

MATERNITY & MIGRATION

AMONG SOMALIS IN NAIROBI, KENYA

BY LUCY LOWE

My fieldwork took place in the Somali-dominated neighbourhood Eastleigh, an area of Nairobi commonly referred to as 'Little Mogadishu'. The Kenyan refugee encampment policy means that the residents of Eastleigh live in a legally ambiguous context, facing frequent police harassment, including regular raids on streets and in homes. Very few people considered Kenya a permanent settlement, rather they saw it as a transit point while they tried to migrate to another country. My thesis focuses on maternity as a site to examine the effects of displacement and concern for onward migration among Somali women in particular. It will look at how desires for high fertility, as an intrinsic element of what it means to be a woman and particularly a wife, are shaped within a context where marriage is of even higher importance in terms of security and possibilities for onward migration. There are over half a million Somali refugees in Kenya, a source of public fear and hostility as they are portrayed as a security threat, inextricably entwined with piracy and Islamic fundamentalism. Simultaneously, many Somalis live in Eastleigh because it allows them to live their lives away from the scrutiny of the government, the UN, and NGOs. As a result, they have built their own 'city within a city', largely invisible to outsiders. 

