural and she did not feel like an outsider. Another woman reiterated a similar experience. Although she had completed Grade 11 in Eritrea, she joined Grade 10 in Canada and completed high school before enrolling in a two-year college diploma program. She built her self-confidence and started to speak up in public, voicing her opinions and replacing her feelings of shameful neswrit behavior with positive and constructive ones. She never missed a day of class despite being a working mother.

One of the women however had to let go of her past medical educational qualifications and had to start from scratch because she was required to upgrade several courses. She chose to enroll in a new program rather than upgrade several courses which almost added up to a new program course requirement. Her requirements could barely be called “upgrading.” Although she had been a well-recognized professional in her field in Ethiopia, her past employment experiences in the medical field were not recognized and therefore of no use in her studies for accreditation purposes. She pursued her studies full-time at university in a different field and completed the four-year program after which she became a recognized and successful professional. Another
woman gave her parents' situation as one example of the painful realities of lack of accreditation in Canada. Both of her parents had been educated professionals in Eritrea. When both applied for jobs they were told to “forget their past experiences” and go back to high school to upgrade their skills.

One woman who wanted to upgrade her secretarial skills enrolled in a famous secretarial school in Toronto. Since she also wanted to make herself marketable, she took French language classes which enabled her to form a network for job-search. It also enabled her to meet and interact with a lot of people. When she decided to enroll in the secretarial school, the director assured her of their high placement rates in employment. She took out a student loan and looked forward to the upgrading experience. However, all did not go well as she explained:

Before they take your money, they promise you a job, everything. They promise you the sky, the mountain and the roses. Everything! And as soon as you finish school and they got their money, to hell with you! Like they don’t even want to see you.

Her negative experience with that school did not end there. She also noticed that the instructors were unqualified with no teaching credentials. One instructor would come to class totally unprepared and would talk about Hollywood movie stars endlessly. Her suspicions were confirmed when she noticed a “not-so-bright” student who could not speak “a word of English”, scoring over 90 out of a 100 while she herself was studying very hard and scoring only 70 or 80. Finally during one Lotus 123 test when this participant got stuck on her computer exercise, the “not-so-bright” student gently nudged her and passed her a sheet of paper with all the test answers neatly listed in a row. Apparently the teacher had prepared it and given it to the student for a small fee. My participant was upset and later disappointed whenever prospective employers grimaced at the sight of her diploma from that school. She felt that the school was milking students of their student loans with false promises of lucrative jobs and said students should be advised to be wary and do research on potential schools’ reputations, instructors’ qualifications and placement history.
Scams in educational institutions are obviously not limited to business schools as experienced by another woman, this time in a community center. She approached an African community center which had started a special training program under Employment and Immigration Canada. After she had completed all the necessary application forms and interview, she was assured of a spot in the job training program. However when she did not hear from the center for a few weeks, she called and found out that she was on the waiting list. The coordinator later told her that there was no space for her. Feeling disappointed, she went to the Employment and Immigration Canada office to inquire about the availability of other training programs. The officer first looked her name up and quietly informed her that she was already enrolled in the African community center program and was collecting $800 dollars a month in allowance for childcare and transportation expenses. She was shocked to realize that the coordinator at the center had used her name and personal data for government application approval purposes to enroll someone else such as a friend or relative in the program. She confronted the coordinator and told her in typical Eritrean customary rhetoric that, “God would punish” her. The coordinator denied any wrongdoing. The participant never took the case any further and felt that the best retaliation would be for the coordinator to see her future success. She added, “When I see her now, I am glad that she can see I’m doing well. Good thing she hasn’t seen me doing less than she is.”

The same woman encountered a different problem in the formal education system as an adult learner. Although she had completed high school in Eritrea, she decided to attend high school after she had delivered her last child. Her English was less than perfect and her English teacher’s attitude did not help. Her teacher was very rude and insensitive and would throw exercise books with marked essays on her desk with a loud “flop.” Because this participant wanted to improve her English skills she chose to tolerate the abusive treatment. Deep down as an adult and mother, she felt insulted and hurt. She compared this to the way teachers were respectful and encouraging in Eritrea. She finally decided to confront her teacher whom she felt
was abusing her power as a teacher over a student, “I am not a child. You cannot shush me. I am an old woman. I shush my children. You don’t tell me to shush. Show me respect and then when you listen to me, I will answer you.” This participant also felt that her identity as an older responsible adult mother was totally denied and even devalued. She also felt that her identity as a visible minority woman with knowledge, experience and culture was negated when the teacher failed to accept her views or choice elaborated by the following incident. When she and her classmates were asked to write an essay about a famous person whom they admired, she chose to write about Mother Theresa. When the assignments were returned her essay had a big “X” on it with the words, “Mother Theresa is not famous” scrawled over it. The instructor failed to respect her choice of Mother Theresa which was also related to her strong faith and admiration since the essay was a simple English writing exercise and not even a philosophical one.

Another woman recounted an almost identical incident. When her university instructor asked students to write an essay on children, she chose to write about children’s participation in the church and church choirs. When her assignment was returned, it had a big “X” with the words, “How about a synagogue?” written over it. The participant innocently went to her teacher and asked her, “What does ‘synagogue’ mean?” She later realized that the teacher had been biased against her Christian faith and became upset by the teacher’s discriminatory stand which she felt had racial undertones. The teacher had visibly favored one religion over another and had tried to intimidate a member of an ethnic minority through her power as an instructor within the academic power relations structure. She later approached the dean. The instructor immediately changed the grade to an “A.” The dean apologized on behalf of the instructor. The participant felt glad she had addressed the incident. Ever since this incident she has become very active in addressing racism in the education system which she said is rampant starting from early education where blond and blue-eyed children are favored over children of color. Such differences, she said, creates feelings of racial inferiority and difference in children at an early age, which intensifies as
they get older. She believed that racism in the school system must be addressed as early in the school system as possible.

Some of the women agreed that there is a tendency for students of color to be viewed as less intelligent and that the assumption is compounded when they are also immigrants from the Third World. Rahwa recalled a computer class she was attending. When one of her White classmates asked her a question, the teacher snapped, “She doesn’t know it herself so what is she going to show you?” Rahwa felt challenged and solved the problem while the teacher made no comment. She added that such incidents were pervasive.

Winta raised the very significant point of eurocentric curriculum within the Canadian school system. She felt that her ethnic identity and values as an Eritrean or African were not represented in the curriculum as she explained her point:

I will never learn anything about Eritrea. Never mind Africa. That doesn’t even exist. Europe yes. I could tell you who Queen Victoria’s son was, who the son of Tsar whatever was….and it made me realize just how very biased, how systematically racist the whole education system is. Who is Winta? Where does Winta come from? Why do I look like this? I couldn’t find this in school at all.

At one time, she had to confront her school principal because the Eritrean flag was not included with other flags in the school compound although there was a large number of Eritrean students in her school. She asserted that if the school principal of the school himself did not know Eritrea she could not blame the students for not knowing it. She added that there were many wrong assumptions about Africa including Eritrea. There is a tendency for example, to assume that Christian Eritreans were converted to Christianity by European missionaries and most Canadian students do not know that Christianity came to Eritrea and Ethiopia several hundred years ago and that there is an Eritrean and Ethiopian Orthodox Church. She stated that most of the analyses and interpretations of historical facts on Africa and the Third World are European. This White European perspective judges and recommends based on its own criteria of what constitutes right or wrong, civilized or barbarian. She commented on forms of government, “Obviously, the
form of government is different from yours so if it looks disorganized to you, to someone else, it is well-organized, very well-established and I’ve noticed that in a lot of books.” She added that although Canadians are not aware of African history, Eritreans themselves are unaware of theirs. She stressed that Eritrean history is not only about the independence struggle and bloodshed:

"It is a very good thing to know that if we were ever oppressed, we can always find our way out. We are not a weak people, but our backgrounds. We are so much older, so much richer heritage and people need to recognize that.

One woman seconded Winta’s views about the curriculum being biased against non-Western cultures. She believed that cultural practices are viewed through eurocentric lens and presented in their eurocentric form in the curriculum and class discussions. She gave the example of female genital mutilation mentioned earlier in Chapter Two. When a famous professor had given his lecture on FGM and FGM cultures, she challenged his views on FGM as being detached from their socio-economic and cultural context. She explained to the professor and the whole class that mothers used FGM to protect them against newri or shame and to ensure “marriageability” since wifehood and motherhood determined a woman’s social and economic status (Berhane Selassie, 1984). Part of our conversation is as follows:

A: Our mothers did not know that even after they had us but they were afraid of rapes and so on. There were shepherds who could rape a girl and if she brought a pregnancy, it is big newri [shame] in our country so it is to protect her from such things that brought it. So they all said to me, “What? So are you like that?” They want to know more and more about that.

Q: Do you tell them?

A: Yeah. Part of it. Not everything. Not everything. Some of them you know, look down on you. But some of them. I was thinking that before you have to be open and you learn more so they understand. It differs and depends on who you’re talking.

This woman faced classmates who were curious to know whether she had undergone FGM herself. Earlier she had believed that discussing FGM openly was a learning experience for others in which she could discuss the culture that necessitated it although she was against the practice itself. She later discovered that she and her culture were attacked and viewed as inferior
by people who refused to understand the culture behind it and chose to view it through a totally Western or eurocentric perspective.

Some of the participants felt that since the education system is biased, parents should actively monitor their children’s education and provide them with supplementary guides to ensure that they have a balanced education both within the formal school system and education about their own ethnic language, heritage and history. Zufan believed that the Canadian education system is not perfect and that parents should not leave their children’s education solely in the hands of teachers but should take a responsibility in being active in their children’s education by closely following their homework, extracurricular activities and by participating in school activities and meetings. She believed that teachers always favored students with actively-involved parents and were more willing to spend more time in the class as well as outside with such students knowing that their parents were dedicated to their children’s education and future. Her assertions were not based on her belief that the Canadian education system is discriminatory towards minorities but rather towards families that did not make an effort to educate their children.

The participant who was illiterate faced a unique difficulty. She lacked formal education since her education has been purely informal or experiential. Her lack of English language proficiency as well as her inability to read and write have severely curtailed her life in Canada and impinged on her rights as a permanent resident. Although she had resided in Canada for several years, she was denied Canadian citizenship on account of her lack of English language proficiency. She was told to take English language courses although she could neither read nor write even in Tigrinya and said, “I have no intention! I am old! What am I going to do with it?” She felt vulnerable because she could not leave Canada for more than six months and felt that she had been discriminated against for not speaking English well. This woman is included in the pre-1974 Ethiopian Revolution’s women’s high illiteracy rate of 90 percent (Berhane Selassie, 1984) while Schmittroth (1991) gives an alarming higher rate of 99.8 percent for that same period.
Since the 4th century, traditionally, education was tied to religious functions and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church’s support of civil and military leaders (UNESCO, 1985) and was therefore beyond the realm of women. Rockhill (1991, p.348) states that the anomaly of literacy is that it is seen as “women’s work” but not as “women’s right.” During the Italian colonial period in Eritrea, women’s low literacy was intensified as men were given educational priority to attend school although they too were limited to Grade 4 as the highest grade they could attain.

Canadian citizenship and literacy for elderly immigrants is an area of further research since this has consequences for elderly immigrants who have a harder time learning English or French. Since among immigrants it is the elderly and most often women who do not have formal educational experience, the requirement for English language proficiency will be an additional burden. As a result a common trend may be more and more illiterate, semi-literate and even literate elderly female immigrants being denied Canadian citizenship on grounds of insufficient knowledge of English or French.

Employment: “I had to work very hard for it. Nobody gave me on a plate.”

One of the most crucial elements in immigrant satisfaction seems to be successful employment while immigrant frustration and poor adjustment are tied to not having past educational qualifications and employment experiences recognized in Canada. Accreditation problems and the denial of past work experiences affect most immigrants not only in terms of economic difficulties but also psychologically. Maraj (1996), in fact, stresses that accreditation problems are linked more to psychological difficulties than to economic ones. In addition, for many of the women in this study, their job search experiences were their first encounter with racism in a seemingly non-racist Canada. At the same time, most stated that after the initial hurdles in gaining employment, they gained self-confidence, independence and a sense of who they were.
For most of the participants, the first encounter with racism was in the job-search phase followed by search for accommodation. The term “Canadian Experience” often has the dreaded connotations of “You do not fit here. You are not good enough. Your skills are not good enough,” and sometimes even, “You are from Africa or Asia. You are not White.” Another method also used by prospective employers dealing with minorities is ironically “praising” them as “overqualified” and letting them off politely without hurting their feelings or by subtly reversing the discriminatory tones and directing the “inferior” standards away from the candidate and towards the company itself. One simply has to read between the lines to understand that the employer is not denying the candidate’s qualifications overtly but is doubting them covertly leaving no room for negotiation. Although many potential employers know that many immigrants work in positions well below their qualifications, they use this tactic to sift “undesirables.”

One woman started looking for employment as soon as she and her family arrived in Canada. After several unsuccessful attempts, she had almost given up when a neighbor referred her to a textile warehouse where the manager decided to give her a dexterity test first. She admitted to me that although she had never even done basic housework in Eritrea let alone known how to operate a sewing machine, she went ahead with the test as she was desperate to get a job. The moment she attempted the first test, the manager sternly asked, “You don’t have any dexterity. Have you ever worked in a factory?” She anxiously replied, “All my life I’ve been a secretary and bookkeeper.” He asked, “Then what are you doing here?” She replied, “Because I’m in a foreign country, I have to work and I need anything for survival.” Her response evoked sympathy which she could read on his face. Apparently, he too had immigrated to Canada and understood her plight. He finally said, “Okay. I have something for you. No factory. You are going to work in the factory but you are going to do office work.” She started working as a bookkeeper and was responsible for processing all the factory product orders. Although she was overqualified for that position she stated, “…I was sent for a sewing machine and I ended up in the office so that was more than rewarding.”
After this woman and her family moved to Toronto from the city they used to live in, she started another job-search period. This time she decided to go through Bell Canada’s Yellow Pages to match companies who might use her work skills. She would then call companies, talk to the human resources managers and make appointments for an interview. She said that over the phone they would be very warm and sound eager to see her but when she arrived in person she would notice that the company’s attitude was etched on the receptionist’s unfriendly face. She would sit for thirty to forty-five minutes in the reception room before the manager would see her and when he finally did see her, he would respond with:

Oh, I can see that you have a lot of experience but you know what? It would be boring for you. I know I cannot hire you because after two, three months you will be bored and don’t want to work. I want someone who will really do the job and good work. You know, this is junior work.

Another woman explained the absurdity of “Canadian Experience” in employment. When she approached a prospective employer for a cleaning job, he asked whether she had Canadian experience and their brief conversation is as follows:

**Employer:** Do you have any Canadian experience?

**Participant:** To clean the floor? Yeah, I have eighteen years experience but I don’t have any certificate!

**Employer:** How?

**Participant:** I’ve been fed up sweeping my house. I am a mother of four children and you ask me if I have sweeping experience.

**Employer:** Well, we have to ask that. What can we say?

She added, “Even if they know you have the experience they pretend that they don’t know that you do. It was this requirement for “Canadian Experience” that discouraged the participant who had arrived to Canada most recently and who could not find a job because of her lack of Canadian experience. These women believed that “Canadian Experience” actually reads “West European/North American” or “White experience/background.” They felt that a
candidate from the US or Britain would not be turned down for employment for not having "Canadian Experience." One of the women felt that this requirement was one of the most blatantly racist elements in Canadian society and added:

...If they are going to demand Canadian experience and reject you, then where am I going to get that experience? I have to be hired somewhere to get that Canadian experience but I say that it shouldn't be only Canadian experience that should be the criterion because wherever you go worldwide, experience is experience.

In addition to not being able to work for lack of so-called experience, immigrants also waste their education, skills and work experience which employers could take advantage of. Instead immigrants often find themselves even rejected for manual jobs which they are overqualified for. One woman who once lived in a large west Canadian city approached a small coffee shop when she saw a "Help Wanted" sign. The White owner told her that the position had been filled but days later she noticed that the "Help Wanted" sign was still on the window and that the owner was accepting applications.

Due to such job-search problems some of the women felt that having connections was necessary. One woman said that many Eritreans got positions because other Eritreans or Ethiopians had referred them. A conversation with one woman on this issue is as follows:

A: ...Everything is through family connections. You have to know a lot of people. I heard once a saying, "It is not what you know but who you know that gets you a job." It is true.

Q: So you've had many difficulties looking for a job. Let's come to your present employment. How did you get that?

A: ...that was about four, five years ago. That was the time when you couldn't get a job. Before you it was imperative that a Habesha [Eritrean or Ethiopian] was working there, someone you know. If you knew someone there, then they would hire you. If there was no Habesha working there, then you have no hope of ever being hired. It is really sad. They don't even want to give you a chance and try you out. They don't even test you. If you submit an application, they throw it out right then. No one calls you...Unless you have connections, you don't think about taking a test and getting a job.

This woman had been referred by another Eritrean who worked at a company. Another participant however, had the opposite view of Eritreans helping each other during job-search although she stressed this point with respect to higher level professional positions. Like the first
woman, she believed that connections and networking were very crucial as job-search strategies but felt that Eritreans in professional or managerial positions were reluctant to help other Eritreans in networking or job referrals. When I asked her if there were that many Eritreans in managerial or professional fields in Toronto, she came up with an impressive list of Eritrean professionals in various fields and added that she had contacted a few professionals for jobs and they had all been rather vague and uncooperative. She felt that Eritreans, though very nationalistic and proud of their ethnicity, were ironically less helpful in employment opportunities. She stated, “An Eritrean referring another Eritrean is very rare here. A few successful Eritreans and they won’t help others. Nobody calls you and says, ‘There’s a job here.’ So they want to be successful individually.” She gave an example of one professional whom she contacted when she found out that the company he worked for was hiring candidates in her field of specialization. He simply told her that his company was cutting back which she discovered was not true. She recalled her encounter with another Eritrean professional:

I’ve been referred to a guy who works for some company. They told me that he was the one who hired and fired. I got the name from three, four people. I called him. We met for coffee and he said he’d had bad experiences with Eritrean people. Most of them don’t speak English properly and he doesn’t want them hired. He asked, “How is your English?” I said, “I think I can communicate well.” He never even called me back. This is very sad. He could have called me and said, “There’s no posting. How are you doing?”

Her assertions were also based on her comparison of Eritrean behavior with those of other ethnic groups such as Chinese and Tamils from Sri Lanka whom she felt were cooperative and helped one another in job referrals. Another woman had another different view in terms of Eritreans giving job referrals. She believed that Eritreans were very helpful and cooperative in referring other Eritreans to less skilled or non-professional service jobs and were more cooperative towards Eritreans they felt were disadvantaged by lack of English language proficiency or “Canadian Experience.” She gave her own example. Since she had completed school in Canada and spoke excellent English without an accent, she was seen as advantaged and
was given less priority by other Eritreans in job referrals since they believed it was easier for her to get a job on her own compared to an Eritrean woman who had just arrived in Canada.

Another participant felt that Eritreans put too much emphasis and hope on having connections instead of actively looking for jobs independently. She said that many people were too pessimistic and discouraging which also affected their influence on newcomers. She added that they tended to believe that good jobs were beyond their reach and that they never made a conscious effort to apply for and follow up on such jobs. She recounted her own experience when she applied for a very competitive position. The following is a typical conversation she had with such individuals throughout her job application process:

Participant: I am applying for this job.
Other: Oh, don’t bother. They’re not going to hire you.
Participant: Why not?
Other: You just came and I don’t think they’ll hire you.

Participant: I sent my application. By the way they called me for an interview.
Other: It’s formality.

Participant: By the way, I have a second interview.
Other: Don’t bother. They’re not even hiring.

Participant: I was offered the job.
Other: It was luck.

This woman exclaimed, “...you need people to encourage you!” She felt that Eritreans in Canada should encourage others to apply for various jobs instead of focusing on the hardships associated with getting jobs and exaggerating the importance of connections although she did acknowledge that it was good to have the right balance of competence, hard-work and network connections.
Muna raised an important aspect of Eritrean and Ethiopian women’s job-search experiences which Ainalem Tebeje (1989) had raised concerning Ethiopian cultural upbringing in which exalting one’s qualities is frowned upon as a form of immodest bragging. Muna contended that since Eritrean women are raised while being watched and closely monitored and advised even on minute issues with little autonomy, they tend to develop low self-esteem and poor self-confidence in decision-making or expressing themselves, always questioning their decisions and seeking reassurance. “Even if you are sure of yourself, you always hesitate.” In her case, after sending out several resumes, she was reluctant to follow up on them by phoning the prospective employers. She felt that calling and inquiring about her resume or application would be considered rude or newri. She also feared rejection and waited anxiously for their response instead of making the first move by calling them with confidence and assertion. She believed that Eritrean women faced the triple burden of lack of Canadian experience which she called “color block,” English language proficiency and lack of assertiveness or confidence.

Another woman backed these points by stating that three factors were working against her: English was not her first language, she had a strong accent and was also quiet by nature. Her quiet nature coupled by gender cultural conditioning had become a setback at work, “They see you as someone without confidence.” The cultural trait of many Eritrean women to be rather quiet or reserved is often misconstrued as incompetence or lack of self-confidence although Muna did admit that many Eritrean women suffer from the latter. Muna’s comments on lack of self-confidence and assertiveness are also related to problems immigrant women face in the education system as expressed by Seydegart and Spears (1985, p. 41) who state that these women have “...an inhibition when dealing with authority figures and a natural shyness and poor self-image...”

One of the immigrant selection criteria used by Immigration Canada is level of English or French language proficiency. Therefore it is not surprising that more women in the Assisted Relative or Independent Immigrant category speak either English or French followed by women
in the Family class and Refugee class in which they are usually dependants. In one 1988 study it was found that 19 percent of women in the Assisted Relative class, 43.9 percent in the Family class and a staggering 80 percent in the Refugee class could speak neither English nor French (Seward & McDade). This shows the strong connection between immigrant women’s dependent status and lack of official language proficiency, the latter which further reinforces their dependency as expressed by most of the participants. For example, among Ethiopian and Eritrean refugees she interviewed, Moussa (1992) states that almost all the refugee women required language training. English language proficiency was also tied to formal education levels as she concluded that only .42 percent of Eritrean and Ethiopian refugee women in Canada had a bachelor’s degree while 1.10 percent had some non-university certification and 42 percent had some secondary education (Moussa, 1992, pp. 306-308).

Muna said she did not blame employers for preferring non-immigrants in highly competitive jobs and believed that employers often wanted employees who could fit in the company with less training and with excellent command of the English language. Since she felt that most Eritrean women did not show confidence and assertiveness in their job-search approach during interviews and follow-up telephone calls as well as good command of the English language, they were evaluated accordingly against qualified Canadian-born women who showed more assertiveness and excellent communication skills. She added, “...as new immigrants unless you are born here and raised here, no matter how educated you are, your background affects you.”

Another common view was that Canadian employers and co-workers tend to view immigrants as “thinking with accents” and that their thought process is as flawed as their accent or grammar. “…if you don’t speak like them, like the Canadians, they think you don’t know anything...they want you to speak like them. They want you to be fluent and they judge you accordingly, according to your accent.” In their research, Billingsley & Muszynski (1985) discovered that 28 percent of White employers doubted their non-White employee’s performance while Kimura (1993) concluded that one of the significant factors for acculturative stress was lack
of English language proficiency which some of the participants faced in their job-search experiences. Two of the women in this study faced similar problems at work due to their lower levels of English language skills and “soft personality” although they were highly competent in their respective professions. One of the women was told by her supervisor, “...you are very soft. You can’t consult the caller. The caller controls you. You have to be tough.” Another stated, “…the person who hears you at the other end thinks you have no confidence so they tell me to speak in a loud voice. Of course the problem of second language is there definitely.”

Although most of the women agreed that lack of English proficiency was a major setback, another woman vehemently disagreed. She stated that she was able to find work as a cashier in a large department store as soon as she had arrived in late 80s Canada within a few days in spite of her heavy accent. She added that her lack of English language proficiency had not been limited to accent and even included mispronunciations of basic words such as “French fries” and names of popular Toronto streets. She had simply gone to the department store and filled out a job application form and handed it to the manager who hired her immediately. Her key to a successful job-search strategy was perseverance, assertiveness and a positive attitude.

This participant’s employment experience was the exception rather than the rule, though another participant also stressed the ease with which she had gained employment initially.

In spite of such positive employment experiences, immigrant women still face various obstacles which may also be related to cultural differences. One problem is being judged negatively professionally when they make simple errors on the job. For example, in several Middle Eastern countries as well as in some African ones such as Eritrea and Ethiopia, filing is done by a person’s first name since there is no family name or surname as such, as in the Canadian sense although the father’s first name is used as a form of surname. If an employee makes such an error, it is not attributed to these cultural or experiential differences in work procedures but viewed as a downright stupid mistake when judged by Canadian standards.
In terms of career, the majority of the women in this study were working in occupations other than the fields they had studied in. In fact, in one study it was discovered that only 30 percent of university-educated visible minority Canadian women were in professional jobs compared to 48 percent of White university-educated Canadian women in 1991 (Statistics Canada, 1995, p. 137). Yordanos felt that she would greatly prefer to work in her own field of specialization in the Natural Sciences in which she had majored in university. Although she had been actively networking to get into her field, she had not been successful. She admitted that at first she was discouraged by stating, “I threw my degree in the garbage.” She later changed her views on the significance of education, “But after a while I learned that school means a lot than work. You can’t work only. You don’t study to work only. You study to learn.” She began enjoying her job in a large financial corporation where she has a good position. “Then once I started liking my job, I got happy and I learned a lot. The fact that I was able to learn was good. I never thought I was able to learn. Every department I worked, I learned.” Although she sacrificed a lot to attend school full-time, her inability to get a job in her field is not as worrisome as it once was. She believed that her current job was dynamic and interesting and added, “I always say if this place paid me less, I think I would still work here.” Job satisfaction rather than salary was crucial to her. Her boss even encouraged her to take more computer courses which she was doing and saw a brighter future in the company where she had many opportunities for upward mobility.

Another woman who actually completed her undergraduate degree program in Business was not able to find a job in her actual field of specialization. After graduation, she vigorously searched for good jobs and had to do odd-jobs to make ends meet:

I used to go out in the morning and look for a job. I left in the morning and used to go around the city looking and returned late. I’ve done odd-jobs. I’ve even sold flowers standing in the streets. It was in February during the winter. I did door-to-door. I didn’t know it was that kind of job but it was a job so I did work door-to-door with others. I tried even telemarketing. I hated that. I worked as a cashier in a restaurant and so on.
Although she currently worked in an established large insurance company, she felt that the longer she remained out of her field of specialization, the lesser her chances of getting employment in that field. She also stated that she had not written as many exams as she should which would boost her chances for employment in her specialization. She had felt that she would have a better chance in the US and moved there temporarily only to find that US companies were not willing to sponsor Canadians unless there were highly exceptional. She still wished to find a job in her field and was not as happy in her current job as it was also quite stressful.

One significant element that some of the women raised as the key in obtaining employment was doing volunteer work. One woman said she was advised by a Canadian colleague whom she knew before arriving in Canada that she should do volunteer work immediately and that this would open several job opportunities for her. As soon as she arrived in Canada she took his advice and started volunteering in a community center. Within weeks she was referred by one community worker to attend a workshop in another community center. She attended the two-day job-search techniques workshop where she left her resume, after which time she was contacted by an organization for an interview and got the job they offered her. She added, “That’s what I say to people when they come. You have to volunteer. You have to. For me it’s one of the advantages which is really wonderful and it really paid off.”

Another woman also believed that volunteering was a way candidates marketed themselves to enable a prospective employer know their qualities and personality without having to force the employer to make a commitment. When she first decided to volunteer, she was discouraged by others who felt it was “rather stupid to work for free.” However, she held her ground and went around looking for companies that would allow her to work as a volunteer in her field of tourism. She believed that there were two advantages to this method. One was that the company might eventually hire her. The other was that even if the company did not hire her, it would give her the employment experience she needed for other jobs. Her volunteer job-search experience was not successful and she realized that even volunteering free labor was not a
guarantee. She enrolled in a government-sponsored program where she passed the Math and English essay writing tests to qualify for the volunteer placement program. However, she did not like the company they referred her to and started to look for volunteer work on her own. She stated, "... they don't accept you, you know. Most of them they don't even want you to do work for free for them." Countless companies turned her down until she approached one company whose manager asked her to write down on a piece of paper three valid reasons as to why he should hire her. She narrated the incident:

... he threw me a pen and paper like this and said, "Describe. Write three things why I have to hire you." Then I wrote the letter for him. He left me for ten minutes. He came back then. He read it. And then he smiled. He said, "Can you come tomorrow?"

In addition to facing severe obstacles in job-search experiences, immigrants also face vulnerability directly related to the attitude their employers have of their immigrant status and difficulties they have encountered in obtaining work. Ng and Estable (1987, p.29) comment that the term "immigrant women" often refers to women of color from the Third World who do not speak English well and "who occupy lower positions of the occupational hierarchy." Some of the women bitterly recalled being treated differently than others because of their immigrant status both as women and as minorities from the Third World. The pervading assumption was that immigrant women from the Third World were suitable for low-skilled, low-paid, less-secure positions and could work for longer hours because they had no choice and were assumed to be improving their economic status in Canada. These non-skilled, less secure jobs were what Arnopoulos (1979) termed "dead-end" jobs.

Roxana Ng (1996, p. 15) states that a common feature of immigrant women's experiences with community service agencies is their ending up in "minimum wage assembly-line jobs or as restaurant and domestic help." Third World Immigrant women are often taken advantage of through the intersection of their gender and race/ethnicity while their labor is "commodified" as a product by employment agencies (Ng, 1996). Brand (1990, p.276) also
observes that some professions are reserved for certain racial/ethnic groups. She notes that nursing is one such profession and adds, “Black women’s socialization to become nurses can be seen as a trajectory from maid/servant/domestic help to helping caring subordinates.” This is also reflected in the higher incidence of Black female students in Beauty/Cosmetology schools or Nursing Aide Community Colleges in Toronto and their relative absence in the advanced stream within the Canadian education system. These women’s “immigrant” status and “having to start from scratch” with low pay is evidenced in some of my participants’ initial job experiences in manual work and/or working conditions.

One woman who worked in a small office recalled her work experience:

There’s always that taking advantage of you, the new immigrant. They suck your blood. Yes! Basically, I had to work from seven-thirty to seven. Lunch is half-hour and sometimes I don’t take it because there is a lot of work. I was the bookkeeper, receptionist, secretary, cashier, you name it. I was everything there. And you know how much they were paying me for that a week? Two hundred sixty dollars!

Her experience can be analyzed within the context of Capitalist production relations in which “the workers either are vulnerable to exploitation in their own countries by capital export or subject to exploitation when they migrate to the advanced capitalist countries...” (Li & Bolaria, 1983, p.162). This participant was the one who supported her whole family including her husband who was unemployed. She faced enormous financial difficulties and had to balance the budget and appease her young children for toys and entertainment by shopping in discount stores. One advantage she gained however, was learning to economize and live on little which is the opposite of the lifestyle she led in her homeland. However, when she fell seriously ill and was hospitalized for treatment, her employer gave her an ultimatum: her health or her job. She replied very upset, “The hell with your job!” Her company laid her off while she was still in treatment. She felt very sad and angry at the same time, and later understood how her employer had taken advantage of her immigrant status in making her work several hours for very little pay without overtime and had terminated her unfairly and illegally as she had been unaware of her rights as an employee.
under Canadian Labor Laws. Her employer had in a calculated manner, rightfully assumed she would not know her rights like other Canadian-born women. She concluded, “I could go to the Human Rights Commission but at that time I didn’t know these things. I was so sick. I could have sued them.”

One participant who was a successful professional believed that immigrants often have to start from lower part-time and temporary positions before they succeed in getting full-time permanent jobs in their occupations. After completing her university studies she started working part-time in a temporary position while she juggled work and full-time motherhood. She also volunteered in another position and formed networks before being offered a full-time permanent position. One promotion after another followed as she steadily climbed up the corporate ladder until she became the manager of her department. She said, “I had to work very hard for it. Nobody gave me on a plate.” She also was critically aware of her identity as a visible minority woman whose status had been earned against much opposition. She added, “I have to work double or triple to be where I am, to earn what I have. You have to cultivate it. You have to watch it not to break. You have to be extra careful.” She was aware of both the positive and negative contexts within which she became professionally successful. She admitted that being a successful Black woman was not an easy task. She encountered some negative attitude among some co-workers who resented the fact that an immigrant woman from the Third World was in a management position. Her experience is one facet of the similar conclusion that stated that many Canadians tolerated immigrant men and women in low-paying manual or service positions than they did immigrants in managerial or professional ones (Berry, Kalin & Taylor, 1976). This attitude also stemmed from the misguided view that immigrants were admitted into Canada to “perform jobs that Canadians did not want” and not to compete with them for scarce lucrative ones.

This participant admitted that although jealousy also could be a big obstacle, she consciously chose to look beyond it positively. While her co-workers exhibited some racism, she
felt that those in management positions were very supportive and fostered egalitarian relations in the work environment by embracing anti-sexist and anti-racist policies. Again the tendency for lower position or non-management employees to feel threatened and hostile towards immigrants was summarized by Gurcharn Basran who stated that due to the competition for scarce jobs, both male and female immigrants who mostly belonged to the working class, were pitted against the White working class by socialization, education and the mass media (Li & Bolaria, 1983). As a result, immigrants like this participant who climbed the corporate ladder out of the “working class” rung were not met with approval.

Although this particular participant stressed that racism was rampant in the work environment, another successful professional participant disagreed. This woman believed that although she was not denying that racism existed, she felt that what was perceived as racism was perhaps not discrimination based on race and stressed that focusing on a potential problem only served to magnify it. “If you want people to respect you, they will. If you’re always thinking about, ‘They are mistreating me. This is racism,’ then anything they do will be viewed as racism... if you give people positive attitude, you’ll get positive attitude from them.” Another professional woman seconded this view by saying, “I can’t see myself being discriminated against even now.”

The participant who had stressed that racism at work might be magnified by those who focused on it long enough, however, acknowledged that she had encountered sexism in the workplace. When she applied for and gained the position of manager in her department, she encountered much hostility and sexist comments from male co-workers. She heard rumors such as, “How can they hire a woman?” Since she worked in a large organization that dealt with a large immigrant population, I was curious to know whether she had encountered such blatant sexism from all Canadians and her response was that the sexist comments came from African immigrant male co-workers and clients. She added that whenever such clients walked in the office, they would immediately pass her office and walk into her male assistant’s office assuming
he was the manager. Female clients were almost always supportive and glad to see a woman in her position as were female co-workers. She believed that some African immigrant men often carried with them gender-role cultural expectations and manifested them in the work environment.

Some of the women believed that the work environment in the government (public sector) had very positive egalitarian race and gender relations compared to private companies which lagged behind in addressing sexism and racism. Moreover, they felt that many immigrants were obtaining work experience thanks to the Canadian government’s equal opportunity policy initiatives. One woman suggested that the government also strengthen co-op job placement programs for newly arrived educated immigrants who would be able to obtain Canadian experience to counteract the serious waste of immigrant education and skills. She referred to the hundreds of especially educated Eritrean men in Canada who were working as cab drivers, janitors and restaurant help although many had even completed their university studies in Canada. Several researches on immigrant accreditation problems have concluded that stress, depression as well as suicide, are often some consequences of the drastic negative changes in socio-economic status immigrants go through.

Among immigrants, men are often said to be affected the most. Eritrean men have higher levels of educational achievement than Eritrean women and are considered the breadwinners of the family in addition to their cultural conditioning of expecting to work in an “honorable” profession. Accreditation problems that force them to take manual jobs are therefore a source of humiliation. According to one study done on Ethiopian men, (McSpaden, 1991), these manual jobs were seen as shameful. Moussa (1993) adds that the reason why women are more flexible in accepting lower status jobs is that male gender and social status are often tied together. She also adds that women have stronger friendship systems to counteract such stress. Her last explanation however goes deeper as she adds, “...women consciously or unconsciously, know that there is a potentially greater drop in status and deeper level of shame they might have to face if their only
alternative for survival were to sell their bodies.” Since the worst consequence of deprivation for women is prostitution, manual jobs are seen as honorable and therefore acceptable by comparison. Overall, successful immigrant adjustment is linked to employment. Neuwirth (1989, p. 4) who did a research on twenty Ethiopian refugees in Toronto concludes, “Despite the small sample size, the findings are consistent with the hypothesis that a refugee’s social and cultural adaptation is contingent upon occupational adaptation.”

An interesting find was that while the literature on visible minority immigrant women and employment stress their low status in the occupational hierarchy, Boyd (1992) states that visible minority Canadian-born women are the highest ranking in the Canadian labor market which shows the strong link between socio-economic status and immigrant status and even more, employment and cultural bias. In her study, in 1985, 10.1 percent of visible minority Canadian-born women were in administration positions compared to 9.1 percent of White Canadian-born women, and 6.6 percent of visible minority immigrant women. Again, only 2.7 percent of visible minority Canadian-born women were in manufacturing jobs compared to 3.4 percent of White Canadian-born women, 10 percent of White immigrant women and 14.6 percent visible minority immigrant women. For the same year, on average, visible minority Canadian-born women earned $20,359 Canadian per year compared to $17,933 by White Canadian-born women, $17,969 by White immigrant women and $16,441 by visible minority immigrant women. However, these earnings were not always consistent with their educational levels. While 17.6 percent of visible minority Canadian-born women had university degrees, they were followed by 16.9 percent of visible minority immigrant women, 10.2 percent of White immigrant women and 9.6 percent of White Canadian-born women (Boyd, 1992, pp. 290-298).

The disadvantages of visible minority immigrant women may also be due to poor English language proficiency in addition to accreditation problems and cultural racism. In terms of language proficiency, for example, 90.4 percent of visible minority Canadian-born women were bilingual in English and French compared to only 41 percent of visible minority immigrant
women (Boyd, 1992, p. 291). Similarly, Warren (1986) states that generally, immigrant women are less well-represented in middle class clerical jobs but are highly represented in both sales and service and well-represented as Canadian-born women in managerial, professional and technical professions. The polarity in their occupational representations shows their absence in the clerical positions which are one of the most abundant “gendered” jobs that require English language proficiency. Both Boyd (1992) and Warren (1986) concur on the high occupational status of visible minority Canadian-born women although Boyd specifies that visible-minority immigrant women are less disadvantaged by their immigrant status than Canadian-born visible minority women.

Another possible explanation for this trend could be found in Castles’ (1988) view that second and third generation visible minorities may be high achievers who are motivated to return to their immigrant parents’ past pre-immigration socio-economic status which was lost upon immigrating. Their parents who had lost their “white-collar job” status to “blue-collar” ones motivated their children to regain that status through education and career. The children also had the advantages of birth and cultural privileges over immigrants from the same ethnic group.

From the discussions with the women in this study it was obvious that some had similar job-search and employment experiences while others had different ones and at times, even contradictory ones. English language proficiency, networking, volunteering, assertiveness and a positive attitude were given as crucial elements for successful employment. For the majority, the job search experience brought to the surface immigrant ethnic/racial identities reminiscent of Richmond’s (1982) “vertical kaleidoscope” or Michalowski’s (1987) ethnic stratification model in which immigrants face ethnic/racial bias in economic and social status while his structural differences model accounts for the differences in the women’s employment experience due to independent variables of age and education as well as English language proficiency and personality, factors mentioned by some of the women.
Marriage and Relationships: "There is no love. Equality has changed its meaning here."

Traditionally, Eritrean women are expected to lead exemplary lives in which marriage is considered the most important institution. All the women in this study acknowledged the importance and significance of marriage in their lives but differed in their views of its nature, importance and in their experience although a few shared similar views.

One of the single women in the study believed in the importance of marriage in her life since she wanted to have children before the age of thirty-five. Although she wanted to continue her graduate university studies on a part-time basis, the study period would cut into the time she had allotted for starting a family. Although she wanted to start a family soon herself, she also stressed that many Eritrean women in Canada are under a lot of pressure to marry especially after the age of twenty-five. This is partly due to the gender cultural expectations where women in Eritrea were married at a very early age. Many Eritrean immigrants have parents and grandparents who were married very early in arranged marriages and who in turn pressure their daughters to marry early. She recalled her mother constantly telling her, "By the time I was thirty I had you all." This is a common phrase heard by many Eritreans. As a result, the majority of Eritrean women in their late twenties and thirties are under great pressure to marry and sometimes make rash marriage partner choices in their bid to beat their biological clocks, ending up in unhappy marriages or in divorce courts. This is also a trend said to be common among women within the Ethiopian-Canadian community in Toronto ("Making healthcare friendly", 1999).

Since Eritrean women are under a lot of pressure to marry especially after the age of thirty, their lives tend to revolve around men and relationships according to the same participant. As a result, relationships and marriage are given the highest priority over education, career and other activities. She once recalled enrolling in a computer course and being asked by Eritrean acquaintances why she was not focusing on getting married instead. She stressed, "I always say you have to think about yourself first." She believed that Eritrean women should start believing in
themselves, lead independent lives and that they should not feel incomplete without a relationship.

This participant also stressed that the majority of Eritrean women have marriage on their mind when they date. Because they are determined to marry, they tend to work on a dead-end relationship even if it is not working and repeatedly “flog a dead horse.” Since they are also concerned about their reputation within the Eritrean community and do not want to be considered “serial daters,” they tend to stay with the same partner and suffer in silence even if they are not really happy in the relationship or if it is abusive.

Another point she raised was an observation she made about Eritrean women’s choice of marriage partners. She believed that there was a tendency among Eritrean women to have unrealistic expectations of and criteria for marriage partners in relation to what they themselves could offer to partners. She contended that almost all women had high expectations and wanted men with a university education even if they themselves did not. They failed to see themselves realistically and wanted prestige by association with an educated and successful husband. She explained:

A girl that works in a donut shop wants a man with a degree who has a good job and this and that. You have to sit down and say, “What am I going to offer to this relationship?” Look at yourself first. Am I dependent? Can I do well without him?

Due to such unrealistic expectations and inability to look inward at themselves, she said many women ended up getting disappointed and hurt in relationships. Instead of bettering themselves by taking courses, enrolling in various activities and programs or focusing on their career plans, they instead opted to achieve happiness and status through marriage. She added, “Most of them are like dependent on men. They think they will lead a better life if they get married or if they live with a man...” When I asked her whether she did not think that these were characteristics that women in other cultures including Western ones possessed, she agreed but added that Eritrean women overdid prioritizing it. She believed that their conversations were
almost always about relationships and their worries about the status of their relationships and their partner’s fidelity. She felt they did not fully understand relationships in a realistic way. Instead of approaching a relationship as complete beings, they felt incomplete without it. She concluded:

...if you have a relationship that makes you unhappy every day, if you are crying over sleep every night and are really unhappy, is it really worth it? It couldn’t build your self-esteem and confidence. A lot of girls that I know, not close friends, they think that they are half like incomplete if they don’t have a relationship. Once we went away for a trip and we were coming back from the States and one of the girls was saying, I swear I don’t remember I had a boyfriend and we were having a good time, and she goes, “You know what? You have somebody waiting for you.” You see how they think? She had to go back and she was thinking about me going to my boyfriend. What is this feeling that makes you feel incomplete? Of course you need somebody. It’s good. A relationship is great, is good. For your mind. You have somebody to enjoy things with. If somebody asks, yes, you do need it but what I am saying is why should you feel incomplete and that would be your day to day thing in your mind?

Another single woman also echoed the outcomes of this obsession with marriage and children over education and said:

I mean having a child is a blessing in itself but you have to better yourself which a lot of them don’t take time to do. Like at Ryerson in the field like Engineering and stuff, even at U of T and York, you see a lot of Habesha men pursuing their careers and where are their equivalents? Their equivalents are not there. You don’t see them as much and if you do it’s the much younger ones. The ones in their age bracket are somewhere getting ready to get married or looking for a husband. Or if they are single, everybody tells them, “Why don’t you get married? You’re twenty-five. You’re twenty-six. Hurry up and get married!” Twenty-five! She’s still a baby! It upsets me to hear stuff like that.

Another important aspect worth mentioning again is the fact that most Eritrean women value their reputation and prefer not to date many men, opting instead to stay in a monogamous relationship that would lead to marriage. Since this may compromise compatibility, if they are forced to end the relationship and start another one, they are easily targeted within the small Eritrean community as promiscuous. One participant’s valid explanation for this was “…because the community is so small the dating circle must be even smaller. There’s an overlap…” In addition, Eritrean women, with the probable exception of Canadian-raised ones, are believed to seldom date outside their own ethnic group. As a result, the overlap in partners becomes visible.
Living together is a popular practice among young unmarried Eritrean couples, although it is not usually approved of by parents who prefer marriage vows to precede cohabitation. One of the single women was adamant about not living with a man, which she saw as a sign of a woman's dependence on a man. Another woman mentioned the example of Eritrean men who were serial-daters in Canada or who cohabited with their girlfriends but who later chose to go to Eritrea in search of more traditional wives in often family-arranged marriages. Her words:

...I totally oppose for men after having exhausted all the girlfriends whether from Eritrea or other cultures from here, for them to go and marry back home is really a crime! It is a crime! Again the word "object" I used. They [women] are being used as an object.

This woman was not against the idea of the arranged marriage per se but felt that there was a strong distinction between arranged marriages among the old generation and modern arranged marriages which she objected to. The ones she objected to were those by men she believed were using marriage to run away from their unhappy lives and stress in Canada.

Gossip within the Eritrean community was an issue raised by almost all the participants who felt that women’s lives and privacy were being constantly compromised by rumors. Several women stated that people tended to focus on and discuss other people's lives instead of focusing on their own lives and problems. They all felt that there was a preoccupation with discussing and analyzing other people’s shortcomings and especially relationships and a tendency to gloat when other people’s relationships ended. Winta commented that women’s personal lives were much more under scrutiny and that, “Something can happen on Front Street and will reach Asmara in two days.” She also felt that many younger Canadian-born and Canadian-raised Eritrean women were reluctant to attend Eritrean cultural events and parties or bahlit because they were afraid of the gossip. Since most women felt that gossip had the power to break reputations as well as relationships, the need to guard relationships out of the public eye forces many Eritrean women and even men to keep their relationships secret unless or until the relationship becomes serious. Yordanos believed that for a woman, being conservative is an asset and that an outgoing Eritrean
woman could be unfairly labeled as "easy-going." Since the dating pool for Eritreans is much smaller than for other Canadian women, they are disadvantaged in the dating scene and often do not venture out of their ethnic group, which puts them at a disadvantage. Therefore, the pressure to stay and marry within their own Eritrean community becomes a must.

Several participants raised the issue of intermarriages in the Eritrean community in Canada. While all of the women admitted that they preferred marriages to Eritrean men, they stressed that as a selection criterion, ethnicity should never overshadow character. However, they all felt that marriage to an Eritrean would be more fulfilling. One woman commented:

I don't like to date any kind of nationality. Regarding culture it is easy to communicate with a person of your country. You have a lot to talk about and you discover a lot then and then you don't spend a lot of time studying different culture or language. Having mixed children too I don't like that. My kids will be confused and definitely there will be a tendency toward one parent. I always think about that so I always prefer Eritrean. It's easy.

Another woman had a stronger stand. Our conversation is as follows:

A: We are one Eritrea. But now, please don't get offended. Going out with other ethnic groups like Whites or other Blacks, falling in love. There are lots of races in this world but always stay with your own countryman.

Q: You feel strongly about this?

A: Yes. If a piece of meat falls on the ground, what does it lift?

Q: Sand?

A: Yes. So it is like that. If you stay with your countryman, have children and you go back eventually to your country, that should be it. That is beautiful. I agree with that. When you marry outside your own ethnic group, you face frustration. You face bad things. Even if the life is good, if you marry a non-Eritrean it leads you astray. It brings you sadness.

Marrying an Eritrean was therefore of crucial importance to both women's sense of identity and fulfillment. Moreover, since a woman is usually assumed to absorb her husband's family and culture rather than the other way around, both felt that marrying an Eritrean man was considered an important criterion in marital happiness. However, some of the women stressed that the emphasis on marrying Eritreans should not ignore flaws in Eritrean men nor overlook good qualities in non-Eritrean men. Yordanos recalled her mother advising her to marry "even a
White man” if he would make her happy instead of marrying an Eritrean man who would make her unhappy and cause her “black spots all over the face,” in reference to Melasma hyperpigmentation. Another woman also said she advised her children to look for certain qualities in mates, such as love, honesty, kindness and communication over Eritrean ethnicity. She taught them to respect themselves and to seek partners who would also respect them and not take them for granted. She added, “I believe in maturity. I believe in discussion. I believe in delegating. I believe in agreeing to disagree. I should not own that person. He shouldn’t own me.” She believed that Eritrean girls raised in Canada were more aware about relationship issues and more confident in what they wanted in relationships than Eritrean immigrant women. Although she taught her children to seek important personal qualities over Eritrean ethnicity in their partners, she admitted that she secretly prayed that her children would find those qualities in Eritrean partners. She had a strong sense of Eritrean identity and appreciated her heritage. At the same time though, she was interested in other cultures and made sure her children were not culturally biased.

Interracial marriage is not a very common phenomenon for Eritreans. Yet for many Canadian-born young Eritreans, there is a growing trend in dating outside the Eritrean community. While Eritrean immigrants tend to view their identity in terms of Eritrean ethnicity, Canadian-born or Canadian-raised Eritreans have a wider sense of Black identity and venture towards other Black North American or Caribbean groups. Winta’s comments seemed to show a difference between men and women’s dating preferences. She felt that although both Eritrean men and women had started venturing outside their ethnic community, she noticed that more Eritrean women tended to marry non-Eritreans and added, “The guys I find are more loyal than the girls are.” She was referring to Eritrean men’s promiscuity in dating non-Eritrean women but their strong preference for marrying Eritrean women. She also felt that more Canadian-born and Canadian-raised Eritrean men were willing to date Eritrean immigrant women while the reverse was not true. She stated that Canadian-born or -raised Eritrean girls tended to view Eritrean immigrant men as
“FOB’s”, short for “Fresh off the Boat.” These FOBs, she said were considered too Habesha or conservative while their English as well as strong accent were not in par with the girls’ standards. On the other hand, Canadian-born or -raised boys did not judge Eritrean immigrant girls the same way. She explained, “It’s easier because it’s okay for girls to have an accent. Okay for them to look different because they’re exotic.” In addition to the notion than women with accents are considered acceptable and “exotic”, there is a belief that women adjust faster to and blend in their environment faster than men. In addition to these two factors, the fact that the Eritrean community in Toronto is small with most people knowing each other forces the younger generation girls to avoid dealing with gossip by dating men outside the Eritrean community.

However, dating non-Eritreans does come with its own set of problems. One is the obvious ironic backlash of gossip. One younger participant confessed that when she once dated a non-Eritrean, some “concerned Eritreans” called her parents to inform them of their daughter’s activities. Whenever she and her friends were seen socializing with non-Eritrean males, specifically Black males, her parents as well as her friends’ parents would be notified immediately. She did admit that some people were genuinely concerned about her when they contacted her parents since she was young, but she felt that the underlying assumption or feeling behind the calls was the biased stereotypical views some people had about non-Eritrean Black males, specifically Caribbean. At this point both of us recalled a popular 1997 film by Eritrean Daniel Beraki titled “The Darkness in the Light” which addresses dating and family culture conflict problems encountered by Eritrean families in North America, specifically the US. Although the film is extraordinarily brilliant, one cannot help notice the bias against Eritrean women dating non-Eritrean men.

One significant aspect of relationships that one woman raised was lack of financial planning and focus as evidenced by lavish Eritrean weddings in Canada. She attributed this to cultural confusion by elaborating on an interesting phenomenon: the diamond engagement ring, “We’re confusing ourselves with the Canadian culture. Our parents never proposed. Okay. Forget
the proposal. Even for a wedding they don't have a ring. The man and woman exchange rings. That's it. That's the confusion. That's not part of the culture.” Her view was that Eritrean women were appropriating cultural elements of the West such as expecting expensive diamond rings and lavish weddings, which in the long run affected them financially. She stressed the negative outcome of the high incidence of expensive lavish weddings thrown by Eritrean couples in Canada. She lamented that these weddings sometimes cost well over twenty thousand dollars as she explained her point:

We all know that the majority of them do minimum wage job and think about it. How many years did it take you to save all that thousands of dollars? They have lavish weddings so this is the kind of mentality that I don’t like. Think logically. What could I have done with ten, twenty thousand dollars? I think I could have put that down for a house or a condominium or something nice...Put it down on RRSP or kids’ college. So when are those things going to come? It bothers me. For the last ten years I've seen weddings that are at least ten thousand dollars and if you have the money, fine. These girls could have used the money for better things but this kind of mentality really needs to change. I’m sure the men would go with a little wedding. It’s okay for them. The girls want to show off.

This view was compounded by her comparison to other Canadian women. Although this particular woman was not against expensive weddings and the diamond engagement ring for those who could afford it, she felt that Eritrean women were culturally confused in their embrace of the Western engagement ring and Western-style wedding without having any conscious financial planning for the future like other Canadian women. Her point was that when other Canadian couples agreed on the wedding plans and/or when a man gave his future bride a diamond engagement ring, it was often with an understanding of their financial situation or after they had made financially secure plans for their future and that they usually lived within their means. Often Canadian couples planned their RRSP (Registered Retirement Savings Plan) contributions, mutual funds and mortgages or saved for various activities such as holidays instead of spending their entire savings or loans on expensive weddings and facing married life without any assets and sometimes with heavy debts. The issue of prioritizing was raised as one where a couple ought to know how to live within financial means comfortably. Another comparison to
Canadian women was with the following example of a modest wedding thrown by a wealthy Canadian couple:

... I went to a wedding last year. A manager in our office. Not even a hundred people. She could have spent a good hundred thousand dollars, no problem. Her husband is very rich. They own a house. They have all the basics... Wouldn't you be more comfortable to have a few thousand dollars in your bank? If you're laid off or if you lose your job then you have some money to at least survive if you can't find another job.

This problem was also compounded by the fact that the Eritrean women getting married in such expensive weddings were mostly in their late twenties and thirties who had worked for several years and were at the age when they should be thinking about financial security. Unlike Canadian women, most Eritrean women lived away from their parents and also had financial obligations to family members in Eritrea or Ethiopia whom they supported and to whom they sent money regularly. Moreover, most women felt obligated to invite all Eritrean acquaintances to weddings as is customary in Eritrean culture for fear of hostility and bad feelings. As a result, the weddings often became somewhat of a financial and cultural liability.

For the married and divorced women in this study, the issue of equality in marriage was a hot topic as they felt that equality for them was strongly tied to equality in the sharing of domestic roles. Although some of the women had different views of what constituted equality in a marriage, all the divorced participants pointed out that their marriages broke down due to their husbands' inability to contribute to or share in domestic work which was seen as wives' duties whether the wives worked outside the home or not. Most felt that their husbands' attitude towards equality and sharing had changed very little from the ones they had had in Eritrea or Ethiopia. One woman recounted her difficult memories as she coped with her husband and young children while she was the sole bread-winner in the family:

... What happened is he came in Canada and he was the same way he was acting back home... He was stuck to the TV starting from the morning... I used to come home from work, cook, feed them and then help with their homework... On Saturday when everyone was asleep, I used to go to the laundry room and washing machine as early as five-thirty in the morning so the machines would be free. I used to wash, arrange, and fold the clothes and would be done by ten-thirty. No one helped me carry it.
This woman was victimized by her husband's inability to change his attitude and behavior according to their lifestyle and situation in Canada. She felt that although he was educated yet chronically unemployed, he could have given her some emotional support and at least could have acknowledged her dual role. Ng and Ramirez (1981, p. 25) refer to the home which is "a refuge for male immigrant workers" as "a trap for immigrant women." The irony is that in this case, the immigrant male was at home while the woman was also working outside the home. In reference to her marriage vows, this woman said, "I'm sorry. Like you take it for better or for worse but then this man is burying you! He buried all of us!" While her marriage was falling apart, she made a strong effort to be supportive and loving as she tried hard to make ends meet financially. She felt like a single mother while still married and had to cope with the family's deteriorating lifestyle. She referred to her decision to finally leave her husband as "a revolution in my mind." Her husband, confronted by divorce, exclaimed, "You can't survive without me!" She responded, "Okay. I'll show you how I can survive!"

Although this particular participant believed that equality in marriage should entail some level of domestic work sharing, she shared the view with other participants that some Eritrean women go too far by championing women's equal rights under the notion of feminism. Some women believed that the concept of equality was misunderstood by many Eritrean women in Canada. They felt that women were jeopardizing their good marriages by "emasculating" their husbands. By trying to undo the inequality in domestic roles in Eritrea, these women were perceived to be going to extremes to take on masculine roles and eroding what were once content marriages. Some women felt that Eritrean women do not attempt to understand their husbands' cultural conditioning and jump into a drastic role reversal. One woman observed:

The Eritrean women change radically when they come to Canada. They don't change gradually. They don't change for the best. They change for the negative. Like for example, Canadian culture is always the man and the woman help each other and housework should be fifty-fifty. Everything is fifty-fifty. The rights of the women as well as the man. They have the right. But as you know in our culture, only the man has the right and not the woman but therefore what's happening is women are taking over the role of the
men but not for a positive course.

This woman also noticed that such women believed that they had “equal marriages” by behaving in culturally inappropriate ways. She continued:

Like I’ve observed some couples. The woman will order the man. In front of guests she will say, “Could you bring tea please? Could you bring this?” It’s kind of ridiculous. Yeah. If there is a mutual agreement of doing housework together or cooperating in front of guests, I don’t mind that, but they’re overboard. They’re showing their friends that they can order the husband which is intolerable … show that there is love there and there is a fifty-fifty sharing but not that you took over the role of the man and you’re giving orders.

Because of such trends and due to cultural gender stereotype conditioning that Eritrean men have been exposed too, it is not uncommon to find Eritrean homes where the husband shares in the domestic duties but refrains from such activities in the presence of Eritrean guests, a behavior also observed by Helene Moussa’s (1992, 1993) participants. Moussa believed that such behavior showed that the men had not truly accepted the sharing of domestic duties and still saw it as women’s domain. It was also believed that domestic-role difficulties were more common among couples from non-urban backgrounds according to one woman who said, “… if your background, you’re coming from a well, good family, when you come here, the changes are not tragic. But when people are coming from small countryside, when they come here, adios! The changes are tragic!” This also meant that these husbands found the sudden changes in role reversals difficult to accept due to their deeper acceptance and experience of traditional gender-roles.

Eritrean women were thus seen as understanding and taking “equality” outside their own cultural context and by not understanding how other Canadian women manage that same equality by understanding, compromising and communicating their roles and needs with their partners. Another woman, Rahwa felt that equality had changed its meaning for Eritrean women in Canada. She started by first defining inequality before elaborating:

Inequality is having no consciousness or education for women. But here we want to show some attitude of equality towards our men… the marriages are going to pieces. This is because there is no understanding. We women are lifting ourselves very high and instead of negotiating tasks, we demand it by force.
For her, the notion of equality is tied to partners having open communication and mutual understanding as well as respect and love. She believed that equality should not be forced but negotiated through loving communication. She stressed the need for Eritrean men and especially women, to attend marriage counselling. Since the Eritrean cultural understanding of “equality” and the Western one were clashing, the lack of communication between spouses was creating marital conflict. Although counselling was recommended by some of the participants, for many Eritreans, counselling is unfamiliar and not looked at favorably as it assumes some admission of failure or a problem. This is an important issue to address since marital breakdown due to domestic role sharing is one that deserves attention as more Eritrean-Canadian children will be affected by such marital conflicts and breakdown. However, although women face such domestic work problems, the majority sees the importance of strengthening the family and married life in Canada over advocating “equal domestic-work” wars with their partners.

Another aspect of marriage raised by some of the women was the issue of marital conflict over the wife’s career success. Since traditional roles were that of the husband as the more educated and financially secure breadwinner, any role reversal meant being an anomaly. One of the women who had pursued her education successfully and had reached a career peak became ironically victimized and conflicted by her husband’s disapproving attitude. When she was given a phenomenal promotion at work, instead of feeling happy, she felt devastated when she announced her tidings and was received by a cold, “So? Why are you even bothering me?” At this point she realized that her career success had become a sore point of contention and an even more serious indication of the flaws in her marriage. She realized that her husband’s insecurity was deeper than the-on-the-surface jealousy. She understood that as long as she stayed in that marriage, she would not grow as an individual. She had unintentionally awakened his chauvinistic insecure attitude towards his and her roles in the marriage, which contributed to a marriage breakdown. Another woman’s similar experience was her husband’s bitter response when she referred him to a job and he replied, “I will never accept a job that came through you!”
Since women's roles are still expected to be prioritized as wifehood and motherhood, deviations are a source of conflict not only among partners but also within the community. Different standards are used to judge and evaluate men and women who pursue their studies and careers. A woman, especially a mother who is dedicated to her career, is often viewed as a selfish and unfit wife and mother while a man's role as a husband and father is seldom given thought. When one of the women in this study was offered a temporary but prestigious position in Europe, her husband was very supportive as he was the one who had even pushed her to apply for the position. However, when she accepted the position, some Eritrean acquaintances confronted her husband with questions like, “How can you let her go?” When others asked her how she could leave her family behind, she asked how they would react if it had been her husband going away instead, to which they replied, “He's a man. He can go anywhere.” When she finally left, she was labeled, “The woman who does whatever she wants.” This phrase could never be applied to her husband derogatorily and if it did, in fact would have a positive connotation when applied to a male since maleness is often associated with power and authority. There are three significant points here. One is that her desire to take a well-paying and important job was looked at with disapproval because her role as wife and mother were seen as priorities over her career in spite of her academic and career success. The second one is that her husband was seen as having power or autonomy over her and that he should exercise it. The third point is that people whose opinions should not affect the marriage or husband-wife relations were in fact pushing their attitudes into an egalitarian marriage and advising a change in behavior. This participant stated that although she was not that shocked by people's reactions, she was more stunned by the fact that many women were among those who opposed her leaving. She stated that Eritrean women in the community still had a medley of paradoxical views which on one hand, wanted equality with men and on the other, were sexist and backward. Such conflicting views, she believed were dragging them behind.
Although none of the women in the study said they had experienced it themselves, quite a few of them raised domestic violence as a serious and common problem in the Eritrean community as it was in Canadian society. The only difference they said was in the way it was shrouded in secrecy and that not too women spoke out as victims in the Eritrean community. Domestic violence, often called wife assault, is not limited to abuse within a marriage but is also a problem among non-married couples. One point mentioned was that domestic violence is often assumed to view the woman as the victim while the fact is that men are also at times recipients of abusive behavior and physical assaults.

Domestic assault cases are seldom reported within the Eritrean community for a variety of reasons among which cultural conditioning and cultural expectations are dominant factors. Since in Eritrean tradition women were expected to “carry their marital obligations in sickness and in health”, any physical abuse they received from their spouses was accepted as the norm within a patriarchal culture in which men had total control over women. Traditionally, parents and community elders often discouraged wives from leaving their husbands and did everything in their power to make them stay by stressing the vows of marriage, responsibility to children and by confirming the husband’s love. In fact both feudal Eritrea and Ethiopia had oral proverbs whose themes equated physical assault with affection and a popular Amharic proverb translated into English goes, “Unless beaten, a wife and a donkey cannot function well.” Similarly, there were various assumptions that believed women respected husbands who beat them and that those who were not beaten considered their husbands “wimps.” Again due to low-self-esteem or years of abusive behavior, some women felt that they were the ones to blame for the beatings. Due to such past cultural beliefs, women in Eritrea seldom saw reason to end their marriages.

In Canada, although such assumptions are not dominant, some aspects remain. Although domestic violence is not specific to the Eritrean community, it is not addressed openly as a problem. For battered women, although divorce is seen as an alternative, it is also another form of victimization since it forces a woman to end her marriage and divide her family unit depending
on the situation. Since marriage is looked upon with status and honor, a divorced status, often stigmatized, would have an equally traumatic effect. Battered women are often forced to enter shelters, which is also associated with homelessness and loss of "honor."

Another factor for keeping domestic violence under wraps is the embarrassment associated with it. Most women feel ashamed to acknowledge that they were physically assaulted by their own mates. Another reason is that since the Eritrean community is a small one, members are apt to know people. Since such news travels fast, the women's privacy would be compromised and their cases discussed openly. Another reason is that if the women pressed charges against their partners, they would be stigmatized by members of the Eritrean community who might feel that the women could have presented the case to family members or relatives, friends, community members, elders or the clergy instead of having their partners locked behind bars. This brings in another reason. The sense of patriotic loyalty becomes very strong in such issues. This is a particularly important point since Eritreans are united with a strong nationalistic ethnic patriotism. Past political experiences where they experienced war, terror, imprisonment and torture could open old wounds and make them relive painful memories. Since their past experiences with the repressive and brutal Dergue regime's soldiers, police and government bodies such as the courts, kebeles, and prisons were filled with anger and fear, being arrested by the Canadian police and being charged in the Canadian court system would be a double trauma (Moussa, 1993). Moussa also states that although women are reluctant to force their men relive their past traumatic experience, the men's physical violence and "torture" towards women is itself a duplication of their repressive government's control over citizens.

One woman gave an excellent example of the severity of physical assault and the consequences of pressing charges. A friend of hers was in a car with her boyfriend who was driving. When they got into a heated argument, he opened the car door and pushed her out of the car as he drove full speed in an attempt to kill her. She survived but sustained some injuries and pressed charges against him. His arrest caused a commotion among people he knew. Her charges
backfired on her and she became ostracized and doubly victimized. Wherever she went she received “dirty looks” according to the participant. The general belief was that she could have presented the case to others instead of having him arrested by the police, giving him a criminal record. Therefore, when even charges against such serious offences are looked down upon, it is not surprising that many women are reluctant to address it. One of Moussa’s (1993, p. 239) participants in fact, stated that when her partner broke her hand, other women commented that, “...he is doing it too much.”

Eritrean women who do press charges are also expected to see domestic assault counsellors who seldom have knowledge of Eritrean cultural norms or behavior. Since Canadian counsellors may lack cultural sensitivity, their approach and advice could be viewed somewhat as out of context and inapplicable. For example, in one survey done on immigrants and social service agencies, the immigrant respondents “…felt that agency staff did not possess adequate knowledge of the cultural and social backgrounds of Black clients needed for effective service” (Head, 1980, p.3). Since counsellors would be viewing the problem from a totally Canadian perspective (Moussa, 1993), their suggestions or advice might not help these women’s specific marital issues or situation. Moussa’s participants mentioned that Eritrean and Ethiopian couples are also disadvantaged by the absence of older immigrants in Canada. Since most Eritrean immigrants belong in the younger age bracket (under fifty), the traditional form of counselling from the elderly shemagile are lacking. Most couples would not turn to their same-generation friends who might not have the experience or authority to give them appropriate advice.

One participant, Senait, felt that Eritrean women who face domestic violence sometimes felt they had nowhere to go especially if they were unemployed homemakers with young children. In addition, if they had poor English language skills, they became disadvantaged since that created an obstacle to their seeking outside help. As a result they felt that they had no alternative but to remain in a dependent status under their abusive spouse. Senait, who came into
contact with various social workers in women's shelters through her work, said she encountered several abused immigrant women among whom a few were Eritrean. These women, she said, were not aware that she knew about their situation and kept it confidential.

Another woman, Zufan, stressed that domestic violence could not simply be seen as women's fault. She believed that some women cried wolf and abused the justice system in several ways. One was that they falsely accused their partners of assault deliberately in revenge to hurt them for some misdeed. The other was that some women misunderstood the real concept of "assault" and mistook misunderstanding for abuse. She felt that a line should be drawn between communication breakdown and domestic violence which were being mixed up. From this a conclusion can be reached. There are three groups responsible for domestic violence problems. The first group is made up of the actual domestic batterers. The second comprises the women who press the false assault charges deliberately or those who mistake communication breakdown for assault and the last group consists of actual battered women who refuse to press charges.

All the women had strong convictions against physical abuse. Winta vehemently stated, "I'm sorry. I have not one ounce in my body that will tolerate that!" She believed that there were several ways couples could handle disagreements but that violence was not one of them:

There's something wrong with anyone that feels that he can beat on someone who's small or a woman. We're equal but physically the smallest man can crush a big woman. There's really no need for that, you know. It shouldn't be tolerated and a lot of Eritreans do.

Another single woman stressed that she would rather remain single than face sexism or domestic violence in her marriage as she added, "I don't get into a relationship like that. Hopefully I will have the strength just to have the ability to live by myself."

Some sociologists and other researchers view the growing rate of domestic violence among immigrant communities as one of the results of high unemployment and accreditation problems among men. As a result, frustration as well as the changing gender roles in Canada
where men's socio-economic status is lowered while women's might be raised when they join the labor force also contribute in shaking the family structure and the husband's power in the family. Moussa (1993) calls on Collins (1990) and hooks (1990) who both stress the importance of having an Afrocentric analysis of Black domestic violence by approaching it through the intersection of race, gender and class oppression which affect "internalization" of gender ideology among Black men and women. The status of "refugee" or "exiles" is also seen as another additional form of marginalization among Black immigrants. Thus instead of pathologizing immigrant women with certain socio-economic problems, they stress critically analyzing their status in its triple and even quadruple intersection of race, gender and class as well as "immigrant" status.

On the subject of motherhood, all the mothers expressed a profound love and commitment to their children. Motherhood was a concept seen as an identity that embodied love, respect, hope, and sacrifice. All the married, divorced or widowed women were mothers. Motherhood was also seen as being preceded by "wifehood." One of the single women expressed strong feelings against being a mother before a wife or being a single mother. The general attitude was that by choice, motherhood should also be complemented by fatherhood and that the family unit would be happier and healthier with both. Motherhood was, however, given much credit in family life. One of the women felt that the notion of motherhood was respected universally but that Eritrean mothers' sacrifice and love should be acknowledged and denoted by "Mother's Day" as it was in the West. Winta's emotional account of her positive adjustment in Canada which was strongly tied to her mother's selfless sacrifice, was summarized by her powerful words as she said, "I give credit to my silent mother." Another woman gave her notion of the significance of motherhood as the given, "The mother is the mother. The father is everywhere. Men are not to be trusted but a mother is faithful to her husband and sits with his children." Since motherhood is also in traditional Eritrea viewed as a powerful, unwavering and unchallenged status with permanence, it also serves as the symbol for nationhood and unity. When Abeba
referred to Eritreans struggling for independence by stating, “We all fought like we were children of the same mother,” she was epitomizing the Eritrean nation as the mother of all, the highest and precious symbol under which children were embraced and united, thus showing the strong link between motherhood and nationhood. Popular traditional and liberation songs in Eritrea often refer to Eritrea as the mother. Surprisingly, it’s worth mentioning here that though semantically different, the Tigrinya word for “mother” is adey while the term for “my nation” is also adey though with a much stronger guttural “a” vowel sound, making their metaphorical link all the more canny.

**Intergenerational Issues:** “A lot of them get lost in the North American melting pot.”

Eritrean youth in Canada have a strong sense of Eritrean identity while they also feel somewhat alienated within their own community. They feel conflicted by their ethnic cultural background and the cultural norms of mainstream Canadian society which most of them have been born or raised in. The problem according to Winta is that despite these young people’s Eritrean identity and heritage, there is guidance and support lacking from the older generation.

Her comments:

> You have the community. You have the guidance. You have the culture right in front of you and you can always fall back into it if you need that guidance and a lot of them get lost in the North American melting pot. They get melted right into it and all they have is that ray of hope when “Saba, Sabina” comes up.

Her reference to “Saba, Sabina,” a popular Tigrinya song summarizes the “glimmer of hope” they have whenever they identify familiar aspects of their culture which they want to hold on to. She equated “assimilation” to “melting” in reference to the melting pot syndrome coined by Hector St. John Crevecoeur in the 18th century which referred to second and third generation White Americans who ceased to identify themselves as hyphenated Americans (Schlesinger, 1993). She felt that the younger generation which had been born and raised in Canada within the
last twenty years had “melted” into Canadian society in a similar way and was also viewed by
others as being advantaged by birth, upbringing, English language proficiency and savvy for
Western culture. They were also viewed as being less interested in their cultural heritage and
often criticized for not speaking Tigrinya or for having a Canadian English accent. One of the
participants who had been raised in Canada said she encountered several incidents when she
would speak in Tigrinya and would be ridiculed for having an accent. Once when she and her
friends were teenagers they went to an Eritrean cultural event where they tried to negotiate for
admission at half-price since they were students. As one of the girls was pleading in Tigrinya, the
man at the admission desk said, “You can’t even beg properly in Tigrinya.” They felt very hurt by
those words since they had tried very hard to speak perfect Tigrinya. She admitted that that
comment made them feel like outsiders. Therefore since these young Eritrean-Canadians
sometimes felt alienated within their own community, they often associated themselves with
mainstream popular Canadian culture. In a form of resistance and rebellion, they sometimes put
down Eritrean culture and adopted Western cultural behavior, clothing, African-American music
such as hip-hop, rap and others.

These differences are further aggravated by their exclusion from participation in various
Eritrean cultural events. One participant mentioned one such exclusion being high admission
prices instead of half price to events, which did not encourage young unemployed students from
attending. Another problem she mentioned was that Eritrean youth were denied help or support in
obtaining halls or bands from older Eritreans for the parties and events they sponsored. However,
her had some explanations for that. One reason was that since most older Eritreans organized
Eritrean cultural events that brought together Eritreans, they felt that the younger generation
might change the ethnic composition of the events by bringing other ethnic groups to those events
which were for the benefit and entertainment of Eritreans. Another reason she gave was that she
felt the older generation felt threatened by the younger generation’s activities and success since
the latter group was considered more educated.
Another issue that came up was that since this younger generation would be the one running the Eritrean community after a decade or so, the sharp boundary lines between the young and old generations would create a gap in transition. The younger generation was keen on getting a sense of Eritrean identity. Winta noticed that at cultural events, the young Eritreans were starting to prefer dancing to the Tigrinya songs rather than the English ones which she felt was an indication that they appreciated their heritage and wanted ways in which to connect to it. She added:

...they lack support from the older people. The younger generation are very willing to go to stakes. They're willing to pay. They are willing to hang out with Eritreans which is something which hasn’t been happening for a while but it is just beginning to happen because there’s this huge population of kids that are between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five that were raised here, you know. They’re just not recognized.

This participant felt that a conscious effort should be made to include this large population of young Eritreans in various Eritrean-Canadian community activities. If they were denied inclusion, only a few would be left in the future to run the community. The rest, she feared, would simply “melt in the North American pot.”

Another intergenerational issue is the parent-children conflict in families. Children raised in Canada often do not understand and often challenge strict parental authority and control. Considering the way Eritreans in Eritrean and Ethiopia are raised fearing and respecting their parents, it is no surprise that those raised in Canada resist such an imposition based on their own understanding of Canadian cultural norms of children’s autonomy and rights. One woman admitted having serious arguments with her children over the way she handled discipline:

We as parents have one way and say, “Don’t do this.” We get angry. We insult them. Because we grew up that way, we don’t see anything wrong with it but to them it feels very bad. We’ve made it a habit. They see it negatively so this is something we are not understanding as parents. That is hurting their feelings.

This woman was aware of her cultural upbringing and conditioning. Fortunately, so was her son who told her, “Mama, I won’t hold it against you. You grew up like that so you are taking it out
on us.” She admitted that the key to successful interaction with children is having an understanding of cultural conditioning.

Dating was one very critical intergenerational issue. Since the majority of Eritrean parents do not openly approve of their young teenage and sometimes twenty-plus and even thirty-plus children and especially daughters dating, parental control becomes a tug of war in this area. Again considering the strict rules the participants themselves went through as young women under the notion of newri it is not hard to guess the severity of such conflicts. Three of the women in this study did not approve of their teenage daughters dating. One of the women even objected to her much older daughters dating openly and preferred that they “meet a man and finalize the relationship” into a marriage with her blessing. However, this sentiment was not shared by all the mothers in the study. One of the women in fact showed me a picture of her daughter and daughter’s boyfriend which she carried in her wallet affectionately. She had a very open and loving relationship with her daughter with whom she communicated at every level. They were very close and her daughter confided in her. She said that she was the first person her daughter would come to if she had any problem or crisis. This participant felt that perhaps her own upbringing in a very open, loving and supportive family may have contributed to her attitude as a supportive and understanding mother. She felt that parents should understand their children’s feelings, maturity level and the cultural context they live in. The point was that Eritrean parents were alienating their children by imposing Eritrean cultural values on their children whose values were also shaped by Canadian society in which dating is a normal aspect of socializing.

Such intergenerational conflicts have been emerging among Eritrean families recently since children born or raised in Canada have now become teenagers and adults within the last fifteen years. Culture conflict issues which were once not so obvious or denied by parents have now become obvious since they are being articulated by teenage and young adult Eritreans. One participant, Zufan felt that the fact that this denial of parent-children conflict is now changing to an admission and acceptance that it does exist, is the first positive step in addressing it.
The main problem children face with their parents is lack of communication and the resulting total communication breakdown. Children accuse their parents of not listening to them as individuals. They also do not feel comfortable discussing their intimate problems with their parents since they were not brought up in a family atmosphere in which the parents had taken the time or effort in establishing open communication lines. Although strong loving relationships did exist within such families, the poor communication lines precluded open discussions. As a result, children often preferred to discuss their problems with outsiders, mainly counsellors. In families where there is domestic violence or marital breakdown, this problem is exacerbated by the communication breakdown among all the members of the family. One participant observed that many Eritrean families were very concerned about the welfare of their families especially if they involved their children and gave an interesting example of workshops. She said that more Eritrean men attended workshops if the workshops had titles that reflected issues concerning their children.

Some Eritrean families were also said to have adopted a “Canadian” way of life without fully understanding the consequences of their attitude or behavior on their children and on their own Eritrean cultural expectations. Zufan gave the example of one Eritrean family whom she knew. The family came to Canada fairly early and adopted a Canadian way of life immediately by abandoning certain Eritrean cultural behaviors. The parents started repeatedly telling their young children that they would have to move out on their own when they turned eighteen like “other Canadian children.” She was against this and advised the parents that it would spawn a false sense of independence and weaken the family bond. The couple replied, “We are living in Canada. We have to live like Canadians.” When the children finally left home at the age of eighteen, the parents were left in a daze, shocked by the reality of having their teenage children leave. They themselves had been raised in a different cultural context in Eritrea where children lived with their parents well into their twenties, thirties and sometimes even forties. The culture shock of having to face Western culture by Eritrean cultural standards was powerful. This couple
had simply embraced a practice which they perceived as correct and benefiting their children, because they “lived in Canada” without questioning it’s validity or appropriateness. Zufan concluded, “You have to take the positive things from the Canadian culture. You’re not supposed to take everything even if you are living in Canada.”

**Extracurricular socio-political participation:** “For peace demonstration I’m always there.”

All of the women in this study were active in participating in various extra-curricular projects beyond or outside their education and career requirements or interests. Their activities were as diverse as the participants themselves. Their activities ranged from Eritrean community social issues to political participation and fund-raising to gender and education issues as well as volunteer work.

Several women had been active in Eritrean community projects. Some women though, stated that they preferred to participate in non-political activities. One gave her reason as her being raised in a family that had sheltered her from the realities of politics. Another said she simply preferred religious or purely social activities to political ones. A few of the women had been active in their respective universities in promoting networking opportunities for Eritrean students. One woman gave her reasons for such projects:

> When one person joined first year, many Eritreans wasted valuable time there because they didn’t know what to take and what they want to get into. And we wanted to help out on that so our purpose was more into that. It was more information disseminating.

This woman had been a member of the Eritrean Students’ Association. Her group also raised money from within the Eritrean community and from the Student Association as well as by selling used books donated by the university library. Another woman also was part of an Eritrean youth group which had been active in collecting used educational books to send to schools in Eritrea.
Several of the women were also active in organizing Eritrean cultural events and had been part of projects that helped prepare food and sell items at various Eritrean events such as youth soccer tournaments. One of the women recalled a soccer committee for children in which her children had been very active and in which she and other parents had participated eagerly by preparing food and other activities to bring all Eritrean children together. The summer soccer tournaments ensured active children’s participation and parents’ interaction. Unfortunately, this soccer committee had faced internal conflict and had dissolved, leaving several children disillusioned.

One of the women was also a member of a women’s mahber or communal association named after St. Mary. Such mahbers are very popular in Eritrea among Orthodox and Catholic members. Since every day of the Gregorian calendar marks the celebration of or reverence for a male Deity or saint such as Gabriel, Michael or Abune Aregawi, women’s mahbers are often held on days marked for St. Mary or Mariam such as on the 1st, 3rd, 16th or 21st of every month. During these mahbers approximately twenty to thirty women gather to socialize over traditional coffee or boon brewed over coal stoves and traditional injera (traditional sponge-like bread) and various kinds of tsebhi (stew).

This monthly gathering is held in various homes each month and creates a space where women can share their joys, problems and give each other support. Such mahbers are also a means to save money for special occasions. In some cases women go into equb by which they create a money pool to be awarded to members. Such equbs in Eritrea gave women some financial autonomy and in the past a say in their daughters’ marriage and dowry arrangements.

One of the women helped set up an immigrant women’s shelter. This group was also a support group for women to discuss their problems and to learn self-defense methods. She explained that all the women prepared various traditional dishes from their homelands and shared it with the others as they socialized and shared in discussions. These meetings were held once a month in a women’s shelter. However, she observed that, “…once the immigrant women get
settled, they no longer come. Only a few come.” She understood their situation. Since she too had shared her own problems and had made friends in that group when she first arrived in Canada, she felt that these women wanted to move on after adjusting and perhaps wanted to give other newcomers a chance in the group.

A few of the women were active participants in Eritrean political matters. Two were active members of the non-political National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW). One of the women was very well-traveled and had also attended EPLF meetings in several other cities world-wide. She had also been active in the EPLF’s policy formulation of women’s rights in the seventies and a vocal champion of women’s rights. The other was also very active in matters concerning Eritrean national and gender issues. She attended various meetings on women’s issues as well as events organized by the NUEW and added, “I am always with them, especially March 8. I’ve never been absent from the events they organize. I’m mostly active because I had a personal struggle in my personal life.” This notion of the personal being the political was evident in her comment.

Three of the women’s extracurricular activities also involved volunteer work. One woman did some volunteer work for the Red Cross while another did volunteer work in retirement homes for the elderly. She had noticed that the Meals on Wheels program did not reach all elderly people and saw some elderly people who were neglected. She felt obligated to help. “Whenever I came from work in the evenings I used to go there. They used to send us to women with no family.” She was instructed not to take any food to the elderly as the organization she volunteered for would be liable for any consequences such as food poisoning or allergic reactions. However she noticed that some of the elderly people she visited had barely any food to eat and said she used to be racked with guilt. She admitted that she had recently slacked off on her volunteer work due to the demanding pressures of work and family obligations.

Another participant also volunteered in a downtown women’s stress management center for a while but stopped attending because “the organization was disorganized.” She would go
prepared for meetings only to find out at the last minute that it had been cancelled. This bad experience discouraged her from doing any volunteer work.

Only one participant mentioned participating in mainstream Canadian politics such as voting and demonstrations. She expressed being active in NDP election campaigns ever since she became a Canadian citizen. She described herself as a staunch NDP supporter because she tried to "represent working class and left wing." She also used to participate in walkathons for worthy causes but no longer does for health reasons. She added, "For peace demonstration I'm always there." In addition, this woman participated in minority group panel discussions on racism and had written some articles on immigrants while she enjoyed attending various workshops on women's issues. She also was at one time active in counselling activities. She and another participant also used petitions to fight unjust practices such as school closures. The first participant however said that she always made sure she read a petition thoroughly before she signed on the dotted line. She recently took part in an anti-Harris government petition against school closures, which included her own children's school. She also attended wife assault workshops and sometimes helped facilitate them.

Although some of the women in this study expressed a preference for participating in non-political activities which they saw as more productive and constructive, the current Eritrean-Ethiopian war sparked the revival of strong patriotic feelings and they all stated that they had been active in various political meetings as well as Eritrean cultural events and fundraising activities. Some of the women had already participated in or helped organize fundraising activities and stated that all other extracurricular activities had been overshadowed by the priority of strengthening Eritrean sovereignty and the welfare of all Eritreans in Eritrea and Ethiopia.
ADJUSTMENT AND IDENTITY: “I am an individual. Unique individual. Female. Black. Eritrean. And who has the right to be called Eritrean.”

Race and Gender: “I don’t see my identity in color at all. I see myself as an Eritrean woman.”

Very often women of color are called upon to identify with and act upon various elements of their identities which intersect. One may ask, “Is a Black woman Black or a woman first?” The identity constructs of race and gender through their intersections are the dominant elements which determine immigrant women’s socio-economic positions and relations. These elements are neither permanently static nor always compatible, at times coming into direct conflict with one another. As members of the dominant society, Eritrean women feel their gender identities and relations while keenly being conscious of their ethnic and national identities in relation to another majority ethnic group with social, political or economic power. As minority immigrants in North America, the preoccupation with ethnicity may shift to one of racial identity which might at times, overshadow gender with contextual variations. Yet, it is a gross error to categorize Eritrean women under a monolithic “Third World Woman” category’ (Sen & Grown, 1987) or to talk of the “black experience” (hooks, 1990). At the same time, Mitsude Yamada (1983, p.73) contends of race and gender identities that, “The two are not at war with one another: we shouldn’t have to sign a “loyalty oath” favoring one over the other. However, women of color are often made to feel that we must make a choice between the two.”

This “loyalty oath” issue however, does come into play in the daily experiences of women of color from Third World countries, whose varying degrees of race, ethnicity and gender as well as other factors such as class, occupation, age and religion determine a sense of who they are and at what stage. This “gear-changing” syndrome was one that divided Black women during the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas debate. Hall (1992, pp. 279-280) states, “Some blacks supported
Thomas on racial grounds; others opposed him on sexual grounds. Black women were divided, depending on whether their ‘identities’ as blacks or as women prevailed.” The O.J. Simpson trial was another more recent example of gender-race “divided loyalties.” Although Eritrean women’s fundamental identities may be based on race, ethnicity and gender, this divorcing of identities or “divided loyalties” may sometimes ignore their diverse experiences. Yuval-Davis (1994, p. 417) explains the dangers of monolithic categorizations of identity and states that, “…the politics of identity devalues the diverse and conflicting experiences of the people it attempts to represent.” This comment belies the diverse attitudes and experiences of my participants.

When I first asked the participants how they viewed themselves in terms of race and gender I received a wide medley of responses. The first woman responded with a strong, “....I never identify myself as Black. I always say, ‘Eritrean’ for some reason.” She believed that she was Eritrean and that this was both her racial and ethnic category, separate from “Black.” At the same time she acknowledged why she consciously felt that way. She felt that other Blacks such as North American US as well as Canadian and Caribbean Blacks behaved differently and that she had had negative interactions with them to make her believe she was different. She encountered unfriendliness especially from “Black women with an attitude” and accepted the negative stereotyping of Blacks. She admitted that her notion of difference from “Black” as a race was not due to physical appearance or phenotypical differences but one based on behavioral differences. She also made a distinction between Africans whom she saw as distinct from Caribbean Blacks whom she called “Blacks” and said she preferred to be called a “person of color.”

This woman also stated that she probably disassociated herself from the Black race because of the negative stereotyping and assumptions which upset her. When a Black male colleague told her she was the first Black woman “that liked to be skinny” she felt the fallacies of categorizing women of color under one umbrella of “Black” and passing value judgements. On another occasion, she confirmed this fallacy when another Black colleague asked how old she was and whether she had any children. When she responded and added that she was not even
married, let alone have children, he replied, “So? A lot of Black women don’t have husbands but they still have kids.” She was very upset because she had very strong family values which entailed marriage before children. She commented on this stereotyping of Black women:

Single mother? Who comes to their minds? Black women. That’s the kind of weak things that I don’t like about the way they stereotype them. That’s why I prefer not being Black. Otherwise it’s my color. It can’t go away. I like to be treated like a normal Canadian.

In addition to her views on Black identity and behavior, this woman also felt that other people’s preoccupation with her light complexion also reinforced her views. Although she herself did not feel that race was based on “skin color” differences, other Blacks made her feel different since many Blacks inquired about her “mixed heritage”, a phenomenon many Eritreans and Ethiopians face among Blacks and others due to their somewhat lighter complexion, different facial features and straighter hair. Said one of her Black colleagues jokingly, “I don’t think you’re pure Black…Check your ancestor…No wonder you don’t think you’re Black.” She believed that his comment on her lack of “pure Blackness” was not based on her “denial” of Blackness but was a common comment she received from others too because of her appearance.

On gender, this participant neither felt her gender identity nor identified with women’s issues since she believed focusing on them only served to portray Black women as “complaining weaklings.” She recounted her experience with volunteer work she did at a downtown Adult Education Center that handled projects with and on Black women. Since she was against the notion of presenting the woman issue as one based on oppression, she confronted her Caribbean friend, “Black woman! Black woman! It just looks like you guys are so inferior. Why are you guys putting yourself in one corner and just hammering it like, ‘Woman! Woman?’” When her friend explained that unless women spoke up, their voices and problems would not be heard, the participant responded that it was obvious that women were the nurturers and the strong ones who were the real heads of families. She herself did not feel weak or marginalized and had never considered herself discriminated against by gender or race especially at work. As a Canadian
citizen and resident, she felt that she had access to everything a White male had access to and that she could educate or better herself. For this woman, gender and race are irrelevant while she presents her identity and adjustment struggle on the basis of Eritrean ethnicity.

Another woman did not believe in racial categories which she believed made broad and sweeping categorizations of millions of people. When I asked her how she viewed herself, she replied:

In fact to tell you frankly, I don’t see my identity in color at all and I have never said, “You know, I’m a Black woman.” No, because I don’t like it. One thing is you know, when people say, “Black woman, White woman” whatever, you know, it’s not right. For me it’s not right and I see myself as a woman and I can say as a minority also. I would prefer to say “minority” instead of “Black” or “White”...

This woman believed in her national or ethnic identity as an Eritrean and not as a Black. Her preference for an identity based on nationality rather than on race or color stands valid by the following example she gave. She noticed that the inquiries on racial identity on some government job application forms are flawed. While there are just the two racial categories of “Black” and “White” boxes to be checked, there are other “racial” categories based on geographical regions such as “Southeast Asian”, “West Asian” and “Southwest Asian.” Because other ethnic groups are accurately and specifically categorized by region, she felt insulted that both Blacks and Whites were lumped in monolithic categories. By that same reasoning, why were Africans not categorized by region such as “East African” or “West African”? Would Egyptians classify themselves as West Asians as members of the Arab world although they were not in Asia? Would they check the “Black” box because they were in Africa? Such questions remain unanswered by such flawed racial categorizations. This participant stated that she always skipped the “Black” box and wrote “Eritrean” in the bottom reserved for “Other” to make her point.

Another woman claimed her Black Eritrean identity and gender:

I guess I am a female first. I think that’s the first. Then the Black, the color issue. Yeah but my identity as a female is right there first then you can address issues like the color or as a Black person but I think of in terms of “I am a female.”
She later described herself in terms of having identities that intersected, "I would like to stress that I carry myself like as high as to be female and Black Eritrean. I have no shame to be female and Black Eritrean... Very high. Very proud. I stand up straight."

Another woman presented her identity as a Black Eritrean woman but admitted that her Eritrean identity was the most prominent one which she felt at all times. However, she added:

Being Eritrean 'cause I get asked that all the time but I mean if I had to sit back, forget it. I'm not just Eritrean. I'm a woman. I'm Black. I'm all these things at the same time. The given. You know what I mean? I can't choose to be one more than the other. Then I'm denying something, right? But when I travel abroad and they ask me, I would say, "Eritrean." The first thing that obviously I am is a woman. You can see that obviously I am not a White person, you know. And another thing that I want people to recognize is that we always take time to say, "I am Eritrean." And people ask me, "Is that Black? Does that make you Black?" I say, "Well, yeah. We're people of color. I mean look at me? Don't I look like people of color?"

Unlike the first participant, this woman believed in her Black identity but like the first woman faced some ambiguity or uncertainty from others about her Black identity. Since like many Eritreans and Ethiopians, her features were not easily recognizable as Black, the problem was compounded by her response of "I am Eritrean" which did not help them categorize her racially since they did not know where Eritrea was.

Another interesting point she and the first participant shared with the other women in the study was that as Eritreans in Eritrea or Ethiopia, they had not been critically aware of their Black racial identity since they lived as the majority in ethnic/racial enclaves with the possible exception of Eritrea under colonial Italy and its Fascist racial segregation policy. The second participant added that when she first came to Canada she had not known that she was Black or part of a race until someone mentioned that she was Black to which she responded shocked, "What's he talking about?" Her initial discovery of race and racism ironically first cemented her ethnicity rather than her racial identity because she first encountered racism or rather cultural racism not from Whites but from Blacks in her school.

She recalled her painful childhood experience in Grade 3:

And it was the time of famine in Ethiopia and they just had this idea that we were all poor
starving children and even if we were you’d think they’d show some sympathy. They were being rude all day. They were like, “Shoot Ethiopians!” It was like a big campaign. Everybody hated Ethiopians!

This woman became very confused since she had accepted herself as Black and was trying to socialize with other Blacks. These Black students did not see Ethiopians as Black but as a different category with which they did not identify. However, in spite of these taunts, she made an extra effort to befriend them and participated in Black History Month activities as she tried to tell them about her culture. However, she said:

...they just had enormous animosity and I couldn’t understand where it came from because they themselves [famine victims] didn’t do anything...there was just so much hatred against them and it was hard for a while...and it just got to the point where even if they thought you were a cute girl or if you were pretty, they’d say, “Why would you think she’s pretty? She’s Ethiopian!”

This woman ironically defended Ethiopia as her source of national/ethnic identity at a critical time when Ethiopian troops were attacking Eritrea.

Due to such negative childhood experiences, she socialized mostly with Eritrean friends although she saw herself as a Black woman. She had had other non-Eritrean Black friends but severed her friendship when she realized from their statements that they did not consider Eritreans, Ethiopians and Somalis as Black but as a separate category. She responded, “If you’re not going to accept me for what I am regardless, then there’s no need to be around you.” She further concluded, “…as you get older, you have this tendency to just kind of you integrate with people that are more like you. It’s common. It’s a natural human instinct.” She was still baffled by the racism she had encountered from Blacks while she had not encountered any from Whites in some of the predominantly White schools she had attended which had been dominated by Italians and Croatians although while there she experienced loneliness. She stated, “…it is a terrible thing to be by yourself and not have anybody there that’s like you.”

In spite of her negative experiences with other Blacks, this woman still retained a great interest in Black history as well as Third World issues and became a staunch supporter of anti-
racism initiatives and policies. For her, anti-racism meant not only addressing color barriers and discrimination but also the bias and hatred within the Black community itself. There is a rift between African Blacks whose racial experiences are based mostly on colonial racism and who have been racial majorities within their own nations and Caribbean and North American Blacks who tend to look down on “Third World” Africans as “third-rate” or backward and who take offense at being mistaken for African although they take great pride in being called African Canadian. Ghanaian Henry Codjoe (1994, p. 233) summarizes this view as he states, “The mere mention of Africa and I’m looked at upon with some mixture of pity and bewilderment.” It is obvious that both racial and ethnic discrimination are also based on the socio-economic development status of Third World countries. For example, had Ethiopia been a highly industrialized nation with a high per capita income, this second participant’s Ethiopian citizenship or ethnicity then most probably would have made her acceptable. Again one could look at the former South African Apartheid system which considered the economically advanced Japanese as “White” for economic reasons but categorized Chinese people as “colored.”

The bias against African immigrants is also reinforced by the Western media which often portrays Africans as economically dependent, politically corrupt and though “culturally rich,” somehow “uncivilized.” Canadian television programs such as those on World Vision, undoubtedly one of the most humanitarian organizations with a worthy cause, sometimes inadvertently reinforce the images others have of Africa as a poverty, famine and war-infested region while they neglect presenting the positive aspects. In other words, Africa is seldom in media headlines unless under catastrophic conditions. At the same time, analyses are not critical enough in addressing deeper issues. For example, the Ogoni massacre and Ken Saro Wiwa’s 1995 execution in Nigeria are often not analyzed within the context of Shell’s Capitalist interests in Nigeria but rather presented on the surface simply as “brutality” exercised by a repressive African government only. Africa is also sometimes used as a romantic backdrop or “ethnic setting” for non-documentary commercial films which do not always depict reality. Arun Mukherjee (1991,
p.151) objects to some films which are a “misrepresentation, manipulation and fantasization of Third World cultures” which often depict women as submissive sex objects. Because of such misrepresentations and assumptions, African immigrants are sometimes treated like ‘second class’ immigrants much less citizens. For example, Moussa’s (1992, 1993) Ethiopian participants were angered by the media’s portrayal of the Ethiopian famine and Canadians’ assumptions that immigrants from that region came to Canada as famine victims and not as political ones.

The second participant who experienced cultural racism from other Blacks was keenly aware of such media influence and of her Black identity and in direct opposition to the first participant’s views, expressed bafflement by what she called Eritreans’ “lack of racial awareness.” She commented, “A lot of Eritreans don’t think they’re part of this color block…They don’t believe that. There is a huge denial…My uncle’s argument is that, ‘How can you say that? We’re Semitic!’” Her assertion was that Eritreans focused on their Semitic linguistic and cultural affinity to the Hebraic-Arab world and were not aware that Whites perceived them as Blacks nevertheless. She added, “You have to understand that if you put down Blacks like that, you’re putting yourself down too…we have to understand that the only way you can progress is not only within your community but as a whole.” Her focus was on Black unity and avoidance of denial of Blackness in favor of Eritrean ethnicity which she explained by emphasizing the struggle of Black North Americans:

The only difference is that they are displaced. And one other thing a lot of Habeshas like Eritreans, Ethiopians, forget is that we would not have anywhere near these opportunities to come here and learn if they weren’t here. We are the product of what they have fought for.

One woman raised the differences she perceived between African Blacks and North American Blacks in Canada due to the expectations and goals African immigrants have in coming to Canada or the US. “When you come from Africa, you know you are determined to better yourself and your life,” she said. In spite of the many hurdles immigrants faced in improving their economic status, they stick to their plans since many have sacrificed much in coming to Canada.
She felt that children of immigrants however, slacked off later since they were less ambitious and had sacrificed little compared to their parents, an observation also made by another participant although this was not always the case.

Another aspect of racial identity and difference is one encountered by Eritreans, Ethiopians and Somalis or East Africans. Since these ethnic groups are becoming easily distinguishable from other North American and Caribbean Blacks as well as other Africans by their physical appearance, this may act as a constant reminder of the notion of ethnicity and difference in self-perception as well as identification or categorization by others. Many Eritreans, Ethiopians, and Somalis sometimes express being mistaken for Indian, Indo-Caribbean, Arab or Hispanic since many Canadians and other Blacks cannot categorize them in any other racial slot. Said one woman, “Sometimes they mistake me for Caribbean or Indian but I make sure I tell them I’m from Africa. Especially to other Black people...I tell them but they do not remember.” Another woman was told, “...you’re beige too. I don’t think you’re pure Black ‘cause your hair and complexion. Check your ancestor, probably from Spanish.”

This notion of identity categorization based on other people’s perception raises the important issue of race as reality or as perception. If a person is really “Black” but is perceived by others as “non-Black” and treated as a non-Black or even as a member of another racial category, this questions the validity of present racial categories or the need to have them. This is also related to “race” as a socio-ideological and non-biological construct (Dei, 1996; Miles, 1989) and shows the fluidity or shifting nature of race/ethnicity within socio-historical contexts where for example in Brazil some people who are categorized as “White” suddenly find themselves categorized as “Black” in Canada. Another example is the dominance of ethnic clans in Somalia, which is replaced by a simple notion of “Black” in Canada although recently Somalis have increasingly been recognized as an ethnic group rather than a racial group.

One of the women recounted a racist incident based not on who she was but on who she was perceived to be. Once she parked near her head office and since she was in a rush, on her
return, forgot to have her parking ticket validated and profusely apologized to the White parking lot attendant who retorted, “Oh, we know how you Somalis are.” His stereotypical negative views of Somalis as cheats was projected on to her as he had been “waiting” to pass such a judgement on her because she looked Somali. Her experience makes a striking point in that it was her ethnic identity and not her racial identity that he had targeted revealing the complex levels of bias. Perhaps because of his stereotypical views of Somalis, he preferred to vent his racism and derogatory remark on a Somali woman whom he found less advantaged by her ethnicity and gender as an easy target than for example a Somali male and more so perhaps would not have dared make a similar derogatory remark to a Jamaican male since his stereotypical views of Jamaicans as an aggressive ethnic group would be inculcated and reinforced by the media.

Since Eritreans and Ethiopians are a relatively less known ethnic group and resemble Somalis, many are first identified as Somalis. The classification of Somali has now almost become another racial category for Black immigrant women from East Africa with the connotations of female genital mutilation and issues surrounding the hijab. This negative view has been reinforced by the depiction of Somalis as welfare scammers, the warring Somali factions as well as Somali anti-Western political sentiment presented by the media. The same participant concluded that in spite of all the efforts she made to inform people that she was not Somali, other people’s perceptions remained the guiding force and she said she constantly heard even some colleagues saying, “Oh, you know how Somalis are. You know how you guys are.” Although she acknowledged there was nothing wrong with being Somali, she felt that her Eritrean identity was denied by such misconceptions. After the parking lot racial incident, she made sure she reported the attendant to the management who apologized to her and took measures against him. He ended up writing her a formal letter of apology. She added that although she was satisfied with the measures taken against him, not many people understand the severity of racism and its hurtful nature and that some people might think the attendant did not deserve such censure.
For most of the participants who had considered themselves Eritrean women, their Black racial identity emerged when they faced racist remarks or incidents by White Canadians. One woman said her poor treatment under her White teacher made her realize she was discriminated against because she was a Black immigrant without good English proficiency, which signified more of a cultural racist attitude since her “immigrant culture” was targeted. Another time she went to her Member of Parliament to inquire on a relative’s immigration status and ended up having a heated argument with the White “East-European immigrant secretary who spoke with a heavy accent.” The secretary asked irrelevant questions rudely and the participant became upset. The following is a brief portion of their conversation:

Secretary: How did you come?
Participant: By bus.
Secretary: No. How did you come?
Participant: I’m telling you by bus.
Secretary: Where are you from?
Participant: From Canada.
Secretary: How did you come?
Participant: I know you are not Canadian. How did you come?
Secretary: By plane.
Participant: So why are you asking me? Did you expect me to come by camel?

This participant had deliberately replied, “By bus” to the secretary’s query by responding as to how she had come to the MP’s office while she had understood that the secretary had wanted to know how she had arrived in Canada which to her was irrelevant. The secretary’s next question was loaded and politically-incorrect or insensitive for someone in her position as she asked the participant who was a Canadian citizen, “Where are you from?” This participant commented:

They just think you’re Black and they have the right to ask you rude questions. They have the attitude that Blacks are not Canadians. Not all Whites are Canadian-born. They came
like us. They are landed but they treat you like outsiders.

This participant also encountered some racist remarks from schoolmates who told her, “Go back home! Go to your country!” to which she responded, “First you finish your life here in Canada and then you go back home and then I will go...It’s not your country here. This is only Indian’s country.” Her attitude was that no one should challenge her Canadian citizenship because of her Black or immigrant identity. Her response was based on her firm belief that Canada was a country of immigrants and that the only group of people who could challenge her citizenship rights were the Native peoples.

Another woman expressed her Black racial identity as having emerged in her job-search experiences when she would talk to prospective employers over the phone who would often mistake her for a White woman because of her good English proficiency and European Biblical name and who would react differently when she presented herself in person. “I go there because they think I’m White and as I’m there it starts from the secretaries.” The secretaries’ disapproving yet polite manner unnerved her, showing the subtle and underhanded manner by which racism functioned. Another woman added that employers in privately owned companies were the ones with the autonomy to choose racially or ethnically “suitable” candidates and who gently ushered out “undesirable” candidates with gentle coos like, “You’re too overqualified,” “We want a Canadian Experience,” or “Sorry the position has just been filled.” The job-search experience was therefore one in which most of the women encountered racism and a strong identification with Blackness. One of the salient aspects of racism is that it does not have to be acted upon or uttered but can also be experienced in the form of an uncomfortable feeling or intuition. Mitslal, one of the participants gave one such example, “…some teachers were very good and some had a negative view of Blacks. They would have their own opinions of people. No one said anything to me but it was something I felt.” Muna backed this by saying, “…you can read it. You know how they treat you...you can tell...You can feel it.”
Immigrants often face the additional intersecting burden of race and Third World culture which are often tied to their perceived status as "refugees." One of the women who felt strongly that women should not be subordinated and should strive for equality and recognition believed there were two kinds of women: those who accepted and sometimes enjoyed being subordinated by their men and those who struggled to break free from that subordination. Commenting on the latter kind she said, "I am one of those. I want to be like a man. I want to do everything and I want to feel like I'm alive...That kind of woman I am!" However, her painful encounters with racism have marked her with a stronger sense of her Black identity. She first experienced racism in Canada when she was looking for an apartment. She would make some phone calls to landlords or superintendents and would be told to come and view the apartment. Upon arrival, the superintendent would tell her that the apartment had been rented a few minutes earlier. Once when this happened, she had a friend call back the next day and the same superintendent told the friend to come over and view the place. So she took a White friend to the apartment as a witness and when the superintendent saw them, he said, "Oh, it's gone." They both returned defeated and cried in anger. The participant had wanted that apartment desperately since it was across from her children's school. Her White friend told her there was nothing they could do since the superintendent could create a phony tenant and state it was rented.

Another woman recounted an identical story when she went to rent a single room:

I would make a phone call with the level of English I had and they would say, "Yes we have a room for rent." You would go there, then they will slam the door and say, "We don't have any." So that's when I started to see racism in Canada. I can't say it was as a female but color wise very critical issue.

In order to rent a room, this woman had her best friend who was White, inquire about rooms and rent them in her name. "So she would make the phone call for me and she would rent it on my behalf because I would be rejected." She stayed in one room for a longer period and by the time she finally moved out, the superintendent had started to appreciate her manners and the orderly way she had kept the room and felt somewhat remorseful for his earlier racist attitude.
After another one of the participants had been repeatedly rejected for several apartments she decided to apply for only basement apartments thinking they would be less in demand and not worthy of her application’s rejection. When the superintendent saw her he said, “I don’t trust immigrants. I want post-dated cheques. One year.” After she had given him the cheques, he still treated her rudely and would tell her in a brash manner not to touch the washing machines and dryers the wrong way. The misconception he had of immigrants and refugees was one of poverty and dirt and his manner felt like he was doing her a favor. She commented, “…it shows you what kind of thinking they have towards Blacks. It makes you sad. Another time they saw a rat going into a neighbor’s apartment right above mine. Because I am a refugee they thought I brought it.” Again she added, “…they saw cockroaches and they called the owner on me and complained that cockroaches had to come from refugees.” Although she laughed while recounting that story, her pain was all too evident by her next statement, “An old basement apartment because I am a refugee so they can’t give a damn. I am garbage. I felt sad. But I told them, ‘You are right. You don’t know me. You know me here as a refugee.’”

For many refugees in Canada, being a refugee meant being safe in the new host country and being relieved at escaping war and death and being accepted or free to tell others that they are refugees with painful pasts. This woman had thought being a refugee in Canada was nothing to be ashamed of but was appalled to see that others had a different understanding of the term which was a label used to refer to Third World immigrants who were “taking away all the jobs” or “milking the Canadian welfare system.” Not only did they have misconceptions and racist views but they also acted upon it. First victimized by their repressive governments in their homelands, they are victimized again in another way in their host country for being victimized by governments in their own homelands.

One woman stated that she felt her racial identity mostly while in the presence of Whites, an assertion another woman echoed. She had several White colleagues at work who were
wonderful and totally against racism but whenever she was socializing with them in restaurants or in their homes, she felt the color barrier. She described her White co-worker and friend who was not aware of the participant’s discomfort, “With her everybody is equal. You can see in her eyes the way she talks to people and everything else. So she cannot feel it. When we go I can feel people staring at me and I feel really then. I feel my identity.” Although they were close friends, other people’s subtle stares made her uncomfortable and aware of their racial difference. At the same time though, she tried to view the situation from a White perspective and reversed the roles, “Like if some Caucasian kid came into an Eritrean restaurant, we would stare at her.”

Another interesting point in racial/ethnic identity is the perceived importance of religion as identity. Ethnicity is often associated with religion. As a result, Eritrean ethnicity like any other African ethnicity, is often in a misguided assumption, associated with Islam. Although Eritreans are equally divided between Moslems and Christians and there is admittedly a large Moslem population, Eritreans often face queries or statements whose basis is an assumption that Eritreans have an Islamic identity. One woman explained that she was always mistaken for Moslem by Canadians and given advice by other Moslems on how to behave “as a Moslem girl.” She was upset that religion was used to dictate behavior. She stated that although she herself was Christian, had she been Moslem, she would still not allow religion, which she saw as a private choice, dictate her public behavior. She explained some of her encounters with Moslem students in her school who were incensed that she did not cover her head and told her, “Oh, Moslem girls don’t dress like that!” When she explained she was not Moslem, to add insult to injury, they replied unaware of their biased comments, “Oh! You’re Christian. Now I know why you do that.” She added:

...how you dress, how you behave is not based on your religion. As an individual there are Christians out there who choose to cover themselves for their own personal reasons just like there are Moslems that would choose not to cover themselves for their own personal reasons, so it is not fair to put that sort of judgment on anyone...

Interestingly, none of the women defined her identity in terms of her religion.
For most of the women in this study, their identity was a varied composition of predominantly Eritrean ethnic identity and gender while their Canadian adjustment experiences saw various elements and levels of racial identity interlocking with ethnicity and gender. The shifting nature of identities where one dominates in certain situations over another and vice versa reveal the complex construction of identity and diverse experiences. Although these women’s adjustment experiences brought their racial identities to the surface, they held on to their Eritrean ethnic identity with some incorporating their Blackness and Eritrean ethnicity while others negated Blackness and even the notion of race, racial difference and racism. The two participants who stressed they had never experienced any racism in Canada reminded me of Rumble’s (1990, p. 70) Somali participants who stated that they had never encountered racism. Rumble had concluded that her participant’s were not yet attuned to the subtle nature of racism because they lacked an understanding of “cultural and linguistic nuances” of Canadian society. Moussa (1993, p. 228) makes a similar observation when one of her participant’s from an Ethiopian “caste group” felt that her own Ethiopian government was racist compared to the Canadian government which accepted her. Moussa concluded, “She was obviously not as yet aware of institutional racism.” In contrast, my two participants as successful professionals who had lived in Canada for several years and who spoke perfect English are one facet of diversity in immigrants’ experiences and understanding of reality.

Belonging: “Toronto is an immigrant city. You don’t feel different.”

Most of the women in the study felt a sense of belonging in Canada. Most felt that Canada offered abundant educational and career opportunities which they felt were open to all irrespective of gender. Others associated belonging with strong family ties in Canada while others developed an attachment to Canada over time while this attachment alienated them from their Eritrean roots. Some women confessed having ambivalent feelings as they had nostalgic feelings
for Eritrea. Overall, although most of the women exhibited a strong attachment to their Eritrean identity, they had a sense of belonging in Canada in varying degrees. Moussa (1993, p. 245) calls “the search to belong” a complex process of mourning for what one lost and identity as what one is renegotiating and reconstructing within a different cultural context. For Moussa, critical integration is being able to critically analyze and “critique” instead of romanticizing one’s homeland and finding “the spaces” and relationships compatible with one’s values and ideology in Canada. At the same time she stresses the need to be able to understand and critique Canada’s dominant ideology.

The duality of being able to belong in both Eritrea and Canada as expressed by my participants is what Moussa calls “transcultural identity.” For some participants, the duality and true realization of dual identity and citizenship was evidenced when they visited Eritrea and acknowledged the impact of their Canadian identity within the Eritrean context. Although the sense of belonging is often strongly tied to ancestry or place of birth as stressed by some, it is also tied to acceptance of values and lifestyle by some who have embraced women’s rights in Canada or who feel comfortable with their autonomy. Unlike Moussa’s Eritrean refugee participants, who did not have the choice of travelling to or moving back to Eritrea as Eritrean citizens to an independent nation, my participants, most of whom were also Canadian citizens, had the alternatives of choice and decision-making.

Two of the women especially, associated their Canadian citizenship with strong belonging and mentioned that they took their citizenship seriously. At the same time one stressed her dual citizenship: Eritrean and Canadian, while admitting that her ethnic national identity was stronger. Both of these women had visited post-independence Eritrea and felt somehow like outsiders in some ways. One said she looked inward at herself to see her own changes in thinking, values and behavior when she noticed feeling alienated in Eritrea where she had been born. She commented:

I couldn’t fit there. I would fit here more. That’s my feeling and then I said maybe I
should make a decision and say, “Where do I belong?” because I can’t ignore this completely at the same time so I said, “Yes, I am Eritrean and I cannot change that.” I also tell my kids that we are Eritreans. Here in Canada you have a Canadian passport. I don’t want them to forget their roots and we make sure we speak in Tigrinya at home ... I made a decision saying, “You know, I’m Canadian of Eritrean origin and I belong in Toronto.”

This feeling of alienation in Eritrea and attachment to Canada, she said, was activated by her interactions with some of her old friends in Eritrea when she went to visit recently. She could not understand the new Tigrinya vocabulary and points of reference or contexts of humorous anecdotes. Her comments were not met with much comprehension. She realized then the dynamic nature of culture which is in a constant state of flux, “You wouldn’t understand what they’re saying. So we have changed I think and it will be very difficult for any Eritrean to have been away for so many years to fit in the Eritrean society.” Both the participant and I agreed that this syndrome was what people popularly called *mongo-mongo* in Tigrinya to refer to a “no win” situation in which someone or something was neither here nor there. Culture is not static and undergoes significant changes within a society while immigrants from that society who live abroad remember and cling to their old customs the way they left it unaware that the culture back home has somehow evolved from what it used to be. This participant concluded, “We are just the way we left and they are way ahead... Things have changed and that’s why we have a problem.”

The women with children felt attached to Canada mostly because they felt Canada was their children’s home. Since most of these children had either been born or raised in Canada, they had a strong loyalty to Canada and knew no other place as home. As a result, these mothers felt bound to Canada as their home. One woman said, “…because my children’s future is tied to Canada’s I see it also as my country.” These women’s children’s citizenship by birth was a strong indication of loyalty although almost all the mothers admitted that they still entertained ideas about moving back to Eritrea. This tug of war between Canada through their children and their nostalgic feelings for Eritrea was voiced by several of them. One woman confessed:

I’m someone who eventually wants to settle in my country but because my children are
here, I don’t want to go back to my country and live alone. As long as my children are here, I will be with them but I have noticed that most of my children have become Canadian citizens and they see Canada as their country so I don’t feel that they will move to Eritrea for the time being now.

This woman also added that in addition to her attachment to her children, the fact that her husband had been educated in Canada gave her some sense of belonging, “So because of these, we have an attachment to Canada and Canada’s people too.”

Another woman who had stayed in Canada for over fifteen years felt that Canada was her home because of her children and because she was satisfied with her successful career. At the same time, she too felt the conflicting, simultaneous feelings of belonging and nostalgia:

...home is always home so I always get homesick but I think I know the system. I feel confident. I can challenge things. I have no problem. But home is always home. The winter? The more you stay, the longer you stay, the more you hate it.

One of the women who had these conflicting feelings tried to establish an analogy by linking her loyalty to Eritrea comparatively with the one her children had to Canada. She believed childhood experiences and memory are the strongest factors for establishing belonging and loyalty and explained:

Well, you cannot forget your childhood where you spent that. If you have time and return to your home country. I’d prefer that...I say Canada is my country. It’s my children’s future. If I told my children to go to Eritrea, I don’t know how much of that they’d accept but for me it is where I was born and raised so my thoughts are there.

Another woman backed the sentiments above by stressing that although some of her childhood experiences were tinged with painful memories of the war and the Dergue’s brutality, she could still not let go of her strong connections to Eritrea through her experiences as a child growing up in Eritrea.

From the conversations I had with one woman, the fact that she had been denied Canadian citizenship reinforced her lack of belonging in Canada. She did not speak English though she understood a few words. Although she was denied Canadian citizenship because she
could not speak adequate English, she commented sadly that her intent to stay in Canada was not considered sufficient and was curtailed by the rejection. She stated:

I applied for that and gave the application to the lady and she told me to educate myself and denied me citizenship... It is sad. Our family doctor said that people who don't speak a word of English are getting Canadian citizenship... I don't know if she's a lawyer or what. When I saw the happy look on her face, I said, “Did you ask me?” They could have asked who the Queen of Canada is. I knew everything. I came prepared.

This participant became disillusioned because she felt that she was officially being denied that sense of “belonging.” Although her English was limited, she felt she had enough knowledge of Canadian politics and history to deserve citizenship, which she felt was being rewarded to those who knew less than she did. She had studied the citizenship notes supplied by Citizenship Canada and also followed the news and relevant documentaries on world politics and civic issues. While we were having this discussion she mentioned Dr. Martin Luther King's activities in detail and even quoted his famous, “I have a dream” speech. She felt her denial of citizenship was unjust and had denied her a place in Canadian society. Since this particular woman was also among the older generation of immigrants, her stronger affiliation with her Eritrean homeland was cemented further. She reiterated that she missed Eritrea and added, “There’s nothing like the fresh air of your country.”

Although all the women initially felt like outsiders when they first came to Canada after their very initial emigration (Krimer, 1986) or excitement (Rumble, 1990) stage which were very short periods, their encounter (Krimer, 1986) or confrontation (Rumble, 1990) stages gradually led to some acceptance. Misrinesh added, “When we came, we felt the discrimination. I felt really like an outsider when I first came but I can feel now that it’s getting better because of all the multiculturalism and every encouragement from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism.” Both Misrinesh and Senait were comforted by the fact that the government’s initiatives in supporting the integration of visible minorities through multiculturalism and anti-racism policies in employment were strong and contributed to some sense of belonging.
Since most of the women explained that any doubts they had about "belonging" were not only tied to their strong feelings of Eritrean identity or childhood experiences but also to their encounters with racism, their level of identifying with racist behavior or practices seemed to affect their acceptance of Canada as home to some degree. One woman stressed however that Toronto did not represent all of "White Canada" since it was the largest and most multicultural city in Canada as well as in the world. She compared her feelings of alienation when she had lived in a smaller and predominantly White city in the West where at times she would be the only person of color in shopping malls or cafes. On her views of Toronto, she said, "Toronto is an immigrant city. You don't feel different! Actually you see many immigrants. You don't feel like you came from somewhere else." Belonging was thus also seen as being similar to or identifying with others as was stated by another woman who said:

You see a lot of immigrants here. Many kinds of people: Blacks, Whites, Asians, and so on. Because of that, the people are diverse. So you cannot say that there are only Canadians, but every kind of immigrant. It is a country for immigrants.

This participant made a distinction between "Canadians" who were Whites, often Anglo-Saxon, and other immigrants, a common trend in polarizing the population. However her conclusion stated that she considered immigrants as belonging although her reference to "Canadians" was based on race/ethnicity and not on citizenship.

Since the notion of difference was mentioned as one factor in deterring them from having a full sense of belonging, the women who were aware of their different race or ethnicity felt it subtracted from their acceptance of full Canadian citizenship rights even in a multicultural setting like Toronto. One woman had earlier mentioned that it was a lonely feeling to be and feel different among others and to experience racist stereotyping. The woman who had referred to Toronto as "an immigrant city" added that, "...although it is a city of immigrants, still there is. You experience it when you go into a store. They assume you're not going to buy anything or
they follow you around the store." Although she felt positive in belonging in Toronto, such subtle racist behavior was a reminder for her to question her full belonging.

Belonging is also often tied to being recognized or acknowledged. In Eritrea, people’s identities are connected to their recognized status as daughters, wives, mothers, relatives, neighbors, friends within a social framework that acknowledges family and ancestry as well as social class status. In Canada, this sense of identity is lost. The depth of familial or social relations becomes weak. Identity becomes all too often tied to race/ethnicity and occupation. One of the women’s frustration and sadness in being only identified as “a refugee” and feeling like “garbage” and “a nobody” refers to this lack of complex social structure which recognizes an Eritrean woman’s full sense of identity. Cook-Nobles (1997) refers to this fear Black women have of losing themselves as they assimilate which alienates them from their histories and ancestry.

Moussa (1993) refers to an interesting distinction between home and country made by Lebanese-Canadian novelist Emily Nastrallah who believed home is the present residence while country had a stronger attachment to ancestry and history. Moussa also explained that Eritreans, like the majority of immigrants from the Middle East, associated “country” with belonging and birth place, ancestry and roots while North Americans understood “country” in terms of geographical boundary or political organization. The notions of “home” and “country” as distinct, however, are blurry. In Tigrinya there is no separate notion of “home” separate from “country.” One represents the other. However, Moussa’s notion of country as ancestry and attachment is why almost all Eritreans prefer to be buried in their birthplace. It a is a very common practice within the Eritrean-Canadian community to arrange for a deceased Eritrean to be buried in Eritrea at great financial cost for which community members raise funds readily. One of my participants, Yordanos expressed being conflicted when her father passed away abroad and she and her Toronto family had to decide whether to have him buried in Eritrea at great financial cost or have him buried abroad and send the money to their bereaved family in Eritrea. She decided on the
latter which was an exceptional decision, after weighing the realistic financial benefits as opposed to one based on “belonging.”

It is worth mentioning here that all the women had various levels of belonging but the general attitude was that they strongly felt their Eritrean national identity more especially in light of Eritrea’s thirty-year independence struggle. Almost all of them had visited Eritrea since independence. However their conflict in choosing to live in Canada over Eritrea was mostly tied to a choice between the educational and career opportunities as well as technologically advanced systems in Canada and belief in a richer, happier and more stable family and social life in Eritrea where their sense of belonging would not be questioned.

In terms of friendships all the women who worked said they had non-Eritrean Canadian friends among whom most were immigrants or first generation Canadians like themselves. Most of these friendships were formed at work. However, only two of them said their friendships were very close. One woman said she preferred friendships with non-Eritreans because they gossiped less than Eritrean friends who “pick on people and talk about relationships.” She mentioned a very close non-Eritrean Asian friend whom she met during her university days with whom she had a lot in common, “I talk to her about everything. She tells me about everything when I have a problem.” Another woman said she had several White Canadian friends, “They care for me. They support me. They are my good friends...They’re like my extended family here. They’ll do anything for me.” An interesting point was that she had three different categories of friends based on ethnicity. One was a group of White Canadian friends, the other was an ethnically-mixed group of co-workers while the other one was made up of her close Eritrean friends. She stated that she enjoyed the friendship of each group in different ways.

Another participant had several non-Eritrean Canadian friends but sometimes wondered why they constantly reminded her about her Third World culture by arguing about “women’s oppression in the Third World” such as female genital mutilation which she took an offense to. Her socialization time was therefore spent on defending her FGM culture. Although she discussed
her own experiences with FGM openly with her friends, she did admit that the open admission that she had undergone it could backfire on her. She admitted that some women friends and colleagues have given her a condescending lecture by indirectly attacking her culture although she herself is against FGM. Indeed Dorkenoo (1994) states that “…African women campaigning against FGM in the West have the triple burden of having to confront gender oppression, white liberal guilt and racism within the community.”

Most of the women admitted that their friendships were not as strong as the ones they had with Eritrean friends. This could probably be related to the fact that the friendships were formed at work or at school but with the termination or completion of employment or studies, came the termination of the friendships too which were based on the commonality of work or studies. Another reason was the cultural expectation or differences in behavior between or among friends from different cultures. In her research, Moussa (1992, 1993) discovered that several of her participants did not have non-Eritrean Canadian friends although they had lived in Canada for more than three years. She summarized the cultural difference among friends by saying, “…they did not have Canadian friends in the same way that they understood friendship.” Friendships in Eritrea and Ethiopia were in fact similar to family ties. The two significant points here are that the cultural differences result in different behavioral patterns among friends with possible awkward misunderstandings while the other is that the concept of friendship itself is understood differently by Eritreans and Canadians. Furthermore, Eritrean women tend to socialize differently than Canadian women. They often prefer not to spend large sums of money on entertainment such as on drinks or concerts or even socialize in bars or restaurants as much as Canadian women nor do they feel free to socialize in clubs due to cultural conditioning and expectations. Comparatively, Eritrean men have more freedom to socialize in bars and Eritrean restaurants while Eritrean women seldom venture to such places unaccompanied by other female or male friends or relatives.
In Eritrea or Ethiopia, social relationships, friendships or kinship enabled women to gain some social status and power. Women were also active as members of *mahbers* (neighborhood associations) and helped each other organize weddings, religious festivities, funerals/mourning sessions. The space to establish such social relations disappears in Canada where the social structure is different. The changes in lifestyle affect socialization and friendships, and therefore social status and power and the accompanying psychological satisfaction.

All the women in my study also stressed that none of their Canadian friends had known about the existence of Eritrea much less about its location, people, or culture before they formed friendships. It was interesting to note that most of the participants gave indignant unanimous high percentage figures for Canadians’ lack of knowledge about Eritrea. One woman exclaimed, “I have to say maybe ninety nine percent don’t know that there’s a country named Eritrea that exists!” Another said, “...the majority knows nothing. Ninety percent doesn’t know. Only ten percent do.” And yet another, “They don’t even know where it is located. ‘Is it in Asia?’ Oh, yeah right! I am saying, ‘East Africa!’” Another woman had an interesting encounter:

> Most of them don’t know anything about it....Do you know who knows it? Elderly people. I used to work with senior citizens. When they asked where I was from and I tell them I’m from Eritrea, they know it right away. They tell me it was ruled by the English, colonized by Italy and so on. They’re old Canadians...Italians know it because they were there...there was one ninety year old woman. When I told her I was from Eritrea she said she knew it. She’s British. She said her father or grandfather came to Canada but she said she used to read books on Eritrea. She always wanted to go to Eritrea. It’s too late now...I really admired her.

Another woman backed this story by commenting on Canadians, “I find more Europeans educated and know it more than North Americans...They [North Americans] are not as informed on social things going on, political things around the globe.” One possible explanation for older Canadians knowing Eritrea is that many older English-speaking first or second generation immigrant Canadians had come from Britain before or after World War II and had knowledge of world affairs including Africa. At the same time, it is worth noting that the Canadian educational system is weak in its lack of in-depth or wide coverage of world affairs, history or geography.
pertaining to the Third World, especially Africa, as evidenced by younger generation Canadians’
ignorance of Eritrea and world affairs. As a result, knowledge of world affairs is usually limited
to knowledge presented by the media.

Another woman expressed this lack of knowledge differently, “They don’t know about it
because they have no interest.” She experienced some resistance and negativity in having her
identity and ethnic origin acknowledged by her boss. When she was explaining the current
Eritrean-Ethiopian war with her boss, the latter retorted, “Why? What is happening in
Eritrea?...What are you talking about?...The media never talks about it.” The boss’ doubt
confirmed the media’s powerful control over what constituted reality and what did not although
the Eritrean woman was a respected and valued employee. The Toronto Sun’s Peter Worthington
in his December 27-31, 1998 five-part series on Eritrea, also raised Eritrea’s lack of world
recognition in spite of it’s astounding record on women’s liberation and independent economic
progress without foreign aid while stressing that Canada and Canadians should acknowledge it.

As Canadian citizens with dual citizenship, Eritreans feel that they have a duty to teach
Canadians about their country of origin for which they also have a belonging. All the participants
said they had taught so many Canadian friends and colleagues about Eritrean history, politics and
culture that the friends became avid fans of Eritrea. The fact that these women worked like
ambassadors was evident from some of their comments, “I have to show them it’s this and that.”
Another, “I explain to them something, some part of our culture.” And yet another, “You have to
tell them about it.” Misrinesh added that she used Peter Worthington’s Toronto Sun articles on
Eritrea as a starting point to teach her coworkers about Eritrea since the facts were coming from a
Canadian-born journalist who would have more credibility. Zufan had a creative approach:

They don’t know where Eritrea is and I start to explain and then later on they’re so
interested in different things that we do, about our culture and so on and sometimes
they’re coming to my place for tea or coffee or whatever, dinner. We have a few
Eritrean crafts and then that helps a lot with the discussion because they would want
to know, “What is this?” So you’d say, “This is a coffee pot we use in Eritrea.” And
then, later on about the politics.
One woman said her name was the springboard to launch discussions about Eritrea. Since most of her work was done via telephone, her unusual name initiated curiosity. She added:

I always get that associated with my name. At least twenty percent of the calls are discussions about my name. So because of that when they ask where I'm from, I say "Africa" and then "Eritrea" and you find some people who know it. Usually they don’t know it.

An interesting realization was that once Canadians learned about Eritrea, they wanted to learn more. Said Zufan:

...once you discuss about Eritrea, believe me anything written about Eritrea, they would be interested to read and they would call you and say, “By the way, did you see this newspaper? There’s something about your country. So they do that a lot. They know a lot.

Senait also commented, “If there is an article [in the newspaper], they call me and say, ‘There is an article today.’ They will just bring it to the workplace for me.” Many Canadian friends and colleagues feel surprised to realize that they had never known about a nation that had waged a thirty-year war for liberation. Therefore they make a conscious effort to learn more and develop a strong attachment. Senait even described her Canadian friends at a social gathering as “all wearing Eritrean T-shirts.” Another interesting point is that once Canadians made Eritrean friends, they began to recognize other Eritreans by their physical features or mannerisms and exhibited some friendliness towards them by striking a conversation. One of Senait’s Canadian friends was in a cab once when she recognized the cab driver’s accent and told him, “Your accent. You sound like Senait, like your accent.” She found out he was Eritrean and they started to talk about Eritrea. All these women therefore felt that they had contributed to an increased awareness about Eritrea and their Eritrean heritage among their Canadian friends and colleagues and felt somewhat acknowledged in Canada, instead of feeling like “immigrants from nowhere” although they felt that the majority of Canadians still did not know who they were or where they came from.
Culture Conflict - East Meets West: "To tell you frankly, I don't know what I am."

A significant point worth raising here in this section is that when the issue of “Canadian culture” came up, some participants stated that they did not think that Canadians had a culture per se. A consensus was reached whereby Canadian culture for purposes of this research meant the Western value system that included values, attitudes, behavior or way of life in Canada in comparison to traditional Eritrean ones.

One significant aspect of all the women in this study is that they all felt that they had embraced certain elements of Western culture while preserving strong Eritrean ones which were difficult to abandon or which were a means to hold on to their identity and ensure psychological survival. While some admitted still holding on to negative aspects of Eritrean culture, the majority stressed that in order to integrate successfully into Canadian society, both cultures would have to be blended without clashing or creating a culture clash or confusion which they said was a common phenomenon. Two women advocated splitting the two cultures in an either/or approach and stressed embracing one or the other but not both. To them, this was an invitation to disaster. All the women acknowledged that each culture had its merits as well as its flaws and seemed very clear on what they deemed was right or wrong. There seemed to be a consensus or overlap in certain areas.

One of the positive aspects of Canadian culture raised by one of the single women was that Canadians knew how to prioritize. She said Canadian women planned ahead in terms of education, career, finances and relationships. She did not feel that women in the West prioritized relationships over other parts of their lives as did Eritrean women. She saw individualism, which some participants categorized as a negative trait, as a positive one. She felt women in the West thought first for themselves and made decisions independently without comparing themselves to other women’s relationships or educational/career achievements while planning life according to their own interests, needs, resources and time-frame. She also saw Canadian women as having
more financial savvy by their impressive records in saving, investing in mutual funds or RRSPs, or in acquiring property. She compared Canadian women to Eritrean women who prioritized relationships and spent all their money on lavish weddings by failing to understand financial management within the socio-economic context of life in Canada.

Another Western cultural trait that one woman appreciated was Westerners' comfort in expressing themselves openly without fear of being judged negatively. She compared this with Eritreans whom she felt were more reserved in expressing their real views or in even revealing themselves. She gave the example of the difference between a Westerner's and an Eritrean's response to the same question of, "What do you do for a living?" She continued, "You should be saying something but Eritreans I think, are thinking of the perfect sentence." She stressed that this reluctance to open up or to be communicative is career suicide during job interviews. Such cultural behavior and Tebeje's (1989) assertion that Ethiopians, including Eritreans, are reluctant in expressing their educational or career achievements during interviews and in their resumes, creates a double constraint in their career success.

Similarly, another participant mentioned her appreciation for Canadians who were proud to admit their professions whether they were academic professionals or manual workers. Their work ethic in taking their professions seriously however manual or low-paying, merited attention. On the contrary Eritreans, she felt, were reluctant to acknowledge their occupations if they felt the professions were not impressive to the listener. This was also reinforced by cultural conditioning in Eritrea and Ethiopia where education is highly valued and a means to economic success. In addition, occupations such as janitorial work, restaurant service, cab-driving, housekeeping were associated with those in Eritrea or Ethiopia, which were perceived as being in the realm of the less-educated. Added to this was the accreditation problems many Eritrean men faced which affected their self esteem, especially if they were forced to take jobs beneath their qualifications which was a common occurrence.
Misrinesh raised “going Dutch” as a plus in her Canadian experience. She recalled her first experience:

I was new and someone invited me for a birthday party in a restaurant. In my country, like in our culture, if you are invited to a birthday party, it means that the person who is giving the party is paying for it but here the opposite. That was funny. I soon enough found out that we are paying.

The aspect of sharing was a characteristic Misrinesh liked. In Eritrean culture, hospitality starts with generosity as guests are served a lavish array of various dishes and beverages and are waited on by the host family who urges them to eat or drink several times with the guests declining repeatedly until they finally comply. This behavior is carried on in public restaurants where Eritrean friends and relatives often argue by insisting to pay for the meals as a sign of hospitality. She went on to explain that because of such cultural expectations, Eritreans who did not have enough money to cover their friends’ expenses were reluctant to go out and socialize while they could easily solve this dilemma by accepting going Dutch. She concluded:

It’s nice to have sharing because if you don’t have the budget, if you’re limited on your budget and some of us might be able to be extravagant … If we were sharing, whatever we buy it’s much better and you feel comfortable and you’ll go out more often. Meanwhile I have found out from Eritreans there are some guys that don’t want to go out because they don’t have enough to invite their friends.

This cultural trait was also observed more among men since due to cultural expectations of men as the bread winners or caretakers, they were viewed as the ones likely to pay for such social outings.

Western culture was also viewed as one where a woman could assert her autonomy in thinking, speaking and behaving freely. Women had all choices open to them and could make decisions on their own. Their lives were in their own hands. This was compared favorably with women in Eritrean culture, whose lives were much less autonomous and more enmeshed with family and social norms and restrictions.

The negative aspects of Western culture were numerous compared to the positive ones numerically speaking. One element raised by a number of the women was the notion of
"realness" versus "superficiality." Some participants felt that life in Canada was not "real" compared to life in Eritrea where relationships with people whether family, friends or neighbors were genuine. They felt that life in Canada did not offer "real happiness" as did life in Eritrea. Yordanos explained:

The real thing: back home. If they find something new, they tell you. If there's a road that takes you somewhere they will show you so these people are real, they're not artificial. Everything is done because it should be done. Yeah those things I don't like about Canada.

This notion of "artificiality" was repeated by Misrinesh who disliked "small talk":

It's all artificial. It is fake. It's not because I'm concerned about you and I want to know if you had a good weekend... the supervisor, just because she wants small talk, goes, "How was your weekend? How was your Christmas?" That bothers me so much because it is very artificial.

Another Western cultural trait that received some attention was the notion of individualism which was viewed by the majority as strongly associated with selfishness although a few stressed that individualism could be a positive aspect depending on how it was used and where. Senait condemned individualism by saying, "When people die in our community, we support each other. But here people are very individualistic." However her positive notion of individualism was evident in the following comments she made while discussing people's comments about her behavior, "I don't care what they say. I do it for me. I live for me, not for others but respect yourself."

Related to the above was another common belief that Canadians were not very friendly. Yordanos said, "Canadians are cold here. They mind their own business." At the same time she saw this positively. She liked the fact that they minded their own business but wanted this positive trait balanced with some friendliness and caring attitude. Neighbors were mentioned as being less caring and indifferent as in the example one woman gave:

You approach them with the intention of saying "Hello" because back home you always say "Hello" to people but here when they just look at you and pass you by, you feel bad. You wonder what kind of place you're in. It is stressful. You wonder, "What am I going to do?"
As mentioned in Chapter Two, almost all the women perceived Canadian family values as weak. Their major proof was the high incidence of Canadian children leaving home at a very early age, usually sixteen or over and the correlated incidence of “institutionalizing” elderly parents in retirement homes. This factor was by far, the most serious and unappealing Western cultural trait all of the women stressed they could never embrace. Canadian parents were viewed as rather selfish and as wanting to pursue their own individual interests as they had little or no family values or ties. Some women felt that the high incidence of elderly parents in retirement homes was a direct result of the parents’ lack of strong family ties in a form of Karma. Said Rahwa, “What goes around, comes around.” Some believed that with the exception of Italians, most White Canadians did not have strong family values. Some compared family life in Eritrea where unmarried children in their thirties and forties were expected to live at home with their parents while elderly parents or grandparents all lived in one home, the concept of retirement home being completely alien.

One woman who had worked as a volunteer with the elderly recalled an elderly woman with seven daughters who never visited their mother “although they could have alternated to have one come each day.” She noticed elderly people being “discarded” by their children while they “hungered for human companionship.” She continued:

One thing I hate the most about Canada is that. After they’ve raised seven, eight children, you see them thrown away in homes without so much as a piece of bread in some of the homes we’ve visited. This is a bad aspect of Canadian way of life...You do that to your parents, tomorrow your child will do it to you.

This woman confessed that her worst fear in Canada was being abandoned in a retirement home by her children. She mentioned it jokingly to her children who exclaimed they could not imagine doing that. Once during the Christmas holidays when another participant was passing by a nursing home with her children, they noticed an elderly woman being escorted into the home by her children and she too jokingly mentioned to her children if they would “lock her up” in a retirement home the way they had just witnessed. Her young daughter exclaimed, “No, Mommy!
You live with me! No way! I would never put you there!” She said she felt so much pride and comfort feeling that her daughter’s reaction was closely tied to her Eritrean identity and heritage as a dutiful and loving daughter within the strong Eritrean family value system. This focus on family values was stressed by another woman whose understanding of ‘decent family life’ needed some clarification. When I asked her what she meant by “a decent and happy life for Eritrean women”, she replied, “Decent meaning... embracing your mother and living together in a warm family environment.” It’s worth mentioning that all of the participants in this study lived with their mothers or daughters if both resided in Canada.

Although lack of family values was blamed for family breakdown and the high incidence of parents in retirement homes in Canada, Zufan mentioned that there are some assumptions Eritreans and others make of Canadians. She stressed that one common assumption was that Canadian (by Canadian she meant WASP or White Anglo Saxon Protestant) parents did not have adult children living with them. She had met several WASP Canadians whose adult children were still living with them but added, “…maybe I’m only meeting this kind of people. I don’t know.” She felt this was a positive discovery which unraveled an assumption and said she would research the subject further. Indeed, according to an article in The Toronto Star’s February 28 edition, more adult Canadian children are living with their parents now than at any other time in recent history.

Surprisingly, although they advocated women’s equality and liberation, several participants did not appreciate Western culture’s open sexuality and were more conservative about women’s sexual liberation. One woman said, “White people behave like a woman bringing her boyfriend home and does a lot of things in front of them or allows her children to bring their partners and kiss in front of her.” Another was indignant as she said, “Everything is open. They do everything there. You see them kissing the whole day... If they want they have illegitimate children, get pregnant. I frequently see women behaving in very inappropriate ways.” It is
interesting to note that this participant made no mention of men’s sexual behavior as misconduct and was referring only to women’s open sexuality.

Since religion and spirituality are very important components of Eritrean culture, it is not surprising that some women raised the absence of strong religious morals or faith among Canadians, especially among the younger generation, as a negative aspect. Halloween was given as one good example by some women to symbolize Western culture’s strong tendency to cults rather than real faith. Yordanos exclaimed, “What is Halloween? It is devilish... The spirit of Halloween is not right.” Rahwa added:

Halloween is something related to the devil. After people have worshipped God, they turn and respect the devil. Sometimes it makes me wonder. It doesn’t make sense at all. You can only worship one King: either Satan or God but they [Westerners] are ruled by both. That is one thing that amazes me. How could they do that?

Halloween could be used as the starting point to discuss culture confusion among Eritreans. Yordanos felt that although Eritreans are a religious people with a strong faith and fear of God, she has come across some Eritreans in Canada who attended Halloween parties. She saw this as one manifestation of culture confusion: believing in an aspect of one culture but behaving by the opposite standards of another. Mixing Eritrean and Western cultural behaviors that contradict one another are therefore seen as the principal underlying theme for culture conflict.

One woman used the engagement ring as a starting point to address the severity of culture confusion. She stressed that although the diamond engagement ring was not part of traditional Eritrean culture but adopted from the West, Eritrean-Canadian women had started to view it as the norm in spite of the financial constraint it created in addition to a lavish Eritrean wedding. In other words, she stated that Eritrean women wanted the best of both worlds without analyzing the financial consequences. This participant concluded that culture confusion could be avoided only if Eritreans adopted either a totally Western way of life or preserved the Eritrean one without mixing the two since women were holding on to Eritrean values that were holding them back as
well as Western ones that did not benefit them in the long run within the Canadian socio-economic context.

The strong preservation of Eritrean cultural behavior was also evident in Muna’s belief that working Eritrean-Canadian mothers “…are still running with the routine life here but deep inside at home we make injera and tsebhi and roast boon. The culture is still there.” She believed in the polarization of Western culture and Eritrean culture which respectively intersected with their public and private lives, the Western values being prominent in the public realm while Eritrean behavior dominated in the home. Like other Canadian women, working Eritrean mothers dropped their children at day cares, worked in various professions and at home juggled roles of the Eritrean housewife by cooking traditional Eritrean stews and brewing traditional-style coffee regardless of the time and energy spent.

Culture confusion was also said to be the cause of some Eritreans’ total “abandonment” of Eritrean culture in order to be successful in North America. However, this abandonment was perceived to be on the surface since childhood programming and cultural upbringing greatly influence real thought and behavior. At the same time, there is a misguided assumption that holding on to Eritrean culture will be an obstacle to successful adjustment in Canada while embracing everything Western is a guarantee of success. This is especially true when a totally Western cultural behavior is adopted without trying to anticipate its future outcome in an Eritrean cultural context. One such example is the Eritrean couple who had pushed their young children to move out when they turned eighteen only to discover that deep down they themselves still had Eritrean cultural values that did not truly accept children moving out. Winta explained:

A lot of people give up their own culture in order to become what they consider to be modern, new. I mean Canada offers a lot of opportunities that we would never have had back home but at the same time I think that it is important to recognize that a lot of Eritreans when they come here feel that they should leave their cultures behind and that they’re so much better to be living near Italian or English culture. And there’s no such Canadian culture.
Misrinesh noted that such changes usually were disastrous among Eritreans from non-urban backgrounds. Her belief was that those from educated or middle-class backgrounds did not see the need to “Canadianize” themselves while others felt the urgent and ambitious need to “catch up” with modern ways.

Yordanos raised another form of culture confusion which was Eritreans disassociating themselves from other Eritreans or the Eritrean community in an effort to “become more Canadian.” This distancing oneself from Eritreans was seen by some as a means to better oneself and move beyond the past self and “backward” practices or even Eritrean identity itself. Yordanos gave a comment she heard frequently by such people, “Oh, I don’t go to Habesha places.” Her comments, “…they think they are very Canadian just because they have Canadian friends and go to Canadian bars. But that doesn’t change them. In fact they will be more confused. You’ll see them halfway. Neither Habesha [Eritrean], nor Ferenji [White/Western].” In other words, she believed that distancing oneself from Eritrean culture was not the solution but the problem. Another woman who had felt like an outsider in Eritrea and had referred to her situation as being “neither here not there” or mongo-mongo in Tigrinya, expressed having the same feelings sometimes in Canada by confessing, “To tell you frankly, I don’t know what I am.”

The reality of culture confusion or culture conflict remains one issue for many immigrants who feel that their culture may hold them back from adjusting successfully in Canada. Distancing themselves from or even abandoning their culture however, seems to backfire on them while holding on to both their cultures and a Western one sometimes creates a clash. The secret it seems is in picking just the right elements of both and balancing them with skill.

**Adjustment Issues:** “There shouldn’t be ‘Canadian experience.' They should be asking, ‘Do you have work experience?’”

It is a normally accepted fact that the degree of immigrant satisfaction is based on his or her employment economic status. Since successful integration into Canadian society is greatly
determined by one’s satisfaction in employment or career status as well as in terms of income, it
was not surprising that most of the participants adjustment issues were mostly related to
employment and financial status, including living standard. To most, successful integration was
perceived as impossible without economic settlement. One woman concluded, “I doubt whether
I’m going to live in Canada. I might go back to my country. If I cannot work here, why don’t I
just go back home to my country and stay there?”

Factors that hindered adjustment

The participant who commented that she might as well return to Eritrea if she could not
find employment stressed her preference for Canada only if economic needs were met, a
consensus reached by most immigrants that the reasons for immigrating to another country at all
costs was to achieve economic success through education, various professional careers or through
business ventures. In Eritrea, the family and the social support system are available to the
unemployed or those without sufficient income, to fall back on while in Canada, economic
success is an individual struggle. As a result, unemployment and the requirement for “Canadian
Experience” for newcomers were by far considered the most significant factors that delayed
successful adjustment.

Another area that affected successful adjustment was accreditation. Immigrants who had
been professionals especially in fields such as Medicine and healthcare, Engineering and Law
were affected mostly. For example, in one study done by Estable (1986), an undergraduate degree
from a non-Western university was equivalent to the Canadian Grade 13 while a Master’s degree
was equivalent to two years in a Canadian undergraduate degree program. However, there are
slight variations. Immigrants from Commonwealth African countries such as Kenya, Nigeria and
Ghana have more accreditation acceptance due to their British educational models.
Although only one participant faced accreditation problems in her field and had to change her field completely by enrolling in university, those participants who had completed some university courses in Eritrea or Ethiopia had to start from scratch and enroll in new programs in Canada. One participant also mentioned her mother’s painful ordeal, “She had to go back to college all over again so they gave her a hard time and with her you see the effect on her more than you would on us…” Again, those with several years secretarial skills were initially denied employment in their fields. One of them has still not been able to find employment in her area of work experience. Since higher education in Eritrea and Ethiopia are mostly dominated by men, accreditation problems usually center on male Eritrean professionals who face more career discrimination and are forced to take less skilled jobs such as cab-driving. The impact of such demoralizing reality is felt in the home in terms of psychological stress and financial difficulties which may in turn affect interpersonal or marital relationships.

Another factor in adjustment problems was the lowered standard of living. Contrary to popular belief that immigrants embrace a better standard of living, many of the participants admitted facing severe financial hardship and much lower standards of living compared to their lives in Eritrea or Ethiopia. Eritreans who once belonged to the upper or middle class as professionals, government workers or business entrepreneurs found themselves working in manual jobs as members of the Canadian working class. The areas most affected in the drop of status were employment and housing. One woman noted:

What I did notice automatically was how life standard dropped, you know when we were back home we had maids. We lived a very good life. Both my parents had very good jobs. Both came from families that were well-to-do and all of that was just gone. We left one day and all ended…when we came to Canada we were like in one bachelor apartment for all five of us. That’s one thing I noticed like from being some of the richest kids on the street with all the toys we had like one dollar or no dollar so it was difficult. It made it a lot harder. I mean I was young… but I could see my mom went to two jobs.

This woman stated, “When we came to Canada we were dirt poor.” This did not refer to her family’s status in Eritrea but rather to her family’s new devolved one in Canada after leaving
behind the old comfortable life. Another participant who had been extremely well off before immigrating to Canada recalled having to face her children without enough money. At one point her young son asked her, “Mommy why are we poor?” He also asked, “Didn’t we use to have two cars? Why did we come? Canada is a beautiful place but why did we come to Canada and become so poor?” Another time he asked her for a toy which she could not afford to buy. When she promised to buy it the following month, he replied, “Mommy, look at the wall. I saw you. You feed the wall and it just gives you money. Why are you lying?” He was referring to her bank machine instant teller card. His naïve comment broke her heart while it made her laugh. He had noticed the drastic change in their lifestyle although he could not comprehend it. She felt hurt since they had to compromise and that she could not lavish them the way she could have done in Eritrea or Ethiopia where she had left all her family’s extensive property behind. She could not buy them toys or take them out to hockey games like other children. However, she learned how to economize while surviving on very little money and changed her lifestyle. She added, “I regret that they didn’t have the luxury to go...How did I build my home? Did I have household items? No! But thanks to dollar stores you can have everything.” Her change in lifestyle can best be summarized by the Amharic term she used: gojo-mewicha, which refers to bridal property acquisition of new household items to start married life.

Also related to a drop in living standards is the issue of domestic work problems. In Eritrea or Ethiopia working urban women often have hired help. Several working mothers among the participants referred to this as a difficulty. One woman recalled that when she first came to Canada, her “world was falling apart.” She added:

Just when I started I’d cry. I’d say, “Where do I start? The wat [stew]? Cleaning the house?” I swear to God, I never washed a dish in my life! When I came here, I really cried...I don’t know where to start. The whole house, the kids, the washing, the cooking, the cleaning. Oh my God! It has never an end! You start six o’clock in the morning and in the end you’re still doing stuff.
English language problems were raised by three participants as the most significant factor that hindered their successful adjustment in Canada. The majority of Eritrean women who have completed Grade 12 and even university in Eritrea or Ethiopia still face English language proficiency problems although the medium of instruction starting from Grade 7 in junior high schools is English. Yordanos said she had had problems with her accent and pronunciation when she first came to Canada but now spoke perfect English as well as French. Another woman, however said she was still struggling with her English and had encountered some difficulties in school with her English instructor’s abusive behavior which affected her initial experience. She added:

...although I came here after I had completed Grade 12, I still had problems with English
...There was no way I could express exactly what I was feeling. Even until now, I still have English language problems. Anywhere if you have any other good skills, if you have English language shortage, you cannot move ahead.

She made two crucial points. One was that English language proficiency gave immigrants some assurance of successful adjustment or integration. The second one was that the inability to express feelings or thoughts in adequate English affected immigrants psychologically. The first point referred to socio-economic success while the second one was related to psychological adjustment. Inability to speak English was also related to one participant’s lack of “belonging” in Canada. She had no intention of learning English nor did she wish to stay in Canada especially after her application for Canadian citizenship was rejected.

An important observation in immigrants’ difficulties with English which were not only limited to socio-economic and psychological adjustment was also their being perceived as being stupid, incompetent or as “thinking with accents” or that their thinking would be as flawed as their accents. Senait stated:

People could ridicule you even when you speak with an accent. And I, you know what I tell them? I say, “You know what? You know how many languages I speak? How many languages do you speak? One.”...Never mind to be ridiculed by your accent. You speak three, four languages while that person only speaks one language and they try to use that as a weapon to ridicule you. Yeah, so don’t put up with that.
This also points to English communication ability or proficiency being used to treat immigrants differently depending on their English language competence and accent or lack of it.

Racism was also seen as another obstacle in adjustment. Canadian citizenship was automatically "bestowed" on Whites while visible minority Canadian citizens were somehow permanently viewed as newcomer immigrants regardless of how long they had stayed or even if they had been born in Canada. One woman whose daughter had been born in Canada said, "Even when you are born here, someone asks my kids... 'Where are you from?' She'd say, 'What do you mean?' It's like she's born here. She's Canadian-born so it's still there. The racism has its roots and it's still going to haunt you."

Interestingly, the cold weather was also given as an obstacle by three women. One woman mentioned arriving in the winter:

I was frozen. We came in the middle of a blizzard. We were so unprepared for it. We just came from hot Africa, right? So we were worried and when we thought it was getting warm and we got here and we were shaking and luckily for us there was someone from the Eritrean community who knew us and took us to sale but it was painful for me. We spent most of the time crying, all of us. Everybody just cried together.

Surprisingly, another woman who had thought she had adjusted to the Canadian winter over several years of living in Canada concluded that the winter was one which immigrants could never adjust to. She concluded that the longer one stayed, the more one hated the winter.

Factors that facilitated successful adjustment

Among some of the factors that helped the participants adjust to life in Canada, positive expectations of life in Canada was one. Rahwa stated:

I think I can isolate the biggest factor that I think helped me to make my life easier. I thought I could do better abroad. There are more chances for everything; to work, to go to school and I knew there was just less poverty here so when I came here I expected to better myself. I always had the positive thing in mind.
Zufan, however, gave a totally opposite view, “We didn’t come with high expectations so I think that’s what really helped us.” She also added:

...sometimes a number of odd little things add up you know, to be a big obstacle but you have to know how to handle things. If you don’t have high expectations, then you know you will manage to solve all the problems you will have on a daily basis.

Another interesting factor given was making a conscious decision to accept Canada as a permanent home and not being torn between Eritrea and Canada. This divided loyalty was seen in some Eritreans who would be looking for good employment in Canada while at the same time making plans to move to Eritrea. One woman gave a simple explanation for her successful adjustment. When I asked her how she had accomplished this, her short answer spoke for itself, “Well, because I came with the purpose of settling here as my home.”

Also related to accepting Canada as a permanent choice, was the need to avoid holding on to the past whether it was positive or negative, while adopting an optimistic outlook towards the future persistently. According to Muna:

You have to be strong. I have no sister or brother. I had no one. I had no time to find friends. But you have to have a motive. And you have to find the way to share your views to do that. You have to be strong. Don’t look back...Look forward...Work hard. Don’t sleep at all. Keep on going. Don’t give up...You don’t have to be depressed and give up. You have to think that there’s hope and that one day it will be over. Whatever it takes of you, take it as temporary.

While this woman stressed the need to be optimistic and look forward, she also stressed hard work as one of the keys to success. Another woman backed this point by explaining her success as “…taking initiatives, being there, having a very positive attitude and hard work. Hard working is the key.”

Seeing the success of other immigrants moving up the socio-economic ladder also motivated and pushed some of the participants to do the same. Rahwa stated:

I mean people come from all over the world and can manage to live here and if that can happen I say there’s nor reason why it cannot be for me too. And you look at people who’ve been here before you. If they live a good life, you are motivated to live a good life. So the lives of people who came before you become models.
Another significant and crucial factor that some of the women raised was family support and having close family members who had already been established in Canada. One woman said:

One advantage was that I just moved in with my sister. That was a big plus. Like if you go to a new country, you are alone, you know no one. Because my sister was here and she told me to fill out this form and so on so it wasn’t like I was new and thrown somewhere.

Another woman who had no one in Canada when she came said, “It is very tough. So I didn’t have anybody to assist me or say, ‘If you do it this way, it is better…””

Age was also given as a factor by the younger participants. Since values and behavior become set with age, the younger women or those that had come as young immigrants as children or under age thirty said it was easier for them to blend in with society and adapt to Canadian ways. One said, “The fact that I was young has made it extremely easy. The fact that because I was so young, I didn’t have a lot of social movement but a lot of the kids that come here older have.” Her comments also raise the issue of adjustment problems rising with increasing age, since this participant was comparing herself with members of her own young generation who were not much older than she was. The two oldest participants were also the ones that exhibited the least adjustment in terms of employment and sense of “belonging.” This could also be related to the fact that they were among the recently arrived participants.

One participant gave her faith in God as a positive factor that gave her strength to persist even in times of hardship. Although she expressed very strong objections to the practice of Halloween festivities in Canada, she admitted that Canada was a religious nation and that this belief in a religious Canada facilitated her adjustment. She commented, “…religion here is okay. There is faith although there are so many different religions. At least there is priority given to God. So you feel there is a good spirit here. Wherever there is fear of God, it is always good.”
"Better Person": "Experience in life always makes you a better person."

Adjustment in Canada leaves an indelible mark on immigrants. The adjustment experience is a learning adventure and a discovery of not only Canada but of oneself. It forces one to look inward while adjusting to external reality. Almost all of the women in this study expressed having undergone several changes at various levels in their thinking and behavior, among others. For most, a sense of a better self emerging over time became a reality. The women felt that they drew strength and wisdom from their adjustment struggles. One of the younger women confessed:

For the most part I like myself. I like myself. I’m just as guilty as the rest of those Eritreans that say, “FOBs” ’cause I’ve said FOB before. I can’t lie. I’m guilty of it, right? I’m trying to step back from that. To try to take a more active role so so far I like the way I’ve progressed. I like it. I like the fact that I’m really into my culture...for the most part, yeah, I’m pretty happy with the way I’ve turned out.

Another woman expressed having “grown up” in Canada symbolically speaking. Her adjustment struggle as a working wife and mother forced her to look at the reality of her marriage and real status. Before coming to Canada, she had been a working wife and mother who earned a high income. She confessed that although she had earned more than the average person, “When I wanted to buy a new dress, I had to beg him.” She had been treated like a delicate child by her parents and later by her husband. After coming to Canada, the adjustment experience exposed the truth and reality sank in as she realized she was self-sufficient and strong when she struggled to find employment and supported her family against all odds. She left her husband and raised her children on her own. She admitted that she sometimes was still surprised by her old self which was naïve, dependent and obedient compared to her new one as an independent and wiser professional woman. Several other women expressed feeling powerful after having undergone traumatic adjustment experiences. One woman who had undergone severe trauma as a foreign woman in a Middle Eastern country felt empowered in being able to voice her opinions openly
and standing for what she believed in compared to her old suppressed intimidated self. Another woman also added:

If you can't express it, then you don't know what kind of thoughts you have. You don't bring it out. You don't express it in words. Everything is hidden even whatever you are carrying inside. You are afraid of being judged by people but here you say whatever is on your mind. The society itself lets you talk. When you see everyone talking and working, you become like that.

And yet another woman expressed the changes she had undergone in being able to voice her opinions:

A: I have changed. I have changed a lot. Expressing my views, opinions, about things if I don't agree, you know, I would just say it.

Q: But before you just kept it in and not say...?

A: You have to say what you are talking about. I didn't know what to say. I didn't know what to contribute in the discussion.

A better understanding of one's self was also gained through careers as expressed by one woman who said:

You know, here you are exposed to so many things and that's helpful to understand yourself... here I was exposed to the working environment, working with different kinds of people... I have to read a lot. I have to attend a lot of meetings. I have to attend workshops... I feel I gained a lot within these few years compared to all those years in...

Related to a knowledge of oneself was also self-confidence. One participant explained how her self-confidence was built over time:

... here I was so confident because I knew the strengths that I had and I knew I could do it... here you meet a lot of people. When people appreciate what you are doing, then you know. You say, “Aha! So I have this special skill.” So that way you know and it motivates you.

This woman compared her old self with the new one. She recalled her old self when she had been a university student in another country after she had left Eritrea. While at university she could not participate in the class discussions and felt out of touch while the other students were actively asking and responding to questions on topics that included Eritrean cultural practices. She read a lot of books and came prepared to engage in the discussions but could still not participate. She
finally went to her instructor who inquired about her upbringing. The teacher concluded, “Don’t worry, it’s not you. It’s the way you grew up.” From her discussions with the instructor she was able to realize that her sheltered upbringing in Eritrea had left her out of touch with several rich Eritrean cultural practices. The teacher’s approach to the actual original source of the problem itself enabled her to reprogram herself. She concluded, “…I was really amazed because there were so many things I didn’t know at all.” Her Canadian experiences were therefore also devoted to learning more about her Eritrean culture.

One interesting point was that the notion of “better person” was not seen as being synonymous with “happy person.” Mitslal noted that, “Experience in life always makes you a better person. Am I happy? Hmm. I am not complaining like every morning I want to change but I’m okay.” Similarly, Rahwa’s statement showed that life in Canada was somewhat of a compromise although it had made her a better person. While she believed that life in Eritrea might be more fulfilling, peace of mind or freedom could only be achieved in Canada, referring to one of her original reasons for coming to Canada. When I asked her to compare her life in Eritrea with the one she had now in Canada, she replied, “It is the same. When I was back home, I had everything but peace. It didn’t make a big difference. Even there I would have lived a good life. Here too I am living a good life.”

Thoughts on moving to Eritrea: “Of course!”

The women’s views on moving back to Eritrea ranged from a definite yes, a mixed sentiment to a certain no. Most of the women stated that they had plans to move to Eritrea at a certain time in the future while some expressed their reservations with detail. One interesting observation was that all but one of the participants had visited Eritrea after independence and were therefore at an advantage to discuss their views on moving back with more certainty.
The two older participants who were in their sixties expressed the strongest desire and plans to move back to Eritrea for good although two younger women also expressed a similar desire. The other younger women had visited Eritrea with some contemplating staying for good but realized that they had undergone several changes in attitude, thinking and behavior as well as having achieved autonomy through education, employment and living conditions in Canada. The additional exposure to blatant sexism within the society forced some to question their permanent move. As a result, these women felt they belonged in no man’s land since they had a very strong appreciation for their Eritrean heritage. Since they had had high hopes of resuming life in Eritrea, they had not anticipated not fitting in and were surprised to realize they could not after they had spent some considerable time in Eritrea.

Almost all the women had made plans to return to Eritrea after they had completed their studies since most felt that education was an asset they could take there and present as an accomplishment achieved in Canada. Moussa (1992) also observed this trend among her participants. One of my participants completed her studies in Canada before she went to visit Eritrea. She recounted her experience:

I had high hopes, very high hopes of going back and I used to say, “When I have my degree I will go there, have another degree and do this and that.” When I went there after ten years I told myself I couldn’t fit there anywhere at all so I just said, “I don’t think this works.” So I came back. It’s hard the way people think there. Either you have to think the way they think or you can’t live. If you start changing, they will not accept it. They always joke about you. “Oh, she’s trying to be a Westerner, Canadian, American.”

This significant point she raised brings up the issue of the way most immigrants who returned to their homelands were often perceived as trying to disassociate themselves from their ethnic identity and culture. In other words, their experience and lifestyle in their adopted homelands are not understood by those residing in Eritrea. Their Canadian citizenship is viewed as being in name only and any deviance from Eritrean ways are seen negatively or as stemming from a desire to prove Canadian identity or citizenship. At the same time, immigrants returning to Eritrea
entertain high hopes of fitting in social spaces they had missed while in Canada, only to realize that the price to pay for that is conformity.

Winta believed that in order for an Eritrean-Canadian woman to fit in Eritrea, she would have to appreciate her Eritrean culture a lot and not expect to behave the way she did in Canada. Any deviation, she felt, was disastrous. Her explanation was:

If you go back with that mentality you will have a huge clash but if you go there with your appreciation for what is old I don’t think you will have that. You have to have an understanding of the culture when you go there. You can’t go there and expect to wear short, short skirts and bra top, walk around. No, you can’t do that so you know. You have to have respect for the fact that that’s how they dress, you know.

Here, Winta was referring to cultural duality or to refer to the cliche, “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” To her, a woman would have to forego individual choice or conviction and conform to Eritrean cultural standards. Another point was that an understanding of culture was a crucial prerequisite for conformity. Knowing what was deemed right or wrong was essential in avoiding “shaking the basket” and in behaving appropriately without being advised. Since knowledge of cultural behavior was a prerequisite, it is worth mentioning that Canadian-born or Canadian-raised women would not be as compelled to conform as much as women who had been raised in Eritrea.

Another woman opposed conformity indignantly, “I believe I’d have to sacrifice all my values and I don’t think I can!” Similarly, another participant referred to sexism as the factor that deterred her from moving back to Eritrea although she was very nostalgic. She too did not want to compromise her values but confessed that she would not behave in ways which her parents would disapprove of by adding, “I would care for my parents’ reputation. I don’t want to disappoint them.” She recounted her experience when she went for a visit, “Since day one for six weeks I’ve been fighting inside my home, in the market. Everywhere I went when I got invited, sexism was clear. It was very, very obvious. It was very discouraging.” This woman sensed not only sexism but also class discrimination and their intersection in the cheap labor of hired domestic help. She
therefore tried to set an example by doing household chores with both her daughter and son although there were maids. She was trying to show her host family and others that manual work was not reserved for the less fortunate or for women. Although this woman, in all probability had not had such strong views while growing up in Eritrea, her experience in Canada as a working mother who also juggled domestic chores sharpened her views on gender and class in women’s labor.

In addition to some of the reasons mentioned above which affected the participants’ decisions on moving back to Eritrea, there were other less moral or philosophical and more practical motivations. One woman raised the issue of supporting her elderly parents in Eritrea. She felt she could buy a house and care for them in Eritrea since there were no retirement homes there. At the same time, she was afraid to quit her job in Canada. She also feared not being able to take advantage of the technologically advanced computerized services such as banking and telephone systems in Canada once she moved to Eritrea where services were manual. Although she was afraid that once she moved to Eritrea, she would have to take care of her elderly parents and would not be able to afford quitting her job, the strong family support system assured her of family help.

Another participant’s major concern was lack of accommodation. She strongly wanted to move to Eritrea but felt that houses there were unaffordable. Another reason she gave was that even if she were able to afford a house, she would not want to live there by herself without her children and grandchildren. She stated, “If I go to Eritrea alone, what good will that do me?” She felt that her life was tied to her offspring as she concluded, “My life are these children here.” Likewise, fear of family breakdown and old-age loneliness motivated another as she said:

I would want to go back home after I got old because when you get old here you have no neighbor or anything. Your children are not with you the way we see these elderly people being locked and thrown alone in retirement homes by their children after they’ve raised them.
Although some of the women expressed a fear of growing old in Canada with the prospect of facing retirement homes, they did not believe that their children would actually institutionalize them. At the same time, they expressed wanting to face old age in Eritrea.

Achievement of financial security was given as one of the significant factors for motivating the women to move back to Eritrea. All things being equal, some said they would prefer to live in Eritrea. One woman stressed, “With the standard of life I have now, I would choose my country...Here even if you have money, you have no life. You don’t feel your identity and who you are. You don’t.” When I asked another woman if she had plans to move back, she jokingly replied, “If I won the 649!”

The recently arrived participant expressed being motivated to leave Canada since her inability to find employment had greatly affected her views about staying. She was still uncertain about moving back to Eritrea due to the Eritrean-Ethiopian war but stated, “If I cannot work here, why don’t I just go back home to my country and stay there?” She too was expressing the “All things being equal” paradigm in terms of economic success. However, her motivation to move back to Eritrea was not strong since she liked Canada. At the same time her unemployed status forced her to depend on her children although she had several skills and years of secretarial experience. She also was contemplating moving to the US for employment purposes if she did not find employment in Canada within a few months.

Nostalgia or homesickness pushed another woman to contemplate moving to Eritrea. She stated that the current nostalgic feelings were as strong as the ones she had had several years ago when she first arrived in Canada, negating the theories of adjustment (Krimer, 1986, Rumble, 1990) which placed the mourning period in immigrants’ experiences at one fixed stage in the adjustment process. This woman also expressed another valid reason for wanting to move back. She wanted to use her Canadian education and work experience in Eritrea and planned to research her skills and match them with project needs in Eritrea. Another participant who had a similar
educational and career background however, felt that after she had visited Eritrea, she was an outsider and that she belonged in Canada and did not have any plans of moving back.

Several women’s comments on moving to Eritrea were marked by patriotic feelings of Eritrea and Eritrean identity although they were divided by various motivations. When I asked one woman if she definitely preferred life in Eritrea over Canada, she replied, “Of course! Because there are so many things you can choose from. What kind of life is here? There is no life.” Although some of the other participants had expressed ambivalence about moving to Eritrea because of sexism, this woman had different views as she commented on Canada’s advantage over Eritrea, “The only thing is that you have opportunity to have an education, to be equal to men, to speak up freely, to struggle. Even that exists in Eritrea now.”

Abeba’s visit to her family doctor triggered her positive views on moving to Eritrea. She had just returned from her visit to Eritrea when she decided to visit her doctor who was amazed by her stabilized blood pressure. He asked what she had been eating during her visit to Eritrea to which she replied, “Teff [local grain] and everything natural!” She associated Eritrea with good health and added, “There’s nothing like the fresh air of your country... There’s nothing like your country. Our country is beautiful.” This comment was repeated by Muna who voiced a popular Tigrinya phrase, “There’s nothing like your country.” She stated:

There’s nothing like your country if you believe in everything about it. You can work and say whatever you want to say. You know that there is no idea of superiority over you. You feel proud of yourself. You can do anything. You can say anything. Plus the social life is different. Social life, your work, your family in your own country. You say, “My country!”

The decisions and motivations to move back to Eritrea are very individualistic and diverse. One woman’s motivation to move can be viewed as another woman’s reasons for staying in Canada. One woman’s views of sexism in Eritrean culture can be accepted by another as a rich facet to the Eritrean cultural notion of femininity. While one woman’s idea of compromise is limited to certain behavior, another may be willing to remold herself to her old pre-Canada self.
Although there is an overlap in some of the reasons given, some of the motivations and reasons are as diverse and as unique as the participants themselves.
Chapter V

CONCLUSION - Recommendations for the Eritrean-Canadian Community: “All those Eritreans coming now, they do have all these choices, facilities but they are not using them.”

The main focus of all the participants in terms of Eritrean-Canadian identity as ethnic Eritreans and Canadian citizens is their ability to adjust successfully within Canadian society and of “belonging.” Employment opportunities and career satisfaction were placed among the highest and important elements that ensured integration in Canadian society. As a result, most of the recommendations that the women raised revolved around job-search and employment issues, followed by education and then around family relationships including domestic violence and counselling. The last part of this chapter will focus on their recommendations specifically addressed to Eritreans and on Eritrean-Canadian community activities on issues involving solidarity among members. It is important to mention that in this thesis “Eritrean-Canadian community” refers to the general Eritrean community in Toronto and not to the Eritrean-Canadian Community or Association of Toronto.

Employment

Since most of the challenges new Eritrean immigrants face are in employment opportunities and job search strategies, some participants recommended that the Eritrean-Canadian community in Toronto set up a program for new immigrants in this area. The community could have members facilitate job-search technique workshops which cover resume preparation and interview training. In addition, since some of the women felt that most newcomers faced English language skill problems, the community could also set up an English as a Second Language program within the community itself by incorporating it with the job search
workshop programs. Such an English language program could be facilitated by those coordinating the job search technique workshops or by different officers or counsellors who had skills in teaching English as a second or foreign language.

In addition, it was felt that the community should work closely with Employment and Immigration Canada in enrolling especially professional Eritrean newcomers educated in Eritrea or Ethiopia, in government-sponsored job-placement programs in order to give them the much required Canadian Experience. Newcomers would register at the community center and undergo some of the job-search workshops as well as English programs depending on their individual levels assessed by community counsellors or officers, after which time they would be referred to certain job-placement or volunteer work programs available to all immigrants, allocated by the Canadian government.

Although some women admitted that there were several services and facilities open to newcomers, most new immigrants were not aware of such opportunities and needed some guidance. If this guidance were supplied by the community, these newcomers would save themselves time and energy by acquiring all the necessary information as the community would spare them from the agony of trial and error or late realization of the existence of some invaluable programs. Again, the incorporation of all relevant programs within the community would facilitate coordination of all activities.

One woman who had come to Canada several years ago stressed that compared to when she had first arrived in Canada, newcomers now have an abundant choice of opportunities open to them in terms of government-sponsored programs such as LINC through community agencies such as the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI), Costi Immigrant Services, and the York Community Center. She gave her experiences and compared them to current facilities. The following is the brief conversation she had with an Employment Canada Center officer in 1991:

**Participant:** Could I have a course at least for computer literacy?
**Officer:** You’re overqualified. You have to go and find a job.

**Participant:** I can’t find a job nowadays without computer literacy.

**Officer:** No, you have to go and look for a job.

**Participant:** What if I find a course? Would you pay for me?

**Officer:** No. As soon as you enroll yourself in a course, we are going to cut you off unemployment.

This woman’s unemployment earnings were actually cut off when she went ahead to take a computer course. She had had no computer knowledge and did not own a computer. Wherever she had gone to search for a job, she was asked if she had computer skills in WordPerfect or Lotus 123. She compared her “Catch-22” situation with the opportunities available to newcomers now, “...they have the chance to upgrade their skills in any training, computer training, English as a Second Language. There are different courses. The government is giving all these facilities. As far as I know every community has this ESL.” She later added:

They place you to volunteer places in order to get some Canadian experience...so we didn’t have this opportunity...nowadays if you are an employee, they’ll help you. They’ll give you courses. You take upgrading and they will try to find you a job.

This woman felt that due to computerized technological advancements, job-search opportunities were much better as she said, “Now they have employment resources. You go there, you can type your resume. You can search for jobs. There is internet available there. So we didn’t have all these choices.” Although she felt that such problems no longer exist, according to Moussa (1993), women still face similar obstacles although the time period of her findings coincided with my participant’s time period. Moussa (1993, p. 233) adds:

When women wanted to apply for upgrading English classes, they were told by their counsellors in the Ministry of Employment and Immigration that they knew enough English not [sic] to qualify for government-paid upgrading courses. Their language proficiency, in the opinion of these counsellors, was adequate for any job available to them. This meant that they had to work in order to be able to pay for language classes.
Estable (1986, p.45) also comments that the type and level of English language training offered to those who qualify is itself “rudimentary, often inappropriate and frequently inaccessible.”

Another problem for immigrant women sponsored under the Family class is that the sponsorship period and dependent status which could span anywhere between three to ten years also spreads to other areas such as language and employment skills training programs which are often available to independent immigrants only. Moreover, since dependents do not qualify for government social assistance, they are expected to pay for such programs while their chances of obtaining social services such as housing subsidies are also curtailed driving them to deeper levels of dependency.

Although newcomers have some advantages over other immigrants, most come from regions with very little computer literacy backgrounds. Therefore, the Eritrean community can also facilitate computer programs on word processing and accounting such as WordPerfect, Word, Lotus123 and ACCPAC, as well as internet job-search methods.

Another woman also stressed the need to have computer literacy, especially for educated professional newcomers. She too felt that that there were several government programs available that newcomers were not aware of. She explained her own experience:

So when you went for an interview, they give you tests to write. That is tough so you have to pass that. There are two forty-five minute essays. There are so many questions. You have to be educated to enroll in that program. If you qualify, then you enroll in the class. For four months you attend classes and work in your field. One month in class. For three months they send you for fieldwork. The field work they help you look for it yourself but they push you how to look for a job.

Although this particular provincial program had been terminated due to the Harris government cutbacks, she believed there were other similar programs available to newcomers. Like the first participant, this woman felt that women with children in school, especially housewives, could better themselves by attending English language programs such as English as a Second Language (ESL) or Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) and computer literacy in organizations such as OCASI or Costi. The first participant however believed that:
They do have all these choices but they are not using them. They go for the injera and the wat [stew] and the buna [coffee]. And I strongly believe when their kids are in school, they have to educate themselves as well. Take the opportunity. They're not using the facilities which the government is giving them.

Although she felt that these women were not using these facilities, she also admitted that they might have their reasons for not doing so due to daycare and transportation problems, as well as spouses who did not want them to attend courses or work outside the home. Because of such problems, the Eritrean-Canadian community in Toronto could also be a space for handling such delicate matters within its own cultural context by offering its own programs.

One other suggestion mentioned was the need to establish a network of professional Eritreans who would discuss their projects, exchange ideas and information as well as refer each other to job vacancies, seminars and research results. This was one weakness within the Eritrean community in Canada mentioned especially by two participants. Since the Eritrean community is relatively small, the chances for professionals knowing each other was considered high. Therefore forming a network could not be seen as an insurmountable task if there were willing members.

Volunteering for jobs without pay was mentioned by several participants as a job-search strategy many Eritreans were not aware of. Those who had volunteered expressed a high rate of satisfaction and work experience achieved as a result of their “free labor” which finally “paid off.” Another suggestion was the need to view the job-search experience with an open mind and optimism. Since some of the women felt that perseverance was a key to success, the need for words of encouragement to those seeking jobs was deemed crucial. One woman’s unwavering faith in her own judgement against words of discouragement from others during her job-search process was a testimony to the importance of optimism.

Although financial planning is not categorized under employment, since it is directly related to employment income, it has been raised here. Since some participants mentioned the lack of financial savvy among Eritrean women due to upbringing, cultural conditioning or simply lack of sufficient financial knowledge, I have raised it as a point to be addressed perhaps within
the community along with job-search and employment workshops. Such workshops would cover financial planning such as savings, budgeting, and the benefits of investments such as RRSPs, mutual funds as well as education funds for children.

Since education and employment are interrelated there is a blurred line in categorizing ESL, computer literacy and job-search technique workshops under either education or employment. For such purposes both have been included under the employment category. However, an educational issue raised by one participant was her participation in the Eritrean Students’ Association. This organization could be strengthened to give counselling to newly arrived immigrants in upgrading, course selection and field of study, as well as job prospects. Since newcomers often waste considerable time upgrading courses that they later discover to be irrelevant or switching programs and fields for lack of informed counselling, this group could also work with the community in relaying information to students planning to join university. Although university or college career counsellors offer similar services, an informal network of Eritrean students could also give much needed insight to certain problems specific to Eritrean students.

Closely associated with the above is another area which deserves mention. Students planning to enroll in certain programs could benefit from referrals to institutions such as business schools, colleges and universities through the combined networking of the Eritrean Students’ Association and the Eritrean-Canadian community. Some programs could be recommended or avoided through confirmed sources or accounts if these institutions have a record for excellence or incompetence and mismanagement. One participant’s traumatic experience in one business school warranted this recommendation.
Domestic Violence

Almost all the women in this study concurred on the need to have more workshops to address domestic violence in the Eritrean community. Although the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW) of Toronto facilitates such workshops, some women strongly felt that these workshops should be attended by both men and women since the usual assumption was that women were always the victims and men always at fault. One woman particularly felt that in many cases marital communication breakdown was mistaken for domestic violence. Due to this, marital counselling was strongly tied to workshops on domestic violence. She also felt that domestic violence could be successfully tackled only if the workshops openly explained the negative impact of physical violence between parents on their children. There were three groups in need of such counselling: partners who were physically abusive, women who pressed charges against their partners by confusing communication breakdown with domestic assault, and physically abused women who were reluctant to press charges against their abusive partners.

Counselling

Several women raised counselling as a Western element much needed within the Eritrean community in lieu of the traditional Eritrean social networking system in which elders and family members were the “psychologists” seasoned with age and life experience. It is important to mention that during my conversations with the women, the notion of counselling was often tied to that of marital problems between husband and wife while a few women raised intergenerational conflicts between parents and children as deserving counselling attention. The women mentioned the area of communication and domestic work sharing as the crucial ones where Eritrean couples faced conflict. These conflicts were often created within the Canadian context when labor and domestic roles changed and shifted, sometimes even reversing. Eritrean working wives and housewives once content with their domestic role status within the Eritrean and Ethiopian socio-
economic context often found themselves in contradictory dual roles both as housewives and as working mothers in Canada. Because of the shift in their roles as economic providers with or without their husbands, wives expected their husbands also to shift from the sole breadwinners to "shareholders" in domestic life as well.

Husbands' reluctance to participate in domestic duties out of cultural constraints and upbringing or even outright belligerence often resulted in serious conflicts, some ending up in divorce courts. Although all of the participants condemned husbands who did not share in domestic duties in Canada, some participants also condemned wives who were not culturally sensitive to their husbands' upbringing and had embraced "feminism" without understanding the value of good communication skills. They felt these women lacked an understanding of real love and sharing while they also lacked respect for their husbands. Instead of approaching their husbands with good communication lines and respect, they wanted to force a misguided "feminist" notion of equality. Some women felt that these women did not understand the true meaning of equality within marriage as did Western Canadian women and failed to realize that they could not abruptly force Canadian ways on an Eritrean marriage without negative consequences. Therefore, marital counselling was considered necessary to address such problems.

Since intergenerational conflicts between parents and Canadian-born and Canadian-raised children were also raised by some of the women, it was suggested that both parents and children should attend counselling sessions. Some of the problems raised were parental strict authority or control especially towards daughters as well as lack of good communication and trust between parents and children. Since I had the opportunity to hear both sides from daughters and from mothers, I was able to confirm that such problems are real. Strict parental control combined with miscommunication especially towards daughters often force the latter to rebel and associate with others parents often disapprove of. Although none of the younger participants experienced such problems personally due to close family ties and open lines of communication, they had friends and acquaintances who experienced such problems.
Another point is the need to have culturally-sensitive counsellors who understand Eritrean socio-cultural values and behavior. Such counsellors would have insight to the root of the conflicts and address ways of solving them without giving irrelevant “Western” solutions to “Eastern” problems by approaching the problem from a Western perspective. One example would be a Canadian counsellor advising an Eritrean victim of domestic violence to immediately press criminal charges against her husband without analyzing the probability that the couple may be living with the husband’s siblings or even parents in the usual Eritrean extended family living arrangement. Organizations such as Canadian-African Newcomer Aid Centre of Toronto (CANACT) have addressed the need to have culturally-sensitive counsellors and the importance of understanding male-female power conflict within cultures in some workshops (CANACT, 1992). Musisi (1992) also addresses the need to avoid viewing African culture as a means to harbor or tolerate domestic violence in counselling. Another significant point is the need for counselling to address clients’ or victims’ dependent immigration status on their partners or batterers considering the fact that the majority of immigrant and refugee women arrive as their husbands’ dependents.

Citizenship

Although the recommendation of securing Canadian citizenship was a problem unique to only one of the participants, I have raised it here since it has implications for other elderly immigrants who may be denied Canadian citizenship on grounds of lack of adequate English language proficiency. Since the majority of immigrants over sixty migrating from Third World regions as sponsored parents or grandparents may not have sufficient literacy levels even in their own mother tongues or have had no formal educational experience, the prerequisite of English or French for Canadian citizenship is an obstacle. These candidates find it extremely difficult to enroll in English language classes where they are expected to read and write a new language
within a formal classroom setting while they cannot even read and write in a language they are fluent in. In addition, the factor of age reduces their adaptive capabilities. As a result, they will remain a group denied citizenship. If these elderly immigrants are unable to find employment or decide to travel to their county of origin, they are unable to stay there for a period longer than six months since this will result in a lapse in their landed immigrant status, creating a financial strain if they have to travel back and forth to avoid the six-month deadline.

One possible suggestion is to have special citizenship classes within the Eritrean community for illiterate elderly immigrants and to address ways to negotiate citizenship criteria with Citizenship and Immigration Canada. While it is understandable that the knowledge of either English or French is a reasonable criterion for citizenship, perhaps special consideration could be given to elderly candidates who exhibit a thorough knowledge of Canada, Canadian history or politics to compensate for their shortcoming in English language proficiency.

Another issue I am including under Citizenship is related to immigration which was raised by one participant. She felt that immigration procedures for immigrants from certain regions, notably Africa, were slower than those for other regions. She had completed and filed a sponsorship application to sponsor a close relative in Eritrea a few years earlier and had never received a response. She had contacted several offices and was told to contact the Canadian Consulate in Nairobi, Kenya, which handled Eritrean and Ethiopian immigration sponsorships. The consulate in return instructed her to contact her Member of Parliament. This had been going on for several years and she had given up. One possible recommendation is to have a coordinator within the Eritrean community who would address similar immigration problems with Immigration Canada. Since Canadian Consulates in Sub-Saharan Africa are underrepresented (there are only four compared to thirty nine in Europe) as per the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and National Film Board of Canada's 1989 documentary, "Who gets in?", a community coordinator familiar with Immigration Law and procedures could officially work with immigration officers in Nairobi as a liaison between sponsors and immigration officers.
**Eritrean-Canadian Community and Unity**

By far one of the major issues raised by the women was the need to have unity in the Eritrean community. Most of the women felt there was no coherent organization that embraced all Eritreans. Some felt there were too many groups, subgroups and divisions which were contributing to some problems. Such splintering into smaller groups was seen as disadvantaging the community at large. Instead of organizing as a large community group where energy and resources could be utilized, disagreements caused groups to splinter into even smaller groups. One weakness was seeing disagreements or conflict as negative. Instead of resolving disagreements with open discussion, conflicts were simply “brushed under the carpet” and the solution was to run away from it by starting a new group. One woman’s phrase captured the essence of this theme when she said, “How can we agree to disagree?”

Conflict resolution was a key to keeping the community together. Senait added that working together in the community did not necessarily mean members had to be friends but that they had to be at least cordial and cooperative with each other and exhibited mutual respect. Differences could be acknowledged and yet used to understand others, not to divide them. She said, “I really strongly feel we need to put our differences together and work together.”

The recurrent theme was that the Eritrean community had failed its members by being divided. Winta explained her rather pessimistic views, “It’s too late for some kids. It’s too late for some families. It is too late for some who have committed suicide already.” She added, “Within the last couple of years I think we’ve just neglected our community.” Many participants stressed that there were various ways Eritreans could help each other more socially as they usually did in times of crises such as during mourning. One woman referred to a popular Amharic phrase to summarize a Habesha (Eritrean and Ethiopian) person’s behavior when she said, “He doesn’t like it if you die on him. He doesn’t like it if you’re doing better than him.” In other words, she felt
Eritreans and Ethiopians were helpful only as long as others were not more successful than they were.

There was a strong belief among the women that the current Eritrean-Ethiopian war had brought the Eritrean community together and that many Eritreans who had never participated in Eritrean social or political activities had emerged with potential to change things for the better in the community. Since Eritreans shared a history of oppression at the hands of repressive regimes and an independence paid for with a thirty-year war, they were especially united in times of crises. At the same time, several women noted that the Eritrean community in Toronto, including themselves, was weak in community activities but was very strong, active, cooperative and organized when it was involved in political activities such as fund-raising initiatives as evidenced by pre-Eritrean independence activities and current ones. Said one woman, “At least when it comes to political, government-sponsored fund-raising, we are very good but not for the people of the community here.” Another echoed this view when she said, “It is sad to say that our community is going well only when there is a war.” Another compared the Eritrean community with the Somali community in terms of activities:

Like Somalis have been here but they’ve come here in the early nineties and they already have an office. They do so much for themselves. Eritreans have been here a little over twenty years but considering how long they’ve been here even if they are a small community, we should be at a higher spot than we are now and a lot of it has to do that there is no progression within the leaders within the community or you know what? There are no leaders… I don’t find any leaders here.

This woman felt that the community lacked leadership and was neglected although there were several capable and talented members within the Eritrean community. Other women also raised this and mentioned that one possible reason was the political division of the community between EPLF and ELF supporters. However, the Eritrean-Canadian community in Toronto is not divided along political lines since there is an overlap of members in various community activities regardless of political experiences or background. In fact compared to other North American Eritrean communities, Toronto has one of the largest and more well-organized Eritrean
communities in terms of various activities and coordination. By comparison to other immigrant groups though, some women felt that other immigrant organizations such as the Somali Immigrant Association had evolved into stronger organizations although Somalis were a relatively recent group. Moussa (1993) gives one reason for this lack of community development as being the fact that most Eritreans left Eritrea and Ethiopia as refugees to other countries under difficult conditions while fleeing from a repressive government and did not have the ability to apply for landed status from within Eritrea or Ethiopia like other immigrants. She also added that the majority of Eritrean refugees and immigrants arrived in Canada in large numbers within the same time period and did not find an established solid Eritrean community in Canada. However, in spite of Moussa's valid reasons, the example given of the successful Somali community challenges those assertions since Somalis too have arrived in Canada within a similar time period in large numbers after fleeing war-torn Somalia as refugees.

Also related to community divisions in the Eritrean community were intergenerational divisions. One of the younger participants advocated the active participation of younger Eritreans in community activities. She felt that the older members of the community should encourage younger ones to attend meetings and help facilitate workshops as well as get cooperation in organizing social functions by helping them get access to banquet halls and bands. She felt that younger Eritreans were often denied recognition as Eritreans which served to alienate them further. She therefore stressed the need for older members to encourage the younger generation's active participation. She also stressed that since the younger generation under twenty-five would be the active group representing the Eritrean community in the future, it should be aware of problems and issues in the community and get the experience to run it from the older one.

Some of the Eritrean community organizations in Toronto at present are the Eritrean-Canadian Community established in 1984, and the Eritrean Civic Center established in 1980 which serves as an umbrella for the National Union of Eritrean Women of Toronto established in 1984 which facilitates various workshops on issues such as Domestic Violence and Healthcare.
The Eritrean-Canadian Community of Toronto located in the Oakwood and St. Clair neighborhood of Toronto, functions as a center with various activities such as translation services for Eritrean immigrants and has published an Immigration information booklet for newcomers in Tigrinya translated from English. It also helps organize funeral and transportation arrangements especially for the burial of deceased Eritrean-Canadian residents/visitors in Eritrea while encouraging and coordinating fund-raising for the funeral expenses. It also organizes recreational trips for community members as well as “Eritrea Night” parties for youth. It also provides a Heritage language program – Tigrinya for Eritrean children in three locations: Toronto, Scarborough and Mississauga.

The Eritrean Civic Center located in the Bloor and Ossington neighborhood of Toronto serves as a governmental body with various responsibilities and activities. In addition to its governmental functions such as issuing Eritrean Identity cards and facilitating various applications, it also organizes and sponsors musical band tours of Eritrean artists as well as “Eritrea Nights” and also helps celebrate various Eritrean national holidays such as Struggle for Independence Day or Bahti Meskerem (September 1), Independence Day or Ba’al Natsnet (May 24), and Martyrs’ Day or Me’alti Sewu’at (June 20) as well as International Women’s Day (March 8). It helps create the space to disseminate information on Eritrean socio-cultural, economic and political issues and to exchange ideas, organize seminars, workshops, socio-cultural or political events, circulate and/or sell government publications, newsletters and newspapers from Eritrea, as well as videos and audio cassettes.

There are also various other groups such as the Eritrean-Canadian Society for Youth Advancement (ESYA) and the Eritrean-Canadian Soccer Federation of Toronto (member of the Eritrean Soccer Federation of North America). The Eritrean Relief Association in Canada (ERAC) which was established in 1979 also used to provide the space for community development projects and had ceased operating after independence but has now been activated in Toronto. The Eritrean Civic Center also houses the Research and Information Center on Eritrea.
(RICE), the Eritrean Worker’s Association and professional associations of medical doctors and engineers (Moussa, 1993). Eritrean-owned restaurants also serve as informal community information dissemination and gathering places where newsletters, newspapers audio and video cassettes are sold.

Though in a limited capacity, religious community groups also play a role in community development. An Eritrean Lutheran Church as part of St. John’s Lutheran Church located near the Eritrean Civic Center, has been a gathering place for the Eritrean community regardless of religious faith or denomination since 1989, and shares the Church with other ethnic groups. Similarly, recently, Catholic Eritrean parishioners have been congregating in St. Bernard’s Roman Catholic Church in the Jane and Lawrence area, also shared by other ethnic groups. The services are for both Eritrean and Ethiopian Catholic parishioners. Orthodox Eritreans attend Tigrinya services in Ukrainian or Greek Orthodox Churches during special holidays or occasions such as Easter, weddings and baptisms, or attend the regular Amharic services in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in Toronto.

Past researches have normally stated that Eritrean women in Canada have not been very active in community development projects and that those who did were those who had normally integrated successfully into mainstream Canadian society (Moussa, 1992). Sorenson (1990) also states that women’s absence in such community initiatives were based on gender inequalities within Eritrea which affected their identity development in a “different social space” in Canada. The women in my study, nevertheless were active members in the community. To varying degrees, some attended and facilitated workshops, some volunteered in various community projects, some organized “Eritrea Nights” or bahli, while some were active in various political, social/community and/or women’s groups. Therefore, the trend in gender imbalance within community development projects may be changing gradually.

In conclusion, while this study has presented the identity construction of Eritrean-Canadian women within the context of their adjustment in Canada, it has also raised some of the
their adjustment problems and recommendations surrounding their identity. Based on Chapters one and two which established the ground work for understanding their ethnic national and cultural identities with the intersection of ethnicity and gender, it progressed to Chapters three and four to unfold their adjustment experiences and the shifts to the intersection of their race, ethnicity and gender showing the fluid and dynamic process of identity construction.

While the purpose of this research was neither to generalize nor to prove a premise but to express the life experiences of ten Eritrean women in Canada to understand their identity and adjustment experiences, some common and general themes have emerged. At the same time, each woman expressed uniqueness in the way she appreciated, understood and approached her ethnic identity, race, gender, culture and citizenship as well as her adjustment experience in Canada. Each woman’s perspective and experience have been woven in this research with the intention of establishing a clearer understanding of who Eritrean immigrant women are.

Identity is not limited to one based on race, ethnicity, gender or class, but to a whole slew of fluid categories. Although all my participants’ identities had the commonality of race/ethnicity and gender, they also spoke their truths as mothers, grandmothers, daughters, granddaughters, wives, sisters, students, professionals and citizens to name a few. All these women drew strength from their adjustment experiences which enabled them to incorporate their Eritrean culture with a Western one as they realized the depth and richness of such cultural duality. Cultural comparisons also enabled them to truly understand each culture as it stood as they approached adjustment through their intersecting multiple identities. These women also maintained their Eritrean identity as a tool to resist and solve various difficulties in their adjustment experience in Canada. Although most literature on Third World and immigrant women portray them as victimized, the women in this study truly rose above this image of victimization and symbolized courage and strength.

Not all research findings are met with approval. The same goes for this research. There are bound to be individuals and/or groups who may disagree with or object to some of the
participants’ views or my comments. In fact one of my participants, Zufan had this advice for me, “In fact even after you finish, you might get much negative feedback... Nobody really understands research. People think when you do research, you have to come up with the positive. If there were positive things, you don’t have to do the research.” Her comments have summarized my views. This research is meant to enable all Canadians, especially Eritreans and other immigrants, understand themselves better, to address ways to make the adjustment experience easier and to remove blocks standing in the way of improvement. It is also meant to enable Eritrean immigrants, including myself, get a better understanding of who we are as ethnic Eritreans and as Canadian citizens. This research has therefore been an interesting and enjoyable journey of self-discovery for me, one in which I too have looked inward to realize where I stand as an Eritrean-Canadian woman.
Appendix A

Consent Form

Dear ____________________________

I am an MA student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto in the Department of Adult Education, Community Development and Counselling Psychology. You were recommended to me by ____________________________ and I would like to thank you for being willing to participate in an interview for my thesis research on Eritrean-Canadian women in Toronto.

As an Eritrean-Canadian immigrant woman myself, my interest lies in helping introduce our little-known yet growing Eritrean community to the general Canadian public and in getting a better understanding of our Eritrean history, struggle for independence, identity and culture as well as an awareness of our adjustment experiences in Canada which may be used in policy formulation.

The interview questions which will be tape-recorded, will start from personal demographic data and will move to issues about your identity and experiences in Eritrea or Ethiopia. They will then move to inquiries about your adjustment experiences in Canada. You may choose to be interviewed in either English, Tigrinya or Amharic without a translator. The interview will take place once for approximately one hour to one hour and a half at any location of your choice in January 1999.

Sincerely,

Rahel A. Ogbagzy

Please fill in your name in the given blank space and read the following:

I, ____________________________, understand that:

- The purpose of Rahel Ogbagzy's research thesis on Eritrean-Canadian women in Toronto is to understand Eritrean-Canadian women's identity and their adjustment experiences/problems in Canada and to address ways of making the adjustment process favorable to Eritrean immigrants.
- I agree to participate in a recorded individual interview from which she may use data as material for her thesis.
- My identity will remain confidential and I will use a pseudonym and my anonymity as well as those of others and locations such as neighborhoods, towns, cities and countries I mention will be changed or left blank at my request to ensure anonymity.
- Words or phrases I use during the interview may be quoted in the thesis unless I request otherwise.
- Any part of the interview I indicate not to be included in the findings will be omitted from the transcriptions and thesis.
- I have the right to refuse to answer interview questions.
- I have the right to refuse being recorded during the interview.
- I have the right to withdraw from the research participation at any time.
- I have the right to have access to the transcriptions of my interview and parts of the thesis that pertain to me and I may request that a copy of the thesis be made available to the Eritrean-Canadian community in Toronto.

After the completion of the thesis, I request that the interview tape and transcription notes be:
Kept in a safe locker by the researcher [ ]
Destroyed [ ]

__________________________  ____________________________
(Signature of Interviewee)   (Signature of Researcher)

Date: ______________________  Date: ______________________

Appendix B

Sample Questionnaire

**Personal Demographic Data**

1) Basic collection of personal demographic data such as name (pseudonym), age, place of birth (town/city/country), religion, marital status and children (if any), family size (immediate and extended family members in Canada), immigration status and length of residency in Canada, English language proficiency, educational background and occupation.

**Eritrea: Experiential, Political and Cultural Data**

2) What does Eritrea and being Eritrean mean to you? What were your first-hand experiences of the Dergue regime and the struggle for independence?

3) What was your life like in Eritrea or Ethiopia as an Eritrean woman or female child? - How were you treated by family members, relatives, neighbors, teachers, employers, etc.,? - How did you relate to them as a female?

4) What element(s) of Eritrean culture especially aspects concerning women, would you like to see changed? Why? What would you like to see preserved or even strengthened? Why?

5) What led you to leave Eritrea or Ethiopia? - How did you leave and with whom?

6) What were your immediate experiences after leaving Eritrea or Ethiopia but before you came to Canada?

7) What were your expectations of Canada and Canadians before you arrived in Canada?

**Arrival in Canada: Experiential, Political and Cultural Data**

8) How did you feel when you first arrived in Canada? - How were you treated by Canadian Immigration officers, airlines/airport staff, social service agencies, the Toronto Transit Commission (TTC), retail store owners/clerks, housing agencies/landlords, neighbors, the general Canadian public?

9) What has your experience with the Canadian educational system been like?

10) What were your job search experiences (in seeking and gaining employment) in Canada? - How have you been treated by employers and co-workers as an Eritrean-Canadian immigrant woman?

11) How do you feel about 'belonging' in Toronto or in Canada as an immigrant woman of color?
from a Third World country?
- What have your experiences with racism and/or sexism been like? How do you see yourself in terms of being a woman and/or being Black?

12) How well do you interact with non-Eritrean Canadians at school, work or with neighbors, social agency workers, retail store clerks?
- Do you have any non-Eritrean Canadian friends? How close are you?
- How much do they know about Eritrea and Eritrean history and culture? How do they know? How much did they know about Eritrea before you met?

13) What are your experiences in political participation or in social movements in Canada such as with women’s groups, community groups, public forums, doing volunteer work, participating in demonstrations, petitions or in voting?

Since Settlement in Canada: Experiential, Political and Cultural Data

14) How have your views, values or attitudes towards women’s rights, roles, or equality been altered in Canada?
- How have they affected your personal family life and/or relationships with Eritrean men?
- As a woman, what do you do differently in Canada that you would have done otherwise in Eritrea or Ethiopia?

15) What do you like about Canadian or Western culture? Why? What do you dislike? Why?
- What do you think about Eritrean cultural behavior in Toronto/Canada?
- How do you compare Canadian (Western) and Eritrean cultural values, attitudes and behavior?

16) What are your plans or feelings about moving back to Eritrea?
- If you decided to move to Eritrea, how would your behavior, values, views, and/or attitudes about women clash or blend with the established ones in Eritrea?

17) How do you feel about the current Eritrean-Ethiopian conflict and the deportations or expulsions of over 32,000 Eritreans including women and children from Ethiopia?
- How has that affected your views or feelings about Eritrea, your Eritrean identity, Ethiopia and the world at large?

18) What factor(s) has/have assisted or hindered you in adjusting to life in Toronto?
- How would you enhance or change that?

19) How have your experiences in adjusting to life in Toronto and Canada made you a better person or weakened you?
- How do you like who or what you have become? Do you long for your old self? Why?

20) Is there anything you would like to add or ask concerning your experiences, views, suggestions or concerns? Do you have any questions, comments or suggestions about the interview?
Appendix C

Transcription Notes

Q: Researcher’s question
A: Participant’s response

... Omission from original transcription

[ ] Researcher’s additions or comments

Other: Person other than researcher or participant
Appendix D

**Abbreviations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CANACT</td>
<td>Canadian African Newcomer Aid Centre of Toronto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDU</td>
<td>Ethiopian Democratic Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELF</td>
<td>Eritrean Liberation Front</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELM</td>
<td>Eritrean Liberation Movement</td>
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<tr>
<td>EPRDF</td>
<td>Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front</td>
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<tr>
<td>EPRP</td>
<td>Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPLF</td>
<td>Eritrean People's Liberation Front</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ERAC</td>
<td>Eritrean Relief Association in Canada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESL</td>
<td>English as a Second Language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESYA</td>
<td>Eritrean-Canadian Society for Youth Advancement</td>
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<tr>
<td>FGM</td>
<td>Female Genital Mutilation</td>
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<tr>
<td>LINC</td>
<td>Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada</td>
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<tr>
<td>NDP</td>
<td>National Democratic Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NUEW</td>
<td>National Union of Eritrean Women</td>
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<tr>
<td>OCASI</td>
<td>Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants</td>
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<tr>
<td>OAU</td>
<td>Organization for African Unity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PMAC</td>
<td>Provincial Military Advisory Committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>RICE</td>
<td>Research and Information Centre on Eritrea</td>
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<tr>
<td>RRSP</td>
<td>Registered Retirement Savings Plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TPLF</td>
<td>Tigray People's Liberation Front</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNESCO</td>
<td>United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization</td>
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</table>
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