

“I Think They Do Not Recognize Our Struggles” COVID-19 and The African Full-Time Student Mother

The Diary of an African Immigrant Mother in Canada

There is limited literature on the lived experiences of Immigrant African women in Canada. Perhaps the most overlooked subject in academia is their agency and visibility on social, economic, and political grounds. African immigrant women are invisible. The challenges they face as immigrants are similar to other women. However, additional compounding factors such as gender, race, language (accent), stereotypes associated with their ethnic background, and a lack of social/human capital further advance their lack of agency and visibility.

Intersectionality gives us a lens that interrogates how a minority group, such as the African woman, is in a disadvantaged economically, socially and politically. In addition to all the compounding factors, women of color (Guida, 2004) are right at the bottom of social strata and face more challenges. Race as a category and lack of proper language continue to play a huge role in suppressing the African woman. Furthermore, most African women lack social support and network to support their development. Government structures that purport to support marginalized and racialized communities have failed to identify challenges that hinder growth and have further reproduced the same oppressions that impede their success.

This paper is inspired by my struggles as a recent African immigrant woman navigating through family, work, and school life. I believe life stories can rewrite the narratives that are stereotypical among racialized groups. Everyone has a story that they carry in their hearts. Each story is, however, unique and yet, at the same time, critical in reclaiming moments that define them. My submission is my story as a struggling full-time African student mother in Canada and will incorporate short songs in my ethnic language to deliver and create awareness of my struggles.

I hope that this submission will inspire other African women to share their stories so that we reclaim agency in telling our own life stories. I also hope to engage scholars and administrations of higher learning institutions to actively open up conversations on recent African immigrant women's social support and human capital and create avenues for empowerment and a system of accountability that tracks and ensures that progress, failures are followed up.

Key Words: East African Women, Visibility, Story, song, struggles

Katoli tola mwee witu..... (Little bird, little bird, keep flying...)

I would like to tell a story. My story will resonate with most mothers and yet unique and highlights my struggles during the COVID-19 pandemic. I aim to make a case to higher learning institutions to review programs and policies that support marginalized communities. I would also like to argue that African student mothers are a unique minority community and hence their struggles in higher learning institutions should be reviewed with an aim to support equitable access to resources.

In the fall of 2016 I arrived at York University. Now, Universities are usually quite big and intimidating, and you can bet that in the first few weeks you may constantly get lost even after mastering your route. In the initial weeks I seldom made it to class on time. I would run late trying to find my way

around, sometimes entering the wrong classrooms. This was the least of my nightmares. I remember walking into one of Vari hall classrooms that accommodated more than 200 students and I almost passed out from the anxiety that had gripped me. The looks on the students' puzzled faces as they stared me as if wondering where I had been all my life was enough to make me turn around and call it off. Each and every step to my desk was torture and I kept reassuring myself I'd feel better once I sat down. I did not. I felt awkward all through. I did not want anyone to talk to me. They probably thought I was the lecturer. I found it hard to make friends and I wondered if I would survive. Being older than the other students, being on different platforms, being a mother who most of the time had to dash after class to pick up her kids from school or run some errands, and being someone who came from a different culture, I felt judged, and unfitting.

Moreover, I felt like I was invading their space even though it was a learning institution with diverse persons from every background. Most of the time I struggled to understand what the professors said. Many of them spoke fast and by the time I understood what they had said five minutes ago, they were already five minutes ahead, leaving me lost and confused.

I was always hesitant to raise up my hand to answer a question even when I knew the answer because I lacked the courage and confidence to do so, and I feared I could not articulate my answers like other students did. Neither did I ever raise my hand to ask the professors to repeat themselves out of fear of appearing stupid. I thought no one would find my project ideas worthwhile – heck, I didn't even know how to articulate those ideas in front of my cohort!

There were too many assignments to complete, and for me, the load was doubled since I had to read and re-read to understand. I did not grasp lectures like other students and even after reading the same materials provided, in my quiet corner of the classroom, I would question if I had gotten the materials mixed up since the translations provided by the students sounded different. As much as I put on a brave front, I was struggling inside, fretting that I had made a huge mistake enrolling to a higher learning institution thinking I would make it.

That was me in my undergraduate degree. Things have changed since then but I find the same insecurities creeping up on me all the time. Thinking I'm not smart enough, being older, having language limits, being a minority from a lower class and seeing situations from a different lens are some of the barriers I continue to face. Even though I eventually made a few friends who are mothers as well and share the same struggles of motherhood, our cultures, respectfully, present us with different perspectives on how to handle different situations. Our roles are different, how we learn and associate with each other is different and our languages are different.

The first day of class as a graduate student, and the proceeding days for some months were some of my most challenging days. I shared the class with students who were either pursuing their second Masters degrees or were PhD students, and just a handful of first year Masters students like myself. I felt small and it was grueling to attend class every evening – I understood and knew very little. The readings assigned were complicated, the discussions in class intellectual and the presentations stellar! The one thing that kept me going was the relationship I had developed with my professor. One evening, after battling with myself long enough, I mustered every bit of courage I could and dragged my legs to his desk after everyone had left.

“Sir, how do you think I’m doing?” I muttered quietly.

“What do you mean, Catherine?”

I told him I felt out of place and despite reading and re-reading the assigned articles, I still failed to understand the lessons. The professor was very understanding. The weight was lifted off me. From then on, every day before class begun we would catch up on the lessons, he would ask me some questions related to the day’s class and he simplified what was difficult for me. In addition, I joined a study group that scheduled meetings at the library to study together and it worked out pretty well. Slowly, my uncertainty was replaced with refreshed determination. The study group and the relationship with my professor sustained me until COVID-19 struck.

The pandemic couldn’t have hit at a worse time. Mid-March right after March break. I felt this period was going to be hard. Schools extended the break for two weeks and immediately after that a total

lockdown in the province followed. With my folders full of assignments, papers due and presentations pending, I knew it was going to be challenging. My two boys, 10 and 5, were in subsidized daycare all day, which gave me enough time for school and a few other things in between, but now we were all at home, I had no idea how I'd manage this energetic children, housework and school work.

We have two laptops to share among the four of us – two kids and two parents – and with classes everywhere having been switched to online, I have to sacrifice my day study time for my children and let them use one laptop while my partner works full-time with the other laptop. When I have an online class I log onto my phone and lock the door to my room for some privacy, but for some reason, my kids have to check on me every fifteen minutes. Just when I have settled down to some serious study, their curious voices come through the door: “Mama? What are you doing?” Just when I'm in the middle of a Zoom class feeling very intelligent answering a complex question, they barge in like a SWAT team: “Mama? We're hungry!” And just when I finally find a way to keep them quiet by allowing them to watch cartoons the loud fights and screaming begin. When we have dinner and it's time to get them to bed, I'm happy that I'll eventually get some me-time and catch up on those assignments – or so I think.

The noisy children are finally tucked in bed and fast asleep. At last, some peace and silence. I quickly clean up the rooms and put away the dirty laundry. It's 10PM. I sip a cup of coffee and enjoy the tranquility as if I'm on vacation on a calm, tropical island. Suddenly, I catch a glimpse of my laptop patiently waiting for me. I think of all the writing and reading that I have to finish before turning in and the thought of it alone makes me feel exhausted. I reluctantly reach over, switch on the laptop and promise myself I'll read at least one article, but as soon as my eyes are fixed on the glaring screen they become heavy. I feel tired and the coffee is not keeping me awake. I flip through a few pages and get the general idea of the subject before I give in and call it a day. I will wake up early and catch myself up before class begins.

Every class reminds me how hard it is to have an online session when I'm still grappling with language challenges. I know, you may think that I speak quite good English and communication should not be a problem, but coming from Africa, it's obvious that I'm not proficient in Canadian English, rather,

I'm fluent in Kenyan English. With Canadian English, I do not easily understand what one says unless they speak slowly with clear enunciation. I find that if they speak too fast and I'm unable to follow. My secret solution to this, before the pandemic, was to sit right at the front of the class so that I was quite close to the professor's face and I could pay close attention to his lip movement, and that way, I could make up and understand what he was saying. Still, after class, I would always have a question for him.

The reverse is quite true with my Kenyan English. Most people don't understand what I say because of how I pronounce my words. There's quite a bit of miscommunication between us, plenty of "Excuse me, what did you say?" and many corrections and apologies for my tongue. It is more apparent in a classroom setting where at times, I'm the only one with an accent. My listeners seem to pay more attention to my accent than to my message, often interrupting me to ask, "You have such a lovely accent, where are you from?" Hence, being conscious when speaking. With these language limitations I lack the courage to speak, to write and to present efficiently. Consequently, questioning my ability to be an outstanding student. And this is the point where I feel face-to-face interactions with my professors and supervisors boosted my confidence. I would present an idea or ask a question that would turn into a conversation that encouraged and pushed me to think harder and broader in spite of my predicaments. Now that I have to figure out what I don't understand through the screen by myself, I appreciate more the extra work and hours after class that my professors gave me.

Not much can be done about the language barrier – after all, they say when you go to Rome you do what the Romans do – but it would be helpful and welcoming if others learned about where immigrants come from, their cultures, languages, social, educational, socioeconomic and political histories as well as the prejudices and challenges they face in foreign lands. For instance, I feel alone, segregated and misunderstood, firstly because I don't have a social support system and I find it difficult because I come from a different education system. These struggles seem to be exacerbated throughout this pandemic, and the economic hardships and lack of human social capital have particularly made it extremely difficult for me. It is my hope that my story will elicit conversations that aim to re-think how

African student mothers can be supported. In the words of Maynard and Purvis, I too stress the importance of life stories as an excellent source of exploring accounts that are full of silences.

Tapping into life stories is one way of listening to what the silences mean and moving on towards positive change, problematize these experiences and refuse to normalize struggles but rather establish cultural social capital through cultural based communities in higher learning institutions that seek to establish networks and connections for those who have been through similar experiences. And this is my story.

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