

**“A Viagem da Minha Vida” A study of Identity  
Formation and Resettlement among Angolan  
Women of Colour in Toronto**

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- While Lusophone immigrant groups have been studied, much of the literature examines Lusophone women from Portugal and Brazil and not those from Portuguese speaking Africa

# Introduction

- Most Portuguese-speaking groups seem to be homogenized into one community because of their common language and because of this the needs of these new emerging communities may not be known.

- Those outside the Canadian Lusophone community may not know the tensions that exist among Lusophone groups and are often unaware of the history between Portugal and Angola.

- Therefore, investigating the needs of Angolan women was necessary in order shed light on their predicament and educate others about them. Although Angolan immigrant women are not as numerous as the Portuguese, they remain a growing, contributing, and thriving community.

- The influx of Angolan Lusophone women arriving in Canada with various resettlement issues and challenges, highlights the importance of studying and understanding these migrants. This is especially important as news reports of Canada's deportation of Angolan refugees have created concern in the Angolan community.

# Deportation?

- In 2001, the Canadian Department of Immigration decided to send letters requesting Angolans that have applied for refugee status in Canada between 1999 and 2001 to leave Canada (Sol Portugues, 2004).

- The Canadian government argued that Angolan refugees can no longer make claims for refugee status in Canada as Angola is no longer at war (Sol Portugues 2004).
- After working hard to build new lives, the Canadian government is now insisting that they be sent back to a country that is just beginning the process of rebuilding after a bloody thirty year war. The continued deportation of Angolans merits the need for further study on Angolan immigration and settlement experiences in Canada



# The Study

- For our study a semi-structured interview schedule with 61 open-ended questions was used to interview 11 Portuguese speaking Angolan women.
- These women were interviewed primarily in Portuguese, and in some cases using a combination of Portuguese and English.
- During the interviews these women's immigration experiences, their past personal histories, and personal adjustments to life in Canada were discussed.
- Follow up questions were also asked in order to clarify points the participants made and explore various issues regarding settlement and related issues. At times questions were re-phased and clarified in order for participants to understand the context.

- Each interview lasted approximately one hour and a half to two hours and took place in participants' homes, the Angolan Community Centre, Robarts Library at the University of Toronto and in coffee shops around the city of Toronto.
- Participants consisted of 12 both married and unmarried women, with the majority of them currently pursuing a university education. The interviews were all conducted in Portuguese, in order to accommodate and make the participants more comfortable in discussing the subject matter.
- The interviews were also unstructured, in order to allow for participants to respond freely to the questions being asked, without undue pressure and lasted from 45 minutes to 90 minutes.

- More specifically, we found that resettlement issues had positive and negative influences on Angolan women's identity formation.
- Positive influences included the construction of a new identity in a new country and the ability to start over again in the new country of settlement.
- Negative aspects included the loss of familial ties, loss of confidence and feelings of homesickness.

- A combination of sampling techniques was used as it was not easy to locate participants for this study. Therefore, once participants were located and interviewed, they were asked if they knew of others who would consent to being interviewed.
- Participants were also succored with the help of Patricia, a volunteer at the Angolan Community Centre in Toronto, and also with the help of an Angolan graduate student. Even with these contacts, it was extremely difficult to find participants, due to the sensitivity of the subject matter and due to the fact that the researchers, were not Angolan.
- The limited number of participants and the difficulty in obtaining participants limits the representativeness of this study of Angolan women. Participants were obtained through purposive, convenience, and snowball sampling, as these women were often reluctant to participate given the research subject and focus.

- Many subjects were reluctant to participate if the Angolan graduate student was not present. And even then, many participants were uncomfortable at times during the interview process with the subject matter of discussion.
- The participants consisted of 11 Angolan women between the ages of 20-29 who were all landed immigrants but had come here initially as refugees
- The interviews occurred during the summer months of July and August 2004. The sample was extremely difficult to obtain due to the mistrust of the participants towards the researcher and the bias towards the researchers, as the interviewer was Portuguese and not Angolan.

- This qualitative analysis of Angolan immigrant women in Toronto explores questions related to identity formation and settlement experiences. Using "situational identity" (Kenedy, 2004) as a theoretical guide to investigating the settlement process and identity formation, N-VIVO was used to find key words such as settlement, family, home, and other concepts.
- Once the interviews were translated into English, this process of searching for key words led to discovering various themes related to identity and settlement. These themes were connected to other variable such as race, gender, and other issues in order to make sense of these women's experiences.

- Participants identified experiences of settlement with personal growth and change, as in the case of Participant #5 who remarked that being an immigrant woman in Canada “has made me confront challenges and become stronger”(Transcript of Interview with Participant #5). Similarly, Participant #3 noted that:
  - “... it has made me vulnerable and strong at the same time. Everything I have gone through is almost like a journey. In order for me to get to the university where I am today, I needed to go through the hardships and trials that I did. The sadness, loneliness and loss of family ties was one of the hardest things I faced” (Transcript of Interview with Participant #3).

- All participants revealed that the immigration/settlement process had affected what they had gone through. As most of the participants had come here independently, many identified isolation as noted above as a consequence but also referred to growth, as they had to face many of these challenges alone.
- “It [being an immigrant woman] has affected me by making me more alone...before I came from a large family and friends, now here having no support network like back home it made me more of a loner. It also affected how I am with people; it made me more mature and independent as I came here and had to deal with many issues here by myself” (Transcript of Interview with Participant #9).



- Isolation and lack of family ties were a remarked change in the identities of all women as noted in the quote of Participant #9. Feeling “alone” may be a direct cause of the settlement process as was the “growth” experienced by all participants.
- All participants also agreed that they enjoy living in Canada. They had lived in Canada four or more years with the most being six years. When asked how do feel about living in Canada for example Participant #2 replied, “I really like living in Canada” (Transcript of Interview with Participant #2). As noted above the process of settlement in a new country proved to be difficult, but rewarding at the same time. All participants noted that the greatest negative challenge was finding suitable housing in Toronto. Participant #4 pointed out “Just finding a place here and learning the language has been extremely difficult. Those two things are the things that stand out most in my mind. Also, feeling isolated and alone without any family has been extremely difficult.” (Transcript of Interview with Participant #4).

- All participants also identified that current immigration policies and programs had not helped them at all in their settlement. They pointed out that the need for services provided by Angolans for Angolans would be much better than what currently was out there.

- This lack of help actually forced many participants to go out on their own and find their own unique solutions to their problems.
- The lack of services especially sensitive to the needs of Angolan women of colour were not available and this impeded some aspects such as language education and employment opportunities for these women

- Participants also identified that having a prior knowledge of English before coming to Canada made the adjustment integration process much easier.
- Participant #1 stated “...I spoke English already and that wasn’t a barrier for me” (Transcript of Interview with Participant #1). Participant #2 noted: “The fact that I knew English helped me a lot” (Transcript of Interview with participant #2). This brings another point to light that a prior knowledge of English is important as it eases the settlement process and lowers barriers for many immigrant women.

- The key theme of isolation again came into play as many of the participants came to Canada alone without any family. This isolation was mentioned in all interviews as stated above and was also a key variable in the new identity formation of these women in Canada.
- Still, participants found strong ties to cultural values and the importance of cultural maintenance in their new country of Canada.

- The importance of maintaining their Angolan identity or “Angolanness” in Canada was also stressed by all participants, though in different ways, suggesting that keeping this component of their former selves was important and necessary during and after the process of settlement in order to make the adaptation process much smoother.
- All participants identified personal growth and change as a result of settlement, thus creating a relationship between the change in self (identity) and settlement. Participant # 3 identified this change when she stated, “I am more grown, mature and sure of myself” (Transcript with Participant #3).
- This notion of changing identity was present in all interviews of the participants. As identity is created and changed depending on the life and “activities” (Giddens 1991:57) of each individual, then the fact that settlement impacted significantly on the identities of these women is not surprising as settlement was a major change or “activity” that occurred in their lives.

- Although participants identified retaining their "Angolanness"(Lebert 1999:154), to be important, all participants also thought that "Canadianness" was also an important part of their new identities or new selves.
- Participants also identified values associated with this "Canadianness" and adapted these values into their new definitions of self, such as respect for democracy and a sense of permanency. This presented itself in the case of participant 11 when she stated: "Being Canadian to me means permanence and no fear and democracy and a good life for my children. Although there may be prejudices here, I do not fear for my life or for my family, and that is important."(Transcript of Interview with Participant #11).
- This change in identity again came as a result of settlement in Canada, thus linking again the variables of identity formation and settlement. Participants placed a high importance on this integration of Canadian values and to life into Canada.

- It was interesting that many participants took offence at being referred to as a refugee and wanted me to refer to them as an immigrant, which I did.
- Participant #8 asked the interviewer “Please don’t say refugee because I see myself as an immigrant and not refugee” (Transcript of Interview with Participant #8), suggesting a relationship between, self-identity and stigma. Participant #5 asked:
  - “Please can you refer to me as an immigrant because refugee, there is almost a shame attached to being a refugee. I see myself as an immigrant woman and not as a refugee. It is not you, but refugee it almost means you are poor and hungry, getting to Canada with nothing, and I immigrated from Angola.” (Transcript of Interview with Participant #5).
  - Participant #9 noted, “I prefer immigrant woman to refugee as there is almost secondary class attached to refugee and not to immigrant. I came to Canada to settle and not to go back” (Transcript of Interview with participant #5)..



- Current government immigration policies simply did not identify and serve the needs of these women.
- These women felt that the social services available to them in the Portuguese community, were more of a “Portuguese from Portugal” origin and that they were also not tailored to fit them. But they also felt that this in turn forced them to get out and do many things themselves.

- All participants routinely identified being victims of racism, including racist and derogatory comments because of the colour of their skin.
- Participant 6 stated in this regard "...The Portuguese are really racist and the guys think I am a slut just because I am black. They call me a puta [prostitute] all the time and treat me that way. I think the Portuguese are really bad"(Excerpt from interview with Participant 9).
- Despite sharing a common language and Lusophone identity, relations between the Angolan women of colour and the Portuguese seem to be of a stigmatized nature.

- Participants identified interaction between themselves and the Portuguese in Toronto to be strained and uncomfortable, making them feel stigmatized and separate. In return, participants retaliated with a strong dislike for the Portuguese community as a result of this stigma.

- Gender was continuously identified as an obstacle as pointed out by Participant #7: “Being an immigrant woman, I found gave me fewer rights than men. Many men I know had a far easier time in paperwork and jobs etc. than I did and it seemed it was because they were men” (Transcript of Interview with Participant# 7).
- Participant #7 also identified that being an immigrant woman “has made me work harder to where I want to be because as an immigrant woman you have to be better than men and at the same time maintain your femininity and that is very hard” (Transcript of Interview with Participant #7).

- Maintaining the idea of “femininity” was important to most participants though an interesting observation was that some of the participants identified that had they been men of colour than they would have had a much harder time in Canada due to prejudices against coloured men.
- Participant #1 thought that had she been a man she would have been judged “Worse, definitely worse” (Transcript from Interview with Participant #1). Participants identified that being of women and of colour also put them at a disadvantage. As Participant #11 stated” it has made me work hard (being an Angolan woman) to fight the prejudices against women of colour. The colour of my skin does not dictate who I am and what I can do and many people believe that....” (Transcript of Interview with Participant #3).

- Race and gender for Angolan women seem to be almost one in the same as they felt they could not separate their perceptions of themselves as women and themselves as women of colour.
- To some this meant through language and culture and to others this meant passing it on to their children. Participant #3 stated, "...I think it is important to maintain this identity because it was the one I was raised with and the one I hope to pass on to my children"(Transcript of Interview with Participant #3).
- To others, an Angolan identity meant rejecting the patriarchal culture in which they were raised. Ethnicity and identity seemed to be clearly linked. An example of this occurs in the interviewed with Participant #11 when she states, "To me to be Angolan is an individual thing. It means to be proud of where you come from, to have a sense of equality, of justice and, of peace for all. It means to have respect for your fellow man and not to belittle them" (Transcript of interview with Participant #11).
- Almost all participants identified themselves as "Angolan". Some participants identified themselves as "Canadian", while others maintained an ethnicity of "African Canadian".

- This qualitative analysis of Angolan immigrant women in Toronto explored variables the main variables of identity formation and settlement experiences. Utilising semi-structured interviews, this investigation focused immigration experiences, past personal histories, and how non-white Angolan women have adjusted to life in Toronto. The dependant variable in this study was identity formation and the main independent variable in this study was settlement.
- In reality, after analyzing participants' interview responses it was discovered that in fact these two variables were often thought of as one unique variable as all participants identified that new identity formation occurred as a result of settlement in Toronto.
- Other variables included gender, ethnicity and race and participants also identified that these variables indeed affected their settlement/identity formation. Settlement did indeed influence the identity formation of Angolan women. The construction of a new identity in a new country and the ability to start over again in the new country of settlement were positive changes identified by participants. The loss of familial ties, loss of confidence and feelings of homesickness were negative aspects of this combination of variables identified by participants.

- The weaknesses apparent in this exploratory study were the time frame of four months, the small number of participants, the subject matter, sample and sampling technique. Many potential participants on learning the focus of the study believed the researcher to be employed for the Ministry of Immigration and therefore refused to participate, as they were illegal non-status refugees in Canada.



- In order to improve this study, I would increase the sample size by allowing more time and also hiring someone from the community to conduct these interviews. As there was no funding available, I had to resort to snowball sampling in order to gain participants.
- Also, the difficulty in obtaining participants even by these methods would make this study difficult to replicate in the future. If this study were to be replicated, more community involvement is necessary in order to gain more participants. Thus, clear guidelines would be established with the community beforehand in order to alleviate the difficulties that occurred during this study.

# The Difficulties of Researching a Lusophone Community

- As highlighted in my presentation, it was very difficult to recruit participants for this study.
- As a young researcher of Lusophone origin it is very difficult to go out and recruit for these types of studies because of the fragmentation of the Lusophone communities.

- There is no support for young researchers because of a mistrust of those with an education in the Portuguese community and in the Angolan community, a mistrust of those who are not Angolan.

- Because of this community fragmentation and lack of support, there is a lack of research available on the Lusophone communities.
- Therefore future partnerships between the government, the community and researchers is crucial in order to promote research among these communities.

# Conclusion

- The need for services and policies friendly to the needs of gender and colour was emphasized by the needs of these women.
- Also apparent is the need of support for research as there is a lack of research in all Lusophone communities.