

Raise-a-Reader: Canada delivers a much-wanted education, as well as refuge

Learning to read, write helps refugee women cope with trauma of separation

By Tara Carman, Vancouver Sun September 14, 2012

Photograph by: Steve Bosch



Miriam Jawara with her children, clockwise from left, Aicha, 2; Abou, 3; and Maconde, 8. Jawara began learning to read and write after she came to Canada as a refugee from Guinea in 2004 at age 21.

Mariam Jawara longed to go to school all her life, but when she finally got the opportunity after moving to Canada at age 21, the guilt she felt over what she'd left behind made that dream seem as impossible as ever.

Jawara was forced to leave her husband and three-month-old baby in the West African country of Guinea when she came to Canada as a refugee in 2004. Originally from neighbouring Liberia, Jawara fled fighting in that country at age seven with her father and siblings and moved in with relatives in Guinea, where her father died several years later. Jawara sold fruits and vegetables at a local market to help the family get by. Forgoing that income in order to attend school was not an option.

Jawara's brother applied for the family to come to Canada as refugees, and while the application was making its way through the system, Jawara married a Guinean man and became pregnant. Her husband and child were not included in the immigration application and Jawara believed that if she told Canadian authorities about them, the family's application would be cancelled entirely. So she made the heartbreaking decision to leave her husband and newborn behind in the hope of establishing a new life for the family half a world away.

Jawara spent her first year in Vancouver in poor health and immensely homesick. She was under pressure to quickly find a job in order to support herself and send money home, but with no Canadian experience or formal education, it was difficult. She tried to go to school, but found it impossible to concentrate.

"Every time I go to school, I'm crying. I'm thinking about my family, especially my daughter. "She eventually found work, first at a retail store, then as a cleaner. She was able to sponsor her husband and daughter to come to Canada in 2007 and the family was reunited after three years apart.

Jawara, now 28, shifts her heavily pregnant body uncomfortably on the couch in her South Burnaby apartment as her three children — plus a couple of their cousins — play outside on the patio. Her oldest daughter Maconde, whom she left behind in Guinea in 2004, is now a serious-looking eight-year-old attending a local French-immersion school and running herd on her younger siblings.

Jawara must take a break from her own studies to take care of the new baby, due any day now. She started attending the Canucks Family Education Centre, which gives parents who have not had the opportunity a chance to go to school, after her last child was born in 2010. It was the first opportunity of her life to learn to read and write.

Finding the time was not easy; Jawara had to wake up early to get her children ready for the day and be in school in east Vancouver by 9 a.m. She'd get home around 4 p.m., spend a short time with the family, then leave for an eight-hour night shift as a cleaner starting at 5 p.m. Her husband works for a tiling company.

But the long days are worth it, she said, because now she can read her emails and text messages on her own for the first time. Given the choice, Jawara said she would focus full-time on her studies, but the demands of motherhood and paying the bills make that impossible. She's working toward her high-school diploma and hopes to one day become a pharmacist.