

Impact of COVID-19 on Food Security Among Somali Migrants and Refugees in Kitchener-Waterloo, Ontario: Narratives from a Photovoice Study

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has drastically affected food security across the globe, exposing and exacerbating pre-existing vulnerabilities among marginalized communities (Crush et al., 2021; Laborde et al., 2020; Pereira & Oliveira, 2020). In the context of this global crisis, food insecurity has become a critical challenge for many populations (Kakaei et al., 2022). The pandemic has particularly highlighted the fragility of marginalized migrant populations, including asylum seekers, refugees, and undocumented migrants whose existing vulnerabilities have been compounded by the pandemic (Mukumbang, 2021; Sanifelici, 2021)

Research on the impact of COVID-19 on migrant populations in the Global North underscores the disproportionate number of migrants among those infected and hospitalized. Migrants had a higher incidence of hospitalization and death in countries like Italy and Sweden (Hargreaves et al., 2021). Several factors contributed to this relative disparity, including the prevalence of migrants in frontline jobs, overcrowded housing, and reduced access to public health systems (Ulla et al., 2021). Precarious living conditions further aggravated food insecurity, widened gender inequality gaps in domestic and care work, and worsened mental health problems among migrant and refugee populations (Ahmed et al, 2023; Boland et al, 2022)

In Canada, measures to curb the spread of COVID-19 also disproportionately affected migrants and refugees, particularly with respect to employment, housing, food security, access to social services, and social isolation (Barker 2021; Etowa and Hyman 2021, Lemieux et al. 2020). Canada's broader economic challenges—including inflation and a housing crisis—have continued to amplify poverty and inequality, worsening the overall impact of the pandemic on migrant populations (Barker 2021).

This research brief presents findings from a qualitative study conducted through the Photovoice methodology with Somali migrants in



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Kitchener-Waterloo, Canada. The study uncovers the multi-dimensional impacts of food insecurity, particularly in relation to culturally appropriate food access, the disproportionate care burdens on women, and the rising costs of basic necessities during the pandemic.

Somali Migrants and Refugees in Canada

The Somali refugee crisis, triggered by the collapse of the Somali state in the early 1990s, precipitated one of the most significant displacement crises in recent history. The fall of Siad Barre’s regime in 1991 led to widespread violence, lawlessness, and humanitarian crisis, prompting a massive exodus of Somalis seeking refuge abroad (Michaelson, 1993; Osinbajo, 1996; Wyne & Thuo, 2022;). Characterized by factional violence and the disintegration of political and economic infrastructures, this conflict resulted in an estimated 300,000 deaths from violence, famine, and disease in the 1990s (Linke & Raleigh, 2011). The death toll from the conflict is now estimated to be between 350,000 and 500,000 people. With constitutional governance and justice systems in a state of collapse, many Somalis were forced to flee, marking the onset of a significant refugee crisis (Abdi, 2005).

Amid this instability, international aid efforts were severely hampered by the lack of a functioning government (Warsame, 2011). Canada, with its relatively open immigration policies and growing Somali communities, became a key destination for Somali refugees (Kelley & Trebilcock, 1998). Between 1991 and 1993, Canada welcomed over 5,000 Somali refugees, which laid the foundation for Somali diaspora communities in cities such as Toronto, Ottawa, and Edmonton (Jama, 2022). However, Somali refugees encountered significant challenges upon arrival, including negative stereotypes surrounding welfare fraud and ‘bogus refugee claims,’ which disproportionately affected Somali communities particularly in Toronto (Pratt & Valverde, 2002).

At the most recent count, 32,500 Somalis now reside in Canada, with 6,315 having arrived between 2016 and 2021, over 80% of whom were resettled refugees (Government of Canada, 2022). Table 1 provides a broader context for Somali resettlement trends in Canada between 2015 and 2024, by comparing them with arrivals in the same period from Afghanistan and Syria. The numbers from those two countries far exceed those from Somalia. It also shows the different pathways through which refugees entered the country, including private sponsorship, government programs, and blended models. Only 38% of Somali refugees entered under government sponsorship programs compared to private sponsorship compared with 51% of those from Afghanistan and Syria. Private sponsorship, which shifts some of the burden onto ordinary citizens, is thus a significant feature of current Canadian refugee protection policy.

TABLE 1: Resettled Refugees in Canada, 2015-2024

Country of origin	Entry by sponsorship program			Total
	Blended	Private	Government	
Afghanistan	80	29,005	30,015	59,100
Somalia	170	10,330	6,355	16,855
Syria	5,650	43,120	51,785	100,555

Source: Government of Canada (2024)

Despite the growth over time in the Somali-Canadian population, the community continues to face systemic socio-economic challenges. High levels of unemployment, underemployment, and barriers to education have persisted (Danso, 2002; Mohamed, 2021). Somali youth face complex identity struggles as they attempt to reconcile their cultural heritage with mainstream Canadian society (Khalema, 2020). Somali women, in particular, face challenges in the labour market, experiencing discrimination and lower employment rates, despite high levels of education and professional experience (Creese & Wiebe, 2012). Housing issues, such as overcrowding, affordability, and discrimination, remain critical for Somali families, many of whom reside in marginalized neighborhoods with limited access to essential services (Mensah & Williams, 2014).

The COVID-19 pandemic deepened many of these vulnerabilities, with Somali-Canadians overrepresented in essential service roles, which increased their exposure to the virus while they simultaneously grappled with financial instability (Persaud et al., 2021). The pandemic also worsened gender inequalities, particularly with increased rates of family violence against Somali women (Green et al., 2021).

Nonetheless, Somali-Canadians have demonstrated resilience, with community-based organizations playing a crucial role in supporting immigrants through language training, employment assistance, and youth mentorship (Opoku-Dapaah, 1995). These community efforts underscore the Somali community's ability to overcome adversity while contributing to the fabric of Canadian society. Moving forward, policymakers, service providers, and community organizations must collaborate to address the unique challenges faced by Somali-Canadians while harnessing their potential for meaningful integration.

Photovoice Methodology

Photovoice, a participatory visual research method developed by Wang and Burris (1997), allows participants to document and reflect on their lived experiences through photography. The method draws on participatory techniques from popular education and feminist theory, encouraging participants to use photographs to represent their communities and initiate social change (Wang & Burris, 1997; Simmonds et al., 2015).

This study applied the photovoice methodology to understand the food security challenges faced by Somali migrants in the Waterloo Region of Ontario during the COVID-19 pandemic. Photovoice participants took photographs reflecting their experiences with food insecurity, generating discussions on how their households coped with the crisis. The method provides a platform for marginalized voices, making it an ideal tool for addressing complex social issues like food insecurity in migrant communities. By enabling participants to co-produce knowledge, Photovoice helps ensure that their narratives, experiences, and perspectives can be foregrounded in policy discussions (Augustová, 2021).

Photovoice has been increasingly applied in migration studies, particularly in addressing food security and the social dimensions of food consumption (Colón-Ramos et al., 2017). In this study, Photovoice provided nuanced insights into the barriers faced by Somali migrants in

accessing culturally appropriate food, and highlighted how rising costs and social isolation have exacerbated food insecurity. Through this participatory method, the Somali migrant community's voices were foregrounded, enriching our understanding of pandemic impacts on food security.

The recruitment process for the photovoice study was designed to engage Somali migrants in Kitchener-Waterloo in the Region of Waterloo. It began with a face-to-face information session, where participants were introduced to the study's objectives and eligibility criteria. Eligible participants were Somali refugees over 18, and who had lived in the Region for at least two years. After expressing interest, six participants attended a training session where they learned about the Photovoice methodology and received photography training. They were then given 3-5 days to take photos capturing their food security experiences during the pandemic. Following this, a group discussion allowed participants to share their photos and stories, encouraging reflection and engagement. This process ensured participants' voices were heard and their contributions were meaningful, providing insights to raise awareness about food insecurity among Somali refugees in the region.

The Photovoice study was conducted with six participants, aged between 35 and 55, with varying family sizes, educational backgrounds, and employment status. Most arrived in Canada as refugees from Somalia, either during the earlier waves of migration in the 1990s or more recently. The socio-economic conditions of the participants were heavily influenced by their family composition, employment status, and access to support services, with many of them expressing significant food insecurity exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participant 1, a 43-year-old single mother of eight who arrived in 2018, had no formal education and was unemployed. Her family faced severe challenges, particularly due to the reduced purchasing power during the pandemic.

Participant 2, a 45-year-old woman who arrived the same year, with only a Grade 1 education, was also unemployed and struggled to provide for her family of ten, despite having a husband.

Participant 3, aged 35, arrived in 2010 as a single mother of four, including two children with special needs, and faced significant obstacles due to her unemployment and the need for specialized care for her children.

Participant 4, a 40-year-old male with a master's degree who arrived in 2004, was employed in the education sector and supported a smaller family of three. His concerns centred on the loss of community gatherings that previously helped with food security, particularly for culturally appropriate food.

Participant 5, a 45-year-old male who arrived in 2015 with a bachelor's degree, worked for a community association and had a family of seven. While employed, he too experienced the financial strain of rising food prices.

Participant 6, a 55-year-old female who arrived in 2018, was unemployed with a family of eight. She expressed significant anxiety over the relentless increase in food costs, especially as someone without formal education or extended family support.

The fact that the participants were part of a tight-knit community in Kitchener-Waterloo—where social ties among Somali migrants are strong—meant that many already knew each other. This familiarity did not impede the discussion; rather, it facilitated an open exchange of opinions and experiences. Despite gender differences in their pandemic experience and perspectives, common themes and concerns emerged, particularly around the challenges of large family sizes, high unemployment rates, and the additional burden on households with individuals requiring special care. This illustrates the compounded vulnerabilities faced by Somali migrants in the region. Specifically, gender diversity allowed us to highlight the nuances in the lived experience of Somali men and women.

Participants consistently underscored the urgent need for targeted government interventions that address unemployment, support community centres offering culturally appropriate food, and mitigate the rising cost of living, all of which were exacerbated during the pandemic. The diverse life experiences of participants, coupled with the community’s cohesion, enriched the discussion by allowing both individual and collective experiences to surface.

Photographs and Narratives



“This photograph evokes vivid memories of the daily impacts of COVID-19 and a stark comparison to life before the pandemic. This image shows partially filled pots on my kitchen countertop, serving as reminder of our current living situation. In the past, when I cooked for my family, these pots would brim with food. However, what I prepare now barely manages to fill the pot” (Participant 1).



“An empty fridge is a sight that has become all too familiar since the pandemic struck. In the past, our fridge was a symbol of abundance, always filled with fresh produce, dairy, and meals ready to nourish our family. Now, it’s a constant struggle to ensure there’s enough to eat” (Participant 2).



“This picture displays a receipt, a simple yet profound portrayal of the challenges we face. The prices of essential items have skyrocketed, making it increasingly difficult to afford daily necessities” (Participant 5).



“This photo portrays a shopping cart, and its significance is stark. The cost of filling that cart has soared to unthinkable heights. I now pay double what I used to pay before the pandemic to ensure that our cart is adequately filled” (Participant 3).



“The photograph serves as reminder of what we lost during the pandemic. For many Somali migrants, gathering, especially during occasions like Ramadan, was not just about sharing a meal; it was a lifeline for low-income households. These gatherings provided a form of food security and a sense of togetherness” (Participant 4).



“This photo displays a table adorned with traditional Somali dishes, representing a time when our meals were ample and filled with cultural richness” (Participant 6).

Pandemic Narratives

The photographic images taken by the participants provided a vivid and personal portrayal of the Somali migrants' lived experiences and food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants captured images of nearly empty fridges, sparsely filled shopping carts, and half-empty cooking pots—clear symbols of the reduced quantity and quality of affordable food during this challenging period. Rising food prices and decreased purchasing power left many families struggling to maintain their basic nutritional needs, exacerbating pre-existing vulnerabilities in the community.

Before the pandemic, I could walk into a grocery store and fill my cart with a variety of food for my family ... However, now our financial resources have dwindled, and these modest groceries are all we can afford in a week to feed my children (Participant 2).

The reduced affordability of food was emblematic of the broader economic downturn that most participants experienced as they struggled not only with food insecurity but also rising rent prices and stagnant or reduced incomes.

Beyond food insecurity, there were broader economic challenges, particularly related to housing costs. Many migrants reported that rents had escalated, compounding their financial difficulties and making it increasingly hard to maintain household stability:

There is a difference between immigrants that are established, who arrived 15-20 years ago, and immigrants in the last 10 years. These new immigrants can't afford rent, and they have only one source of income (Participant 4).

This comment underscores the stark disparity between newer and more established migrants. Those who have lived in Canada for many years are better equipped to manage rising costs, while newer arrivals—especially within the last decade—faced heightened financial vulnerability. Rent increases, coupled with fewer income opportunities, have left many recent migrants struggling to meet their basic needs. These rising costs, exacerbated by the pandemic, have trapped families in a cycle of economic instability, limiting their ability to build a secure future.

Migrants also face the deeper issue of systemic exclusion, where economic hardship intersects with racial and social barriers. Migrants not only face financial burdens but struggle with a sense of exclusion from broader Canadian society:

Canadians have decent jobs, and two incomes, low mortgages, and smaller families. But beyond this, being white also makes a difference. The system is not friendly for us (Participant 4).

This exclusion, compounded by the economic challenges, adds to the sense of social and economic isolation that many Somali migrants experience, intensifying their struggles throughout the pandemic.

Gendered differences in the pandemic's impact were also evident in the participants' narratives. Female participants, especially the single mothers, bore the brunt of increased care responsibilities. They faced compounded stress as they juggled managing large households on limited income, caring for children, and navigating food insecurity:

As a mother of three small children, two of whom have special needs, the contents of this fridge are a never-ending concern. I often find myself wondering if I'll have enough money to buy what we need, to provide a balanced diet for my kids. Being a single mother makes it particularly challenging to ensure that the fridge is stocked with essentials (Participant 3).

The additional emotional and logistical burden fell predominantly on women, who struggled to meet the growing demands placed on their households during the pandemic.

Before the pandemic, it was common for community members to pool resources and distribute food to those in need during these gatherings, reinforcing social bonds and helping the most vulnerable families.

Before the pandemic, when we came together for prayers or community events celebrations, we knew that everyone would have enough to eat. The community looked out for each other, and no one was left to go hungry. Now, without these gatherings, it feels like we're on our own (Participant 5).

Communal spaces such as mosques, community centres, and informal gatherings, particularly during events like Ramadan and religious celebrations, played a crucial role in ensuring food security for Somali refugees. Beyond these religious and formal events, Somali men also frequently gathered informally at community centers and local coffee shops for *fadhi ku dirir*—a cultural tradition meaning 'fighting while seated,' where men get together to chat, reminisce, debate, and spend time with friends (Abdillahi, 2024). These gatherings were not only social and cultural symbols but also provided men with a sense of belonging and community support. Such spaces facilitated resource-sharing, ensuring that even the most vulnerable members of the community had access to food and social support during tough times.

In contrast to the women, the men in the study tended to emphasize the loss of community ties and the diminishing role of communal spaces that had previously provided culturally appropriate food and support systems. The loss of community gatherings, which had previously provided food and social support, was another significant issue raised by participants. The pandemic restricted these cultural and religious events, cutting off crucial social networks and leaving many migrants feeling isolated and unsupported. The disruption of these gatherings, compounded by the loss of communal spaces due to COVID-19 restrictions, left men grappling with a diminished sense of security and belonging.

Both groups called for urgent government intervention to address the rising cost of living, improve welfare schemes, and enhance support for community-based initiatives. While women emphasized the need for direct financial aid to support households, men placed greater importance on the restoration of communal spaces and networks, which had served as vital sources of both social connection and material support.

These preliminary findings underscore the complex, multi-layered impact of the pandemic on Somali migrants in Kitchener-Waterloo, who faced a return to familiar struggles with food insecurity during COVID-19:

My journey to Canada from a refugee camp in Kenya was initially filled with hope and optimism, as it marked our escape from food rationing and dependence on aid agencies. For the first couple of years, life here was relatively stable, thanks to the financial support we received from the government. However, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted our lives in ways we could never have anticipated. The photographs I've shared evoke memories of my time in refugee camps, where we relied on meager food rations for survival. Despite our initial relief, we now find ourselves facing similar challenges with food insecurity (Participant 2).

This narrative illustrates how the pandemic exacerbated current struggles and also revived past hardships, as many migrants found themselves once again contending with food scarcity and economic hardship.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed and exacerbated the existing vulnerabilities of Somali migrants in Kitchener-Waterloo, with food insecurity emerging as a critical challenge. The intersection of rising living costs, limited access to culturally appropriate food, and insufficient social safety nets has created a precarious situation for many households. The Photovoice methodology provided a platform for a group of Somali migrants to share their lived experiences, offering valuable insights into the daily struggles they face in affording food, managing large families, and navigating the economic and social upheaval brought on by the pandemic.

Beyond food security, the research highlights the broader social and cultural impacts of the pandemic on the Somali community. The disruption of community gatherings, which play an essential role in cultural identity and collective food sharing, has left many feeling isolated and unsupported. Gendered dimensions of the pandemic's impact further emphasize the distinct challenges faced by Somali women, who bear the brunt of household responsibilities and rely heavily on government assistance. In contrast, male participants focused more on the loss of community-based support systems, highlighting the broader social implications of the pandemic.

These findings underscore the urgent need for a comprehensive government and civil society response that addresses the intersecting crises of food insecurity, housing, and income instability. Policy interventions must go beyond immediate financial relief, ensuring access to culturally appropriate food and rebuilding community support systems. As our case study indicates, by incorporating the voices and lived experiences of marginalized migrant communities such as Somalis in Waterloo, policymakers can also develop more inclusive and targeted strategies that not only address the immediate challenges posed by the pandemic but also create pathways for long-term resilience and integration into Canadian society.

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