



Interview with: Farhia (09)
Interviewed by: Esther
Date of interview: 27 January 2017
Travel: Somalia – Kenya – Tanzania – Malawi – Zimbabwe – South Africa

Esther: My name is maman Esther. This is Friday 27 January 2017. I am interviewing maman Farhia. Maman Farhia, please tell us where you come from. How was your life there? Why and how did you come to South Africa as a refugee in this country?

Farhia: I am from Somalia. I left Somalia in 2008. I went to Kenya where I stayed for about two months. Then I went to Tanzania and from there I proceeded to Malawi. From Malawi I went to Zimbabwe and then to South Africa. My life back home was very difficult because they were fighting every morning. You would wake up in the morning as well as at night [to the fighting].

The family got separated. I didn't know where my mother was or where my father was. The family was scattered. We didn't even know where the other members of the family were. My only daughter—she is 12 years now—fled on her own because of the fighting at school. After [she fled] my mother found her. This was after I left the country. [My mother] phoned me and said that she found my daughter. That was the happiest news I have ever received.

And now here in South Africa I am not happy, but I am happy because I have peace. I am healthy although I have a small problem with sickness. But there is no need for me to complain because many people are worse [off] than me.

Esther: Maman, let's us go back to your home. You said that there was war. Who was fighting?

Farhia: It was a tribal war: my tribe and other tribes. Everyone knows the problems of Somalia. This one wants to be president, then the other one also wants to be president. But the tribes are different: some are big and others are small, and a big tribe will not be led by someone from a small tribe. Some people say the big tribe must lead. Others say we don't want someone from any other tribe to lead us—only someone from our tribe.

Esther: Now, did the government organise for you to leave the country or did you leave on your own?

Farhia: We left on our own. We left because it is a real war: you see bombs exploding, no survivors. There is no way you can work. There is nothing else to do. The only choice one has is to run away. Now, we decided to look for a safer place where we can live in peace where there is no war.

Esther: I feel very bad that your family was scattered. Are you alone here? Where is the father of your child?

Farhia: I was told that the father of my child is in Kenya now, in the Kakoma camp. Both my mother and my daughter are in Somalia. I am the only one who is here in South Africa.

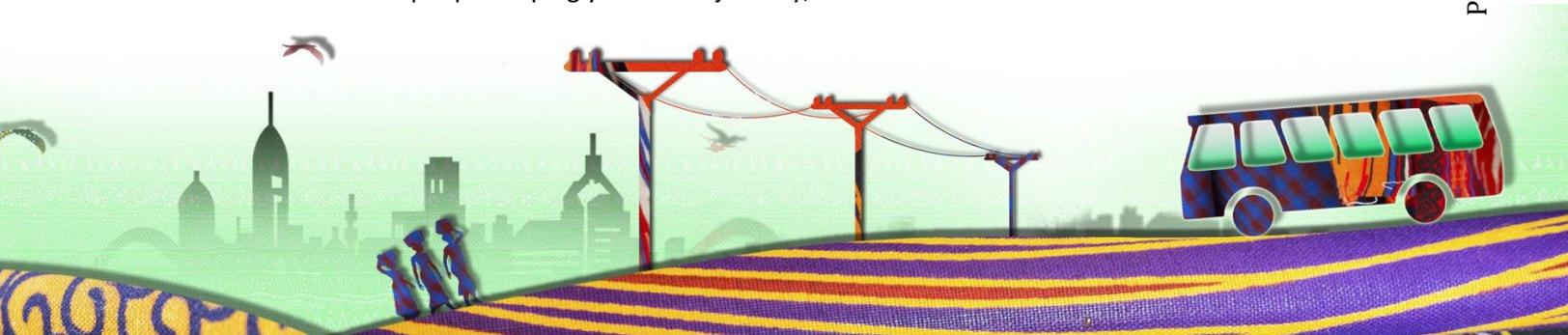
Esther: Are they safe in Somalia? Are they in a refugee camp or where? Is the war over now?

Farhia: There is no camp in Somalia. They stay in small villages.

Esther: When you travel from Somalia do you need a passport or document, or do you just leave?

Farhia: There is no document used to leave. You just leave. If you find a truck or a car going to a certain direction, you can ask for a lift, or if you have some money you can pay. We continued like that until we reached the border post. There we crossed at night when Kenyan soldiers could not see us. When we reached Tanzania, it was the same process that we used. Everywhere it was like that until we arrived in South Africa.

Esther: Were there people helping you on the journey, with food or otherwise?





Farhia: Regarding food, we were helping each other because we were a lot of people. We were about 43 people. When we left Somalia we were nine women and 11 boys. When we arrived in Tanzania we met others who were released from jail and we reached 43, until we entered Zimbabwe. From Zimbabwe we came to South Africa where we were involved in an accident: our driver lost control and the truck rolled. Three people, all boys, died. I thank God that I survived.

Esther: *Hein!* You came out of that accident alive?

Farhia: *Hein!* I am alive!

Esther: From where the accident occurred, did you come straight to Durban or you did you go through Johannesburg?

Farhia: We went to Jo'burg. I lived in Jo'burg from 2011 until 2012, and then from 2012 I went to Cape Town. In 2013 I left Cape Town to come here to Durban.

Esther: Why did you not stay in Jo'burg or Cape Town?

Farhia: Because there are no jobs there. Here we do find jobs and that is why I decided to come here and look for work. But in 2013 I went back to school. I learnt catering in Cape Town and after completing that training I came here and I am now doing small jobs here and there.

Esther: You are a very strong woman. Other women would get discouraged with what you went through, but you are always bold. Do you have news from home, from Somalia, from those that stayed behind there?

Farhia: Yes, my mother has a phone number and I do communicate with her. If I get money I do call her and sometimes she calls me, so yes, we do talk.

Esther: Ok, what is your daughter doing now?

Farhia: She is studying.

Esther: Very good. Are you in communication with her?

Farhia: Yes, I do talk to her.

Esther: Now that you are here in Durban, how do you see life for you here?

Farhia: Life is not easy. For me now, I am living in a shelter that we share with men. We share bathrooms with them. It is hot here in Durban but you can't leave the door open because we are scared. People kill one another in these buildings. A girl was killed in the building where I stay. Now I am very scared and have to keep my door closed, even when it is very hot. It is like you are in jail.

Esther: Yo! It is terrible! What job are you doing here in Durban?

Farhia: Here I am doing piece work. I am community wellness worker. I am also an interpreter for RSS, the Refugee Social Services.

Esther: Does that help you to survive?

Farhia: It helps me because the little that I am earning helps me with my basic expenses. It is not a proper job but it helps me.

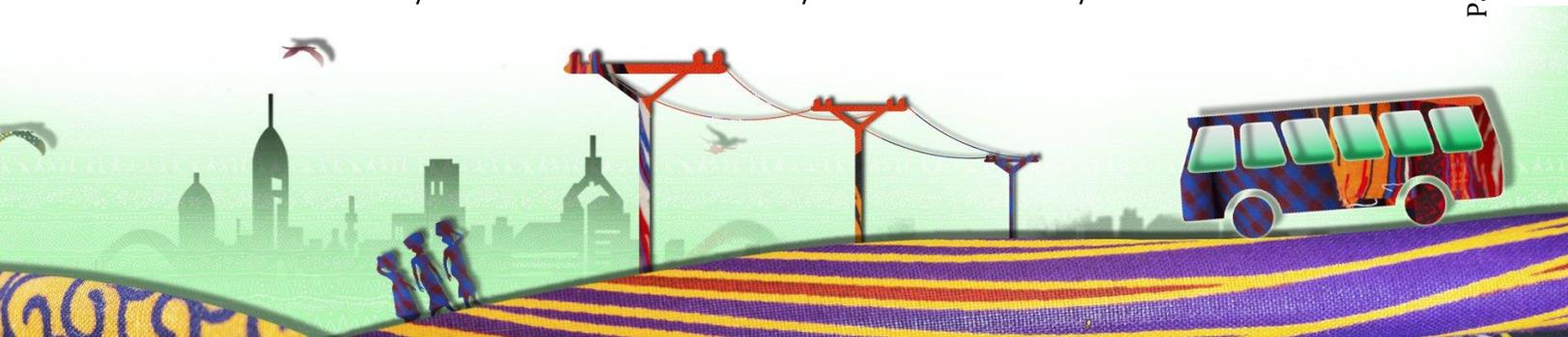
Esther: If you can compare our life here in South Africa for refugees and where we come from, what can you say?

Farhia: To be honest, life would be better back home if it was not for war. But the problem, particularly for us Somalis, is war. Here life is okay because we are safe. You can leave and go looking for piece work. You may or may not get it but you are safe. I thank God I have not come across any problem. It is just people stealing small things.

Esther: When you arrived here, did you go to Home Affairs?

Farhia: I went to Home Affairs in Port Elizabeth. I have really moved around South Africa, my sister, *hein!*

Esther: That means you have a document that allows you to live in this country?





Farhia: I have a document. It expires in four years.

Esther: Is it a [refugee] status?

Farhia: It is a status. It expires on 18 March next year.

Esther: You see, as you have a status, you can study and you can do a lot of things properly.

Farhia: Yes, but you need money to study. You need a bursary—now I don't know where to get a bursary.

Esther: I see that you are still young, not yet old. Can you go back to school since you don't have to spend money on children here? That may help you if you go back to school.

Farhia: Yes, I can go back. Right now I am doing a beauty therapy course that RSS pays for me. I am very grateful for that.

Esther: Are you in contact with the father of your child?

Farhia: I spoke to him on Facebook, but [not for a while].

Esther: But he knows that you are here in South Africa?

Farhia: He knows.

Esther: Does he know the kind of life that you are living here?

Farhia: He doesn't know because it is long time now since we divorced.

Esther: Okay.

Farhia: Yes, we are divorced.

Esther: That means you are free now.

Farhia: I am living alone. I am free.

Esther: What good things do you think refugee women can do in order to progress and not lag behind—so that they don't stay the way they were when they arrived here?

Farhia: I have something to say about women refugees ... well, I don't know about men's things but for women, [I see that] some women have children and others don't. Children go to school. If I had means I would open a training centre [to give women technical skills]—for sewing bags and other things.

Esther: Do you think there are jobs for that?

Farhia: There are jobs that can help them.

Esther: There are other organisations that can help.

Farhia: But the problem with many is the language. They must first learn English then look for work after.

Esther: Do you think of going back to Somalia one day?

Farhia: I'd love to go back to Somalia so that I can meet my mother and my daughter, but the problem is that I am scared about living there because of war. If I go back there I may not be able to come back here, and I don't have money to start a business there, so [these are the issues for me].

Esther: But those who are in Somalia, do they want you to go back there?

Farhia: Yes, but, you know, now my family lives in Mareeg. There is no way to run businesses, no schooling and there are no offices to employ people. And I would love to run my own business.

Esther: Is the war continuing in Somalia?

Farhia: It continues. Just last week and this week two bombs exploded in Mogadishu, the capital city of Somalia.

Esther: Mogadishu, I saw that on television. Is it still about tribal war?

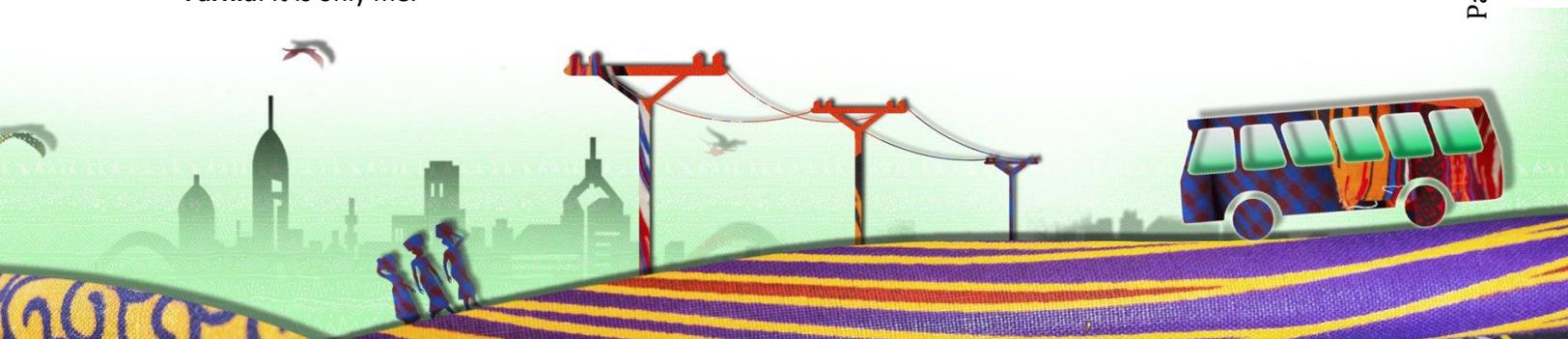
Farhia: Even as we speak, they are still fighting.

Esther: Don't you have relatives here in South Africa?

Farhia: No, I don't have any relatives here.

Esther: You are on your own?

Farhia: It is only me.





Esther: Eh! I thought you Muslims are organised in communities and that you help one another?

Farhia: Yes, there is a Somali community association and they do help, but only if you have a problem.

They have to assess you and be satisfied that you are really in difficult situation. But for a young person like me who can work, they say that you can go and look for work.

Esther: At the shelter where you live, do you pay for your accommodation?

Farhia: Yes.

Esther: Who pays for you?

Farhia: I pay for myself.

Esther: Is it a lot?

Farhia: For the whole month, they charge me R2000.

Esther: Can't you share?

Farhia: I am looking for someone to share with but I have not found anyone yet.

Esther: Will the owners of the building allow you to share? Do they allow sharing?

Farhia: Yes, they do allow it.

Esther: Oh! That is a very difficult thing: I don't know, I really don't know. You are a very strong woman.

Another woman would be discouraged by now. But you are there fighting because there is no way for you to go back to Somalia?

Farhia: (Nodding showing agreement).

Esther: But you only told us about your mother and your daughter. Are there no adult males and females in your family?

Farhia: My father is also living in Kenya. My mother is in Somalia with my child. My other siblings are also living in Somalia. There is no other family.

Esther: What do you think the government of this country can do for you so that your life can be better?

Farhia: I'd like them to give us legislation that we can use to open businesses in townships. For instance, some Somalis do run businesses in townships, but they get killed, their shops get looted and even burned. Now for us who don't have jobs, if we decide to go work in townships, we can make good money that can help us, but we are scared for our lives.

Esther: That is true, but can you invest your money and open a business in townships?

Farhia: Yes, but we are scared because we see how our brothers are killed every day. Their bodies are brought here in town for funerals. Some are savagely killed.

Esther: But for that don't you need some kind of protection?

Farhia: Yeah, some kind of protection.

Esther: Here in Durban, is your Somali community well organised?

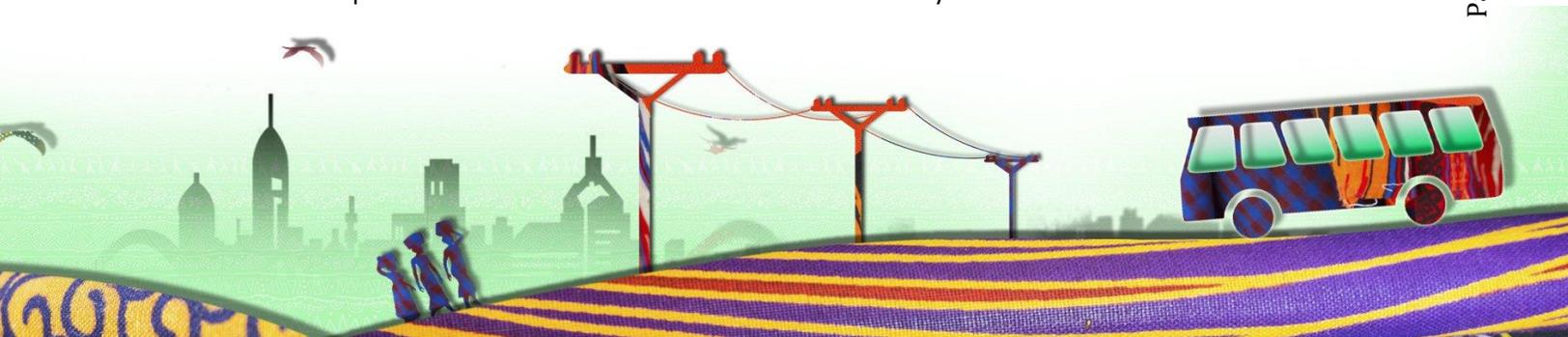
Farhia: Yes.

Esther: What are its goals? Why was that organisation established in first place?

Farhia: The organisation is there to help people. Say, for instance, you are sick and you want to go to hospital and you need to pay and do not have money, they will help you with money. If you want to travel and you say you have a problem, they will help you. They also help orphans who have lost one or both parents and do not have anything, they will collect money—then buy food for them. They pay rent fees for them and give them some additional money to buy more food and/or to pay rent for the following months. Those are the kind of things that the Somali community association is doing—to help poor people and those who are in dire need.

Esther: Do they do that only to Muslims?

Farhia: We help those who are members of the Somali community.





Esther: Even if they are not Muslims?

Farhia: There are no Somalis who are not Muslims. In Somalia, we are all born Muslims: all Somalis are Muslims.

Esther: Oh! I didn't know that! (laughing)

Farhia: Every Somali is born Muslim. We thank God a lot for that.

Esther: There is no other religion in Somalia?

Farhia: No, there is no other religion.

Esther: Ah! 100 per cent Islam?

Farhia: 100 per cent Islam.

Esther: I didn't know that. I am learning that only now. It is good that your community is well organised, but do women also have their own organisation?

Farhia: All are members of the same organization.

Esther: All of you are members of the same mixed organisation?

Farhia: Like here in Durban, our community organisation includes men and women as well.

Esther: I thought you women have your own?

Farhia: There are women we do community work with. We try to identify and understand the problems that members of the community are facing, and then we take those to the leadership, who are all men. The men are hardly at home to know what problems people are facing, especially women's problems. That is why women in the community, who know what's wrong with other women in the community, must identify those problems. If the problem is big and we can't do much about it, we will go to the men and explain the problem that women are facing, and they will provide the needed help.

Esther: I want to know what kind of problems there are.

Farhia: For example, you will find a family where the father passed away and the woman is there. She won't say to everybody what her problems are. She will not just say to men out there that she doesn't have rent or food for her children. She is the only one standing for her children, but she doesn't know how to say: "This is the problem that I have". So, the community women, if they are there, they will notice that the family did not cook anything one day. Why they didn't cook? Maybe they don't have this and that, and then they go to the men and explain to them. This is one problem women face. There is a family here that does not have anything. They can't pay rent and we have to contribute money for the rent. Then men go out to Somali shops and collect money or even go to the Muslim inter-community to ask for some money. And then they pay the rent.

Esther: That is very nice. Did you study at home?

Farhia: Yeah! I did study in Kenya. I was brought to Kenya when I was still very young—just three years old—during the first Somali war. My father was a soldier and he took me from Somalia and brought me to his brother in Kenya. So I attended school while living with my uncle in Kenya. Then I went back to Somalia when I was grown up. I did both my primary and secondary schools in Kenya.

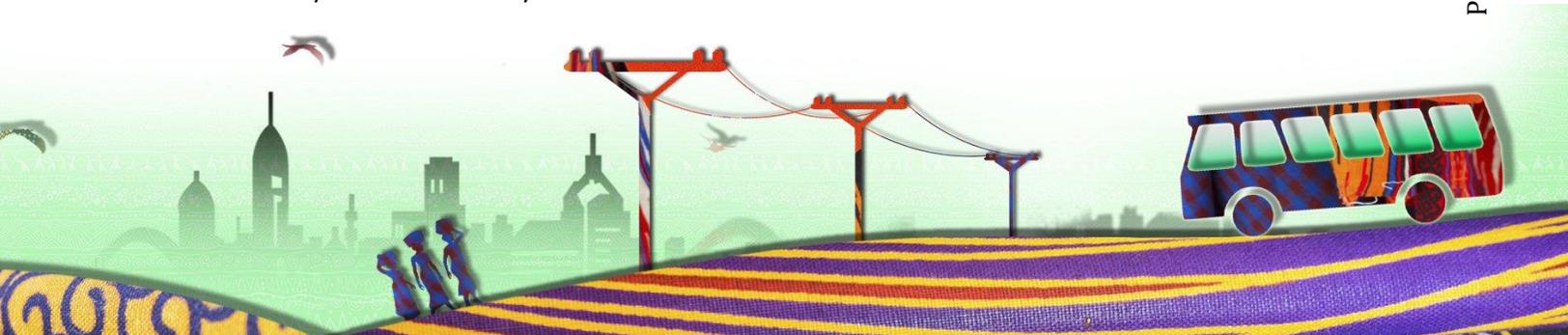
Esther: What did you study at secondary school? What subjects? That is what I am interested in—what did you study?

Farhia: I did only three years in secondary school. Actually I only did three months in my third year and then I got a job in Somalia.

Esther: What job?

Farhia: I worked for Save the Children. It was reproductive health project where we were going to communities to collect data.

Esther: Do you know that they are here?





Farhia: Here? I don't know.

Esther: If you look on the internet—Save the Children—I think you can find them and contact them.

Farhia: I have worked with Save the Children. I have also worked with Care International after completing my studies.

Esther: You have done very good things.

Farhia: Moreover, here I am helping RSS.

Esther: Very, very nice. Like I said at the beginning, you are still young and you can go back to school. It is not too late.

Farhia: I would very much love to.

Esther: Can't you talk to leaders of your community organisation and see if they can't help you to go back to school?

Farhia: The community association can help me, but look at the needs and problems that we are dealing with. We have small children who need to go to school. They won't help me rather than those children. They are the most in need because they are still children and they need to go to school. They cannot remove a child who is attending school and for whom they are paying, and replace him or her with me.

Esther: Your case is different: you are alone. Those children still have their parents but you are a survivor. You are alone. You need to survive here.

Farhia: Yes, but they tell you to go and look for help elsewhere, to other organisations and companies like Jamiatul Ulama, Muslim organisations and RSS.

Esther: You can go to that company—it is a Muslim organisation. They do help Muslims a lot.

Farhia: Jamiat atul doesn't help anymore. We went there before and they said to us that you must be referred by another organisation because they have already taken the exact number that they wanted. If you are sent by another organisation they can do something.

Esther: Exactly, the Somali community association can recommend or send you there.

Farhia: They told the Somali Community association that the number that they have from the Somali community is enough.

Esther: Okay. My dear, what do you think of bringing your daughter here to join you?

Farhia: You know that I don't have a good job. I am not earning good money. The money I earn is not even enough to pay for my rent. Now if I bring my daughter, it will be adding other expenses. She will need to go to school. Where will I get all that additional money?

Esther: So does that mean it is your mother who is paying your daughter's school fees?

Farhia: My mother is helping me. If I get some money I send it to her to help her.

Esther: You don't want her to see South Africa, even during the holidays?

Farhia: But for her to come during the holidays, she will need transport and other things.

Esther: Is it a lot? How much can it be from Somalia to Durban?

Farhia: I am not very sure but I think the airticket is around thirteen thousand.

Esther: Ten thousand?

Farhia: Thirteen thousand just for air ticket.

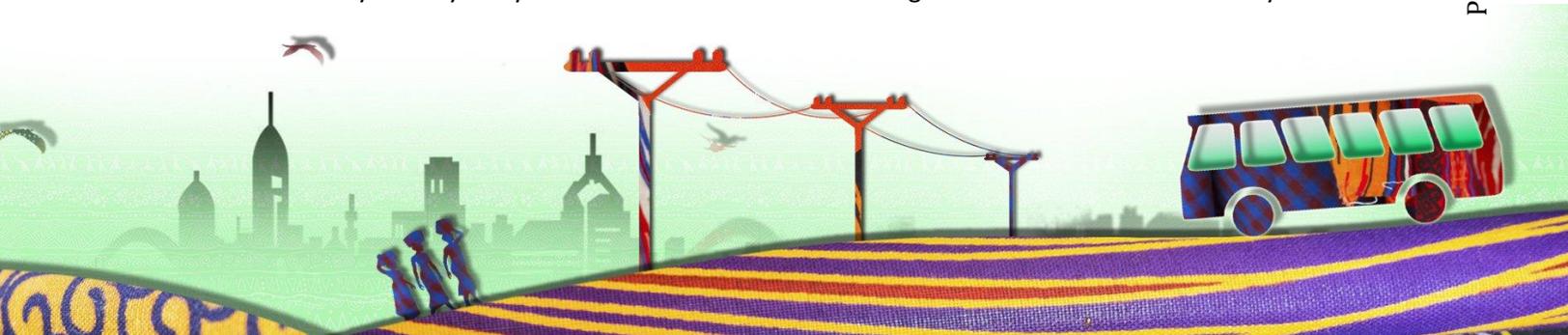
Esther: Thirteen thousand! And then she will need documents, like a passport?

Farhia: Yes, a passport, and a small child doesn't have a passport.

Esther: But since you have [refugee] status, did you declare her at Home Affairs? Did you declare that you have a daughter?

Farhia: Here at Home Affairs? Oh yes.

Esther: She may be very lucky if she comes because she will be given the same document that you have.





Farhia: Yes.

Esther: Thank you very much. I want to know the biggest problem that you have here in Durban.

Farhia: The problem I have is related to health care. I have a problem with my breasts. Both my breasts have things inside. Every time I go to hospital they give me appointments, then new appointments. When I ask for medication to ease my pain, they tell me: "You must go buy your own medication". They don't even give me the medication for the pain. That's the problem that I have. I don't have any other problem.

Esther: As a refugee with status, if you go to hospital, you are not supposed to pay for treatment or medication. At a clinic like Addington, they give you medication for free.

Farhia: We are now paying a small amount, R30.

Esther: Ha! They don't give you medication?

Farhia: No! They don't give medication.

Esther: You have pains like ...

Farhia: Not so much now because they syringed [my breasts]. They took a sample and said they will take it to the lab for testing. But I am still waiting for the results and this is from September last year.

Esther: Yeah, you are waiting for the results of those exams? You have to follow up.

Farhia: They say that they will do another mammogram. It will be on 20 February.

Esther: This February?

Farhia: Yeah. I really want to know the problem that I have because many members of my family died of cancer. Men died of prostate cancer and women died of breast cancer, throat cancer, tongue cancer. My blood sister died of blood cancer. So, I really want to know what the problem with my breasts is.

Esther: Recently they came here at RSS to ... did you also come?

Farhia: Yeah.

Esther: They tested our breasts. Did they also test you, because they also gave people referrals?

Farhia: I was there. They tested me and gave me a referral to go to any hospital for a check-up. But I just saw the same thing happening like at Addington.

Esther: You should have changed and gone to Wentworth.

Farhia: If you go to another hospital they tell you: "You don't stay around here. You have to bring your proof of residence."

Esther: Where do you stay?

Farhia: I live in Prince Edward Street, near Addington.

Esther: I live in Montclair, and all Montclair residents go to Wentworth hospital.

Esther: It is terrible! In the meantime, do you have medication that you are taking?

Farhia: I buy some when I have the pain. I just go and buy my own medication for pain.

Esther: It is good to know exactly what is happening. There are campaigns that are going on which encourage women to go for breast screening. Besides that health problem, what other problems do you have?

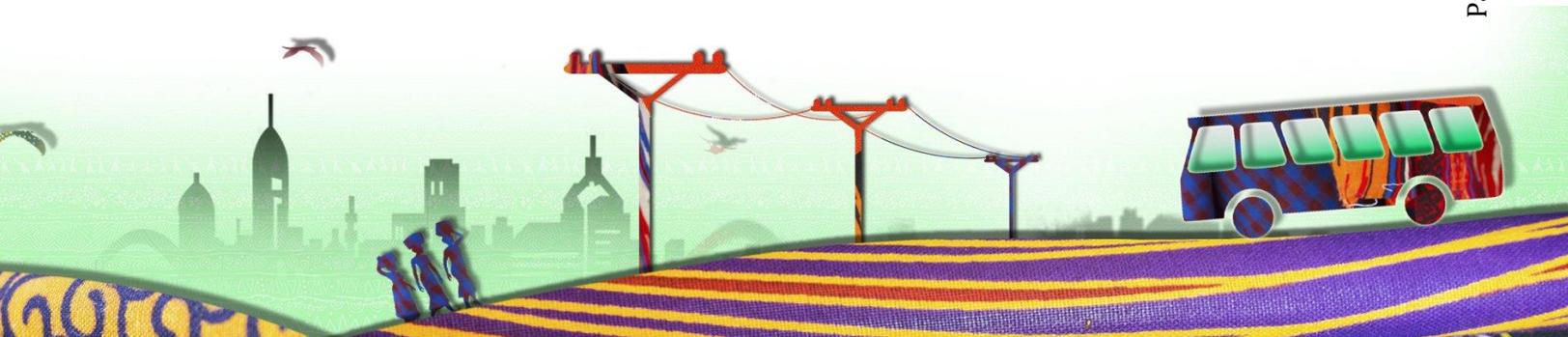
Farhia: Nothing else.

Esther: Do you have a problem of not having food?

Farhia: The first problem that I have is about rental. As for food, if I go to Somali families, I will get food. The food is not a big problem. The problem is the rent. I am paying R2000 per month for the room where I'm staying. I don't even get R1000 per month.

Esther: So it is better to share?

Farhia: Yeah!





Esther: But where you are staying, is the building clean?

Farhia: Yeah!

Esther: But if you ask people in your community, can you find someone to share with?

Farhia: It is not easy to find someone to share with.

Esther: Here you are a community wellness worker and you said that you are also doing beauty therapy?

Farhia: I am still learning beauty.

Esther: Oh! You are attending beauty training! And the community wellness work?

Farhia: I also do interpretation. But it is not a lot of money. Community wellness work is seven hundred rand which is covering rent. But then you are a woman and need sanitary [items].

Esther: Yeah, yeah! I understand.

Farhia: I can't go to look for other jobs because, with the interpreting job, they can call you anytime and you need to leave what you are doing. People won't accept that while working for them. You can't just leave and go to do other things.

Esther: I think you should not leave your job as an interpreter before you find a good job that will pay you well.

Farhia: If I find that kind of job, yes, but the problem is that I have not found that kind of job, since January. There are no jobs. In December we had jobs but now, in January, there are very few jobs.

Esther: Like what kind of jobs?

Farhia: Any job—even to work in a shop.

Esther: Even in a restaurant?

Farhia: They were looking for someone at a restaurant, but if I do a hard work I have pain in my breasts.

Esther: Things are complicated. Shame! Now, with all these issues that you have raised, what do you think can be done? What can you do about all your problems?

Farhia: Like?

Esther: About all the problems that are surrounding you?

Farhia: There is nothing I can do. Only God knows. He alone will open doors and that is when I will get help. I only pray to God, because if I knew what to do I would have done it already.

Esther: Have you already explained to ... do you have a social worker?

Farhia: Yes.

Esther: You must tell her all these problems that you are having.

Farhia: My social worker did help me. That was in October and November. RSS paid R800 rent for me per month and then they said there is no more help that the office will give me because they had paid for my beauty course and two months' rent. They said because I am working part-time as a community wellness worker and as an interpreter, I am getting some money—so I had a lot of help from the RSS office.

Esther: That beauty training will last for how long?

Farhia: We started beauty training in December. We will finish in February.

Esther: What do you plan to do after that beauty training?

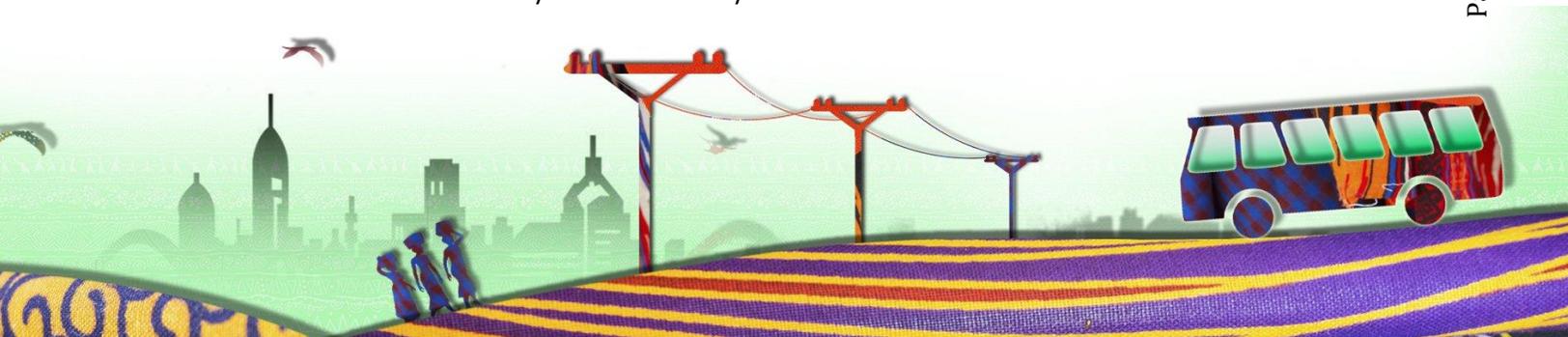
Farhia: I am planning to open my own business because, you know, we get a lot of Somali women who come for beauty treatment for weddings. That's the job that I want to do.

Esther: Is it about beauty only?

Farhia: Only beauty.

Esther: And only for Muslims? You can't do it on other people? To do facial treatments?

Farhia: To do facial treatment you need a beauty salon.





Esther: That is what I am saying.

Farhia: You need money to hire a salon. If you don't have money, with what are you going to open a beauty salon?

Esther: You can do that job at someone else's salon?

Farhia: Where? At other salons?

Esther: Yes, at other salons.

Farhia: I would not want to work for other people because they have too much control. They give a lot of instructions and they don't pay well.

Esther: Why are you learning it then?

Farhia: I will open my own business. I will pray that God will provide money for me to do my own job.

Esther: To open a salon?

Farhia: Yeah, even if it is in my room. I will advertise on a board and tell people. They will come to me at home. After that, if I manage to save some money, I will open my beauty salon.

Esther: I think it is better to start in your building. When people know you and what you are doing, they will come to you for treatment. You said at the beginning that the government can help women to make bags and other do other technical jobs, like catering. If you find an opportunity, just do a job that will not give you pain in your breasts.

I thank you very much for your time and for sharing all what you have told me. All [you have said] is data that we need. Thank you and may God continue to help us.

Farhia: You're welcome.

