

# Weathering the Storm: How African Families with Refugee Backgrounds Coped with Online Schooling during the 2020-2021 COVID-19 Pandemic

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## WHAT THE RESEARCH IS ABOUT

**OVERVIEW:** The research focused on the experiences and challenges faced by mothers with refugee backgrounds from The Horn of Africa (Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea) and their children as they attended high school during the COVID-19 crisis.

### OBJECTIVES:

1. To understand how families with refugee backgrounds coped with the challenges of remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. To connect families with A4C's resources and to build A4C's capacity to respond in a coordinated and caring way to future crises.

**RESEARCH JUSTIFICATION:** Managing the social and economic stress and uncertainty associated with the COVID pandemic was a major challenge for many parents. However, the situation was even more challenging for families with refugee backgrounds.



## HOW THE DATA WERE OBTAINED

The researchers conducted in-depth interviews and focus groups with 10 women and 18 youth residing in Waterloo, Ontario. The study used e-technology, phone conversations, and in-person interviews to connect with youth and parents. Two high school students with refugee experience led online discussions with youth about their experiences during isolation.

## WHAT THE STUDY FOUND

- Schools provided Chromebooks for high school-aged youth to complete schoolwork at home; however, youth's ability to use that technology was constrained by several factors:
  - Lack of physical space and time
  - Poor internet connection
  - Parental stress
  - Financial and food insecurity
- Mothers' low literacy and digital literacy skills, low English comprehension, and lack of knowledge about the Canadian education system prevented them from helping their children with schoolwork.
- The following factors also contributed to a disconnect between schools and families with a refugee background:
  - Poverty
  - Low literacy
  - Religion (specifically, gender divisions)
- The study also found gender differences amongst the youth, with girls more likely to complete their homework tasks and boys struggling to stay engaged.
  - In some instances where there weren't enough computers for all children, boys got to use them first while girls were expected to help with housework.
  - Girls' grades tended to remain stable, despite the extra household responsibilities, while the boys' grades decreased.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- › Language and literacy barriers pose a challenge for parents with refugee experience. During online schooling, schools should connect directly with families by phone rather than rely on written communication.
- › Gender differences must be taken into account when developing policy and programs for online learning.
- › Programs are needed to support mothers with refugee backgrounds to become more involved in decisions affecting their children’s education –especially as they transition to high school.
- › Schools must acknowledge that parents with refugee backgrounds are involved at home but may use forms of capital that are not recognized by schools.
- › More supports for women with refugee experience must be provided given the finding that during a crisis such as COVID-19 mothers (and, in the case of this population, daughters) disproportionately carry the burden of caring for children and keeping food on the table.

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## ABOUT CYRRC

The Child and Youth Refugee Research Coalition (CYRRC) is a network of researchers, service providers, and government partners working together to produce and share research that facilitates the integration of young refugees and their families in Canada and beyond.

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the Child and Youth Refugee Research Coalition.

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