

LAYLA* (SOMALIA)

“Every family is your family.”

See [Bandiri's Refugee Learner Narrative for another perspective and additional information on Somalia](#).

Life before Canada

Birthplace and Family

Ma nabad baa?/Is ka warran. Hello. How are you? My name is Layla. My story begins in Somalia. I consider myself to be Somali even though I lived in Ethiopia and Kenya before coming to Canada. Somali is my first language and the language we speak at home. Father also spoke a little Italian. I was born in Somalia on January 1, 1991, but I soon moved with my family to Ethiopia because of the war. Ethiopia was my home until the age of 14. At that age, I left and moved to Kenya.

Five refugee camps are located in the Somali region of Ethiopia near the town of Dolo (also known as Dolo Ado or Dollo Ado) with an estimated total refugee population of 153,200 (July 2012).

In Ethiopia, my family lived in Dolo. I never heard a gun or saw any fighting in Ethiopia. Dolo was a safe place. It was like a small city or very large village. Certainly, it was not as big as Winnipeg. I am the

middle child of a big family of 10 children and a mother and a father. But four of the children died, and one of my older sisters moved to Kenya to live with an aunt. So there were five children living with my parents in Ethiopia.

Life was good in Dolo. My mother had a store and my father took care of the children. Mother sold fruits, other foods, and clothing. I helped by bringing Mother her lunch every day. I had a good relationship with my family. I had childhood friends there. I liked living in Dolo and I was happy. Everyone looked out for each other. In my community we lived as if every family is your family. It's not the same in Canada. Here, parents won't let you stay with other families.

School

I went to school in Ethiopia when I was 10 but only for five months because my family did not have the money for me to continue. Classes were in Somali, even though we were living in Ethiopia. I had to be at school by 7:00 in the morning for the national anthem and religious studies (religion was important and also taught at home) before classes began at 9:00 a.m. School ended at 12:00 noon. It was a simple one-room school made of grass, sticks, and mud. The floor was also made of mud. I avoided putting my feet down on the floor. Boys

* To protect the participant's privacy, pseudonyms have been used in this narrative.



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SOMALIA

War in Somalia

Somalia achieved independence from Italy in 1960 and merged with the British protectorate of Somaliland to form the modern Somali Republic. Mohammed Siad Barre became leader of the nation after a coup in 1969. The civil war in Somali began in 1990 when United Somali Congress and the Somali Patriotic Movement sought to oust Siad Barre's regime. In 1991, Somalia fell into the hands of different militias, who divided the country along clan lines. Somalia is at the heart of one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world today. Twenty years of conflict and waves of drought have uprooted many of the country's people. Somalia is the third largest refugee source country of the world (after Afghanistan and Iraq). UNHCR reports that as of June 14, 2012, there were 992,488 Somali refugees in the region, mainly hosted in Kenya, Yemen, Egypt, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, Tanzania, and Uganda. In addition, almost 1.36 million Somalis are internally displaced within the country, settled mainly in the south-central region. As the region faces its most severe drought in 60 years, the Somali exodus is growing fast.

References

UNHCR, Somalia Fact Sheet, June 2012.

<www.unhcr.org/4ff5ac999.html>.

Ryerson University Diversity Watch, Somalia.

<www.diversitywatch.ryerson.ca/backgrounds/somalis.htm>.

and girls both attended the same school. We sat at long tables with about 12 students to a table. It was a very cramped, small hot room. There were chairs and a chalkboard.

I had a good relationship with my teacher. I liked studying and learning. The teacher made it fun to study. My favourite subjects were Somali and mathematics.

But, my relationship with other students was not good. I did not like how they made me feel. My classmates would make fun of me if I didn't know something. The other students bullied and threatened me because my family didn't have money. Because of them, I did not like going to



© P. Wiggers/UNHCR. March 2009. Remote Dollo Ado becomes a safe haven for 10,000 Somalis fleeing violence. <www.flickr.com/photos/unhcr/3409643700/>. Used with permission. All rights reserved.

school. When I was forced to leave school because my parents could not afford the school fees, I had mixed feelings about leaving school for these reasons.

Immigration to Canada

When I moved to Kenya at age 14, I thought about returning to school. I was looking forward to life in Kenya and the changes it would bring. But, because of the four-year gap in my schooling, I did not return to public school in Kenya. I was tutored at home in Swahili, the language spoken in Kenya and a little English. As a result I can understand Swahili but do not speak it well. My brother who came to Canada with me speaks Swahili well.

I went to Kenya to live with my older sister, Yaya. Yaya was 23 at the time and already had two children. Yaya moved to Kenya when she was seven to live with an aunt. She wanted me to come to Kenya because she was going to Canada and she wanted me to join her. I lived in Kenya for about a year. I travelled from Ethiopia to Kenya by bus.

It was a big change for me. I had to adjust to living with Yaya and her family and living

Somali Culture

Somali is the official language. Somali is a Cushitic language that is similar to the languages spoken by the Galla and Afar in Ethiopia.

Somalis are a relatively homogeneous people who are believed to have come from Southern Arabia. Somalis largely share a common language, culture, ancestry, and religion (they largely subscribe to Islam).

Traditionally, the people of Somalia lived nomadic lives and moved with their herds. For this reason, animals are often featured in Somali folktales and poetry. Camels, sheep, and cattle are very important in Somalian culture.

There are, however, some elements of diversity. While northern communities have a history of camel nomadism, there are communities, especially in the south, that practice farming, fishing, ironwork, a mixture of farming and herding, trading, etc. In addition, some other languages such as Maay, Jiidu, Barwani, and Dabarre are spoken.

References

- Ryerson University Diversity Watch, Somalia <www.diversitywatch.ryerson.ca/backgrounds/somalis.htm>
- Abdulahi A. Osman (2007). Cultural Diversity and the Somali Conflict: Myth or Reality? AJCR Volume 7 No. 2 <www.ajol.info/index.php/ajcr/article/viewfile/39412/59585>
- Whalley Rang High School. Somalia: Culture, Traditions, People and their Heritage <www.racearchive.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/somali_booklet.pdf>

in a new community. I knew Yaya a little because she returned to Ethiopia from time to time to visit my parents, but I didn't know her well because we didn't grow up together. I was very happy to go to Kenya, but sad I had to leave my mom behind as my dad had just died shortly before my leaving Dolo. My dad's death was one of the reasons that I had to leave Dolo. I needed to go to Kenya for a chance at a better life.

In Kenya, before immigrating to Canada, I was living with Yaya, my brother Samir, two other sisters, and Yaya's two biological children.

We all came to Canada together. Yaya had a UNHCR refugee card from living in Kakuma Refugee Camp. I was added onto my sister's card. An aunt was also listed on the card.

I was very happy to move to Canada even though we did not have any family or friends living in Manitoba or Canada. I had always wanted to live in a city and now I had a chance to do so. Everything went very quickly in terms of immigrating. I had heard good things about Canada.

My mom, my two oldest sisters, and two younger brothers still remained behind in Ethiopia. My mom is concerned about what she hears about what happens to some Somali youth, especially males, living in Canada. She hears that some of them change in ways that are not good. She worries about her sons changing in the same way. She wants to emigrate when my brothers are older and when they are more mature and grounded in their religion and culture. When they are older, Yaya will sponsor them.



© J. Ose/UNHCR. June 12, 2012. Dollo Ado, a year after the Somalia famine. Somali refugee children attend class in Kobe Camp. <www.flickr.com/photos/unhcr/7979542682/>. Used with permission. All rights reserved.

Starting a New Life in Canada

I believed that when we immigrated to Canada everything would be better. I thought we would own a house and that life would be easier. But everything was different than I expected. Getting used to a new time zone, the winter, and learning English was difficult. Everything was different. What I knew about Canada before immigrating and what I now have experienced was all very different. The reality did not meet my expectations.

I was almost 15 when I immigrated. My first memories about Winnipeg

Refugees in Ethiopia

“Ethiopia shares borders with six countries in a region where political, social and environmental challenges continue to cause massive displacement. As a result, the past three years have seen almost a three-fold increase in the number of refugees in the country. While the majority of these refugees are from Somalia, there are also large numbers of Sudanese and Eritrean refugees. In 2011 conflict in the Three Protocol Areas between Sudan and South Sudan saw a new surge of refugees from that region entering western Ethiopia. Despite the many challenges it faces, however, Ethiopia has remained a generous country of asylum.”

From 2012 UNHCR country operations profile – Ethiopia <www.unhcr.org/pages/49e483986.html>.



© J. Ose/UNHCR. June 2012. Dollo Ado a Year After the Somalia Famine. Delighted children pass part of the day in a simple playground in Kobe Camp. <www.flickr.com/photos/unhcr/7979542682/>. Used with permission. All rights reserved.

and Canada were how tired we were and how long we had to wait at the airport for the settlement counsellor from Welcome Place. We did not know what was going on. That September day the weather was very cool and we weren't dressed for it. Eventually, the Somali settlement worker/ counsellor from Welcome Place arrived at the airport and assisted us with settling.

I remember that I did not like the food. The food was different; it lacked flavour; it was not spicy enough. It was so different from what I was used to in Africa, even salt didn't help! Winter came early and I saw for the first time this white stuff coming down from the sky. The cold weather took a lot of adjustment.

At first we lived in temporary housing provided by Welcome Place. Later we found a small apartment in Osborne Village. Six people were living in a three-room apartment! But then, one sister moved to Edmonton and my brother moved out when he was 18 and got a job. He had an easier time settling because he spoke English. In the six years we have lived in Winnipeg, we have lived in five different places.

I like summer in Winnipeg the best. I was also pleased with the school I first attended. The classroom teacher was very friendly and the EAL teacher was very helpful. The teacher had learned that there were two new students living in the Osborne Village area. The EAL teacher went to pick them up to attend school. The teacher taught us how to take the buses to and from the

school. The teacher's efforts helped me feel welcome in my new school.

My greatest difficulty was learning English. I felt a great deal of frustration and anger at not being able to communicate my thoughts. I wanted to speak to people but I couldn't. At first they gave me time to adjust to the classroom by not pressuring me into doing academic work right away. Instead I was given time to colour pictures and watch other students' activities. I was given very simple work such as learning the alphabet and using simple books to begin to learn to read. The alphabet had pictures on it of African animals that were familiar to me.

This was helpful because I was already familiar with those animals. Now I just had to learn how to say their names in English. I found that Somali and English are very similar in form and that similarity helped me to learn English quickly.

I was placed in a Grade 9 EAL class at a large junior/senior high school but I also had to attend other classes. I found it very difficult to fit in because some of the other students in the EAL class had not missed school like me. I found it very hard. The regular (subject-area) teachers didn't seem to understand how difficult it was for me because of the language barrier. I believe that I needed the EAL programming but in spite of the problems, I also needed the regular classes—they forced me to be more independent.



Daadir Faarax Yare arrived in Winnipeg in December 2007, as a privately sponsored refugee. He attended Grant Park High School and is now working as a security officer while studying at the University of Winnipeg and majoring in International Development Studies and Conflict Resolution Studies. Daadir is a community Activist and the founder of and a volunteer at Somali Youth League INC of Winnipeg.

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I remember that, if I had difficulty with the assignments, the regular teachers sent me back to the EAL teacher to get help from her with the assignment. The regular teachers didn't try to bridge the gap between what I understood and what I was being taught. By sending me back to the EAL class, it made me feel stupid! But I wasn't stupid. I struggled because I had little schooling and didn't know English. I believe that in part, this was because regular teachers had large classes and it was difficult for them to give me the attention and help I needed. There were two other Somali girls in my regular classes, but they didn't attend school regularly so they weren't able to help me.

I spent about a year and a half in the EAL program. Without the EAL program I wouldn't have been successful and survived. I recently graduated from high school. I made friends with other Somali girls and an Eritrean girl in the EAL program. Even though one of my friends didn't speak Somali, we found a way to communicate and got along. I liked being in school in Canada. It changed my life. It made me think about my future.

Life Today and Hopes for the Future

I believe that the move to Canada made our family stronger because of all the challenges of settling in a new country where everything was so different from what we were accustomed. It also made me closer to my sister Yaya. I didn't have my Mom here with me, so I realized it was important to respect Yaya. Yaya became my second mother by taking on the role of parent in Kenya and in Canada. I still live with my sister and her children. We had some difficult times but those experiences made us closer. I now feel much closer to my sister Yaya and the years we have lived together gave us a chance to get to know each other better.

The hardest thing that I had to experience in coming and settling in Canada is being separated from my mother. I really wish that she could be here with us. Family is very important to me and the Somalia culture. So, I still try to maintain contact with my mother in Ethiopia. I speak with my mother regularly. Even though she is far away, Mom still cares for me and is always concerned about my safety and health. I miss my mom. When I see other people with their mothers, I think

that they are so lucky to have their mothers with them. But, being away from my mom has made me stronger and more mature.



Former Refugees Helping Refugees

Somali children at the new pre-school in Dagahaley camp funded by Canadian NGO, Humankind International. Humankind International was formed in 2008 when Muuxi Adam met two friends in a Winnipeg coffee shop to explore how they could help other Somalis stuck in refugee camps in Africa.

That discussion led the three Somalis from different clans to establish a non-governmental organization, Humankind International. The NGO's mission is to spread awareness about Somali refugees in neighbouring countries such as Kenya and Ethiopia and to raise money for education projects for refugees.

In February of 2014, their dream became the opening of a pre-school in the Dagahaley camp, part of the world's largest refugee camp complex at Dadaab in north-east Kenya. "More than 400 children lined up to enrol in the school, but we could only take 140 for now," Muuxi told UNHCR at the recent opening ceremony. He added that half were from the camp and half from the host community.

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Abdikheir Ahmed is a university-educated Somali who arrived in Canada in 2003 after living in Kenya and claiming refugee status. In Kenya, he worked with a number of organizations including Oxfam Quebec and CARE International. After graduating from the University in Kenya, together with a few of his former college friends, he formed a

non-profit called Environnementalistes Sans Frontières where they initiated programs to resolve natural resource based conflicts amongst nomadic pastoralist communities in Northern Kenya.

After arriving in Canada he decided to attend the University of Winnipeg to study International Development and graduated in 2007. During this period he began volunteering in the after-school program at the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization of Manitoba (IRCOM). His volunteer role in IRCOM led to a career in youth programming and community development. Ahmed became director of the after school program and later Executive Director of IRCOM. This allowed him to develop extensive experience working with immigrant and refugee communities in Winnipeg's inner city and on settlement issues, gang and street crime prevention, and peaceful coexistence amongst immigrant and aboriginal communities.

Ahmed is a member of the Canadian Council for Refugees (CCR) and was the recipient of the Amina Malko Fund fellowship in 2009 that provided him with the opportunity to participate in the CCR's consultations and working group meetings for a year as one of few potential immigrant leaders in Canada. In 2011, he was the recipient of the "Great Friend of Children" award by the Manitoba Children's Museum for his work in support of immigrant and refugee youth in Winnipeg.

Also in 2011, he was awarded a Rotary Peace Fellowship at the School of Political Sciences and International Studies of the University of Queensland in Brisbane Australia, where he completed a Masters in International Studies (Peace and Conflict Resolution). He is interested in emerging challenges for peace building and conflict resolution in the Horn of African countries, environment and natural resource based conflict, and the role of outside interests in the conflict in Somalia.

In 2014, Abdikheir became the Local Immigration Partnership Winnipeg (LIPW) Coordinator for the Social Planning Council of Winnipeg.

People in Canada care about and plan for their future and this perspective has made me think about my own future. My current goal is to complete the requirements to get a home care certificate. This will allow me to work in the home care field and save some money. My long-term goal is to go to university to study social work. However, for the time being I will work in home care or daycare. I enjoy working with people, especially with the elderly and children.

Reflecting on my experience, I appreciate that generally teachers and people in Canadian schools are nice, respectful of others, and helpful. However, I feel that Canadian schools could help immigrant students much more. They need to be more understanding of the fact that immigrant students often struggle in school because they have difficulty with speaking and understanding English. There needs to be more EAL support and people assisting immigrant students. Volunteer tutors in classes with EAL students would be very helpful. At first, I thought it was kind of crazy to be placed in a Grade 9 classroom when I had come from nothing (I only had five months of schooling before coming to Canada).

But I survived, and I am happy where I am right now. I have plans for a better future.



Sulekha Ali, Canada's latest singing sensation is not only attracting the attention of music lovers from coast to coast but is quickly building a solid fan base across the continents. The young, Somalia-born, Ottawa-based Sulekha Ali, a recording artist on a lyrical journey to global greatness, continues to mesmerize her fans with new hit singles including Hooyo and Time and Time etc. Sulekha arrived in Canada at the tender age of 4 after her family fled the protracted civil conflict in Somalia. Her family settled in the Canadian capital where she went to school and excelled all the way to university level graduating with a Bachelor of Arts (BA Hons) degree in Human Rights from Carleton University. Her choice of post-secondary studies has largely influenced her music, which is loaded with socially-conscious lyrics.

Hooyo Video: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fBj7Gk8BoEU>>

Photo Credit: This work has been released into the public domain by its author, Sulekha Ali. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sulekha_Ali>.

VIDEO RESOURCES

See [Caution Concerning the Use of Resources about War and Refugee Experiences](#).

History of Somalian Conflicts

Ogaden War 1977 Somalia Ethiopia by ColdWarWarriors is a documentary about the 1977 war between Ethiopia and Somalia.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7CemACOk-p0>

Somalia—The social Clan life before and after the war (English) Part 1-2 (2011) by Interpeace and Academy for Peace development (Maxamed-Amin Siyaad Cabdi) describes the role of Clans in Somalian society before and after the civil war.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hmbBpWUuRCo&index=11&list=PL45gdSqHlr0J3riwIDO08jCFLsqpTVwN>

Somalia: 'The desperate struggle' by CBC News (1992): "Somalia is ravaged by civil war, perpetual battle and widespread famine."
www.cbc.ca/player/Digital+Archives/CBC+Programs/Television/The+National/ID/1829222442/

NEED TO KNOW The ghost city Inside Mogadishu, Somalia by PBS (2012): A Need to Know episode on Mogadishu takes a rare look inside Somalia's capital, Mogadishu, a city struggling from decades of civil war, Islamist militants, famine, and piracy, to learn more about how the nation came to be in the state it's in today.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ENPEdrPTQR4>

Somalia in Crisis by CBC News (2011): Almost 20 years after the 1992 famine, this report looks at the continued impact of war and drought in Somalia and refugee camps.
www.cbc.ca/player/News/TV+Shows/Connect+with+Mark+Kelley/ID/2079534060/

Doctors Without Borders leaving Somalia by CBC News (2013): Organization says country is too dangerous and authorities weren't doing much to stop attacks on aid workers.
www.cbc.ca/player/News/World/ID/2401275747/?page=33&sort=MostRecent

Somalian Refugee Camps in Ethiopia and Kenya

Somalian Refugees Flee Fighting, Famine in Ethiopian Camps (2012) by Pulitzer Center includes information about Dollo Ado.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WAtqjcS4p2c>

Ethiopia: Somali arrivals by UNHCR (2013) shows the challenge of meeting the need of Somalian refugees fleeing famine in Ethiopia.
<http://unhcr.org/v-4e1740eb2a>

Tanya Pinto In Ethiopia—Dollo Ado Refugee Camp (2013) by World Vision. In 2012, Tanya Pinto volunteered for World Vision International in Ethiopia. In this video she is in Dollo Ado—the second largest refugee camp in the world. The video focuses on efforts to provide schooling and other services to children.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YwJBfHFhqcEAlDo>

Kenya: Somali exodus to Kenya by UNHCR: The world's largest refugee complex at Dadaab in north-east Kenya is growing steadily as a fresh wave of Somali civilians flee their country to escape drought or conflict.
<http://unhcr.org/v-4e0ddfd56>

Kenya: In Nairobi's Somalian neighbourhood "Little Mogadishu," Somalis pay the price of al-Shabaab (2013) by FRANCE 24: This report addresses the impact of recent Al Shabaab attacks on Kenya and the impact on Somalis in that country.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=56v5klxqJ3U>

Somali's in North America

A Brighter Future—Journey to Canada: Stories of Refugees by Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC), shows Okach and his family, refugees from the Dadaab camp in Kenya, Africa, as they describe their new life in Regina, Saskatchewan.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AmPG_8_598I

Somali Success Story (2011) by garoowe74, shows how Yasmin Younis succeeded after she came to the United States as a refugee.
www.youtube.com/watch?v=mQiro2luFjQ

Storytelling and Refugees: A Somali's Story (2012) by Stanford University: Ifrah Magan presents her initiative to promote storytelling for Somalian refugees in order to capture a more accurate picture of the country's culture. The talk was part of the first annual AMENDS Summit at Stanford University.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uN7ApymG70w>

For additional resources concerning Somalia, see the [Video Resources](#) provided at the end of Bandiri's narrative.