Mental Health and Refugees: the Eritrean Case

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Mental health problems and suicide are two challenges facing the Eritrean community. The collective multi-generational trauma Eritreans experience is a direct result of continuous wars and human right violations committed by the current government. The denial of basic rights in Eritrea and subsequent difficulties experienced during migration, while claiming asylum, and integrating into new cultures in destination countries continue to affect migrants. As a result, many Eritrean refugees suffer from poor mental health. In 2018, an Eritrean ICE detainee killed himself in transit while being deported at the Egyptian airport. The same year in Europe, many Eritrean teenagers who travelled by themselves also took their lives. The suicide rate continues to rise among Eritrean refugees in Canada and the U.S.

Talking about mental health is considered a taboo in the Eritrean culture and among Eritrean refugees in the Bay Area. Mr. Drar will address the growing mental health problems in order to raise awareness and encourage faculty and students to play a leading role in resolving this crisis.

Yohannes Ferdinando Drar came to Canada in the 80’s as refugee from Eritrea. After arriving in Canada, he attained his Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees in Social Work from Carleton University in Ottawa. He has since been working as a Mental Health Social Worker at Royal Ottawa Hospital. He is a strong advocate for refugees’ mental health issues. He raises awareness and educates refugee communities and the public through seminars, radio talk shows, as well as writing articles in community newspapers. He is a strong community activist and organizer. His passion remains to integrate new immigrants and refugees into their host country.

On February 8th, Mr. Drar will participate in a full day healing and educational event with the Eritrean community in the Bay Area. Eritrean refugees started to arrive in the Bay Area in the early 1980’s. Today the Bay Area is home to one of the largest Eritrean diaspora communities.