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How does it feel to be a threat?: ethnographic experiences of urban Somali refugee women in Nairobi, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

The post September 2001 era has been characterised with securitisation of migration, that is, the framing of migration in terms of the threats to the security of states, rather than in terms of the security of migrants. Such framing ignores how securitisation creates a multitude of insecurities for migrants and their families. This ethnographic qualitative study sets out to challenge this dominant state centric perspective of the migration-security nexus. Taking the vantage point of migrants, it introduces an understanding of "securitisation from below" by focusing on the experiences of urban Somali refugee women in Nairobi, Kenya. Seventeen voluntary respondents that were selected through purposive and snowball techniques, were interviewed from Eastleigh in Nairobi. The interviews were scheduled and undertaken at a time and place convenient to the respondent. The data was collected through interviews and participant observation which was designed to examine the critical links between Kenya's securitisation regime, the resultant vulnerabilities it produces, and urban Somali refugee women's everyday resistance to the surveillance and discrimination. Employing what Lonsdale (2000) calls "agency in tight corners", the study explored how the refugee women as active and wilful actors in the securitisation process, develop subtle strategies of interaction with state power, so as to circumvent, protect themselves from, and resist the restrictive regime. They perform their resistance in a number of different ways including disciplinary resistance, disguised compliance, strategic silence, politics of mystification, and self-definition and development. The study findings suggest that urban Somali refugee women have been able, to some extent, manifest some form of agency and diversity and validated their shared experience of the discrimination, and reaffirmed their identity as refugee women. While doing so, they have defied the discriminatory policing, countered the state-driven exclusionary discourse on Somalis, and deconstructed the representation of Eastleigh as a terror zone. The study findings also demonstrate that the securitisation of the urban Somali refugee women is a cyclic and multi-layered process that not only involves various government agencies at various levels, local citizens as crucial agents to the process, but also, the refugee women themselves through everyday resistance. The humanized accounts of the urban Somali refugees presented in this study illustrate how international security and global politics are shaped and lived by non-state actors. While exploring the experiences of urban Somali refugee women, the study sheds light on the experiences of refugee women, whose voices are little heard, and shows ways in which contemporary national and international migration policies impact on their security. This prioritization of increasing invisibility in relations of dominance, and of studying experiences of these refugee women is fundamental to the study of the insecurities of migration, and the way international politics of migration may create insecurity for migrants.