

**Living in a Close Community:  
The Everyday Life of Somali Refugees**

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## **Introduction: Overview of the Research Programme and Limitations**

When we began joint consultation in order to carry some research projects with the Somali community, we had in mind a series of traditional studies on various topics of importance. We consulted the community about the topics they saw as important, rather than take them from our own limited ideas and preconceptions, but we still had in mind a series of conventional studies. Table 1 presents the main areas of focus, and some of the finished, underway and dreamed of studies we planned.

[Table 1 about here]

What became clear very quickly once we began was just how much all the areas of life impacted on each other. It was difficult to separate out one issue and study it in isolation from other issues as we had originally envisaged. Everything impacted on everything else. What is interesting from this is that with our knowledge of Maori research methods (e. g., Smith, 1999), we realized that the real problem was not with the Somali (or Maori) communities but with the western communities. For westerners, our actions and practices can be *compartmentalized* and treated as distinct from other practices. What we do at the gym has only a small impact on what we do at work; what we do at home on weekends has only a little impact on our gym membership or on work. How we talk to colleagues does not much affect how we talk to family. We can also easily substitute and change our compartmentalized activities, as when we try and decide between going fishing for the weekend and driving up north to visit relatives. The two events can be substituted for one another: catching fish and making contact with kin (Guerin, 2004).

The problem for us, not for the Somali community, was the tremendous overlap in activities and the contexts for activities in such a close community. Even health research, one of the first topics to receive our attention, could not be easily compartmentalized away from family, language, religion, history, education, and employment issues. Several examples of this appear in this paper, such as gym membership and exercise classes becoming a religious issue and being subject to a rumour. To this end, we ended up separating out the different areas of research and community development for funding and practical purposes, but actually treated them all as one big whole.

This point is an important one, and certainly affects the ease with which student projects and short-term funding can be made available to study with such communities, for example. It also means that much of what we are all *really* learning from our studies comes from the combined, or ethnographic, research that includes our informal interactions in the community as well as the more formally collected data. This report is our first attempt to cover some of the informal material. It includes observations at Somali weddings, for example; observations that we wrote down afterwards. It includes talking with members of the community before asking them more “serious” or formal questions.

This paper gives an overview of the informal research and community development we have jointly conducted with the Somali community in Hamilton, New Zealand. In this report we will not present data from specific studies but give an ethnographic overview of what life is like for this group of refugees. We will focus most on women and children, because these are the people with whom we have spent most time.

For us, showing the challenges and successes of such a community in this way presents a very real picture of multiculturalism and how to promote cultural diversity. This way of viewing the community also suggests some theoretical considerations about the very possibility of doing traditional forms of research in these areas. In giving these observations we will also outline some of the community projects in which we have been involved and some of the problems we have found in trying to sustain activities in a multicultural society.

### **Somali Refugees in New Zealand**

Approximately 1000 refugees come into New Zealand every year under the quota and asylum-seeker criteria. This does not include many others now arriving under the family reunification criteria. Originally, New Zealand was one of the few countries to accept from the United Nation High Commissioner of Refugees a preponderance of women at-risk and those with disabilities. Over  $\frac{3}{4}$  of refugees in the world are women and children, and so many of the refugees coming into New Zealand are women and children. Many refugees coming into New Zealand have now gone through the difficult process of requesting family members to be allowed entry into New Zealand (they have to pay the airfares, for example), and so many men now arrive each year under this family reunification scheme.

Upon arrival, refugees get a six-week orientation course at a special centre in which they learn about the cultures and practices of New Zealand, the bureaucracies, and other topics. Refugees are taught English daily during their orientation, but after they leave the orientation centre English classes are not provided but refugees are given information about locally available English classes. One of the current problems,

however, is that family reunification entrants receive none of this, as it is assumed that the family will, and can, teach them everything they need to know, even though the women and children will have different requirements from the men who often arrive.

Somali refugees have been arriving in New Zealand since 1993, and as mentioned, they have mostly been women and children until more recently. This has meant that it is not uncommon at all that a household might have one or two women looking after five children, and then be expected to house and cater for the arrival of two older men and three sons in their 20s. As can be imagined, this puts a great burden on all members of that household, but most especially the women.

All the Somali in Hamilton are Muslims, most to a very real degree, and the Islamic Mosque is a key meeting place for Somali men in particular, along with other non-Somali Islamic groups. Somali make up the largest group of current refugees in Hamilton, with at least 800 currently living in this city of 110,000 people. The term “refugee” is an abstract and sometime misleading label, and although there are many Cambodian and Vietnamese refugees in Hamilton, many do not now refer to themselves as refugees since they have been here with passports for more than 20 years. In this way, the uses of the term “refugee” need to be monitored and treated carefully.

What refugees do have in common, however, are a series of contexts or conditions that define the basis to their lives. Most of their problems arise from these “refugee” conditions. First and foremost, many do not speak good English, and this is a key factor in almost every part of their learning to live in a new country. We found, for instance, that English ability was a key factor in health for Somali in Hamilton, despite language seeming to have little to do with physical health (Guerin, Abdi, & Guerin,

2003). But the complex connections between the ability to speak English and the accessing of health services provide ample links. Unlike migrants, who in New Zealand must show some competency in English before being allowed to migrate, refugees have no time to learn a new language before escaping their original country or from the time they learn where they are going to the time they leave.

Refugees often have also had interruptions to schooling and study. They may have had no formal education during the conflict or war from which they are escaping, and little or no education in the refugee camps in which they might have stayed for 2-3 years, some even 10 years or more. This means they arrive in a new country with little English and little education. The current school systems usually place them into schools merely based on their age, which puts them at a distinct disadvantage and adds to the stress (Kahin, 1997). For example, we have talked to a 13-year-old boy with no English, who had only been in the country for three months, placed in an intermediary level high school because of his age. He had no real idea what was going on, and was “causing some problems from not paying attention”.

Another very typical pattern for refugees is for high unemployment and low incomes. This is a combination of many factors compounded, including lack of English, no recognition for qualifications gained in their country of origin, and discrimination. Once again, this influences almost everything else in their lives since opportunities are lost and compromises made to their health and well-being. It leads to living in poorer neighbourhoods with poorer housing, and all the associated risk factors and health problems.

One of the *benefits* of being in a close community, however, is the total amount of social support available. This is very noticeable in the Somali community, with loosely connected relatives helping out with big and small tasks. For example, when a woman has a baby other women in the community come to her house to cook and clean for 42 days, relieving her of those responsibilities and allowing her time to recover and enjoy the baby. The Somali community have also joined together to buy a van for community uses, such as transport for children to their soccer matches and picking up new family reunification arrivals from Auckland Airport.

Associated with this, refugees are typical in having absent family members. Indeed, this is one of the biggest stressors to them, and if their reports are to be believed at face value, this is the biggest worry and stress most of them have in life. Family members, most often males, are either missing or dead, although sometimes contact is made after several years from a distant part of the world with no warning (Kahin, 1997). Not only do those here have to do everything themselves, so that children take on roles that the father might have had (cf. Aye & Guerin, 2001), but they are also left with a gap of not knowing whether their relatives are alive in some other part of the world or dead.

Finally, another common condition of being a refugee is that there are subtle and not so subtle discriminations and prejudices from the resident population. This is especially so for Somali women, whose flowing and brightly coloured clothes make them stand out (Guerin, Diiriye, Corrigan & Guerin, 2003). We have found it common that people in cars yell abuse at the women, and tell them to go home. Occasionally, the Mosque is defaced with graffiti.

Getting a house rented is also a common discrimination problem although few have the English ability and assertion to make a formal complaint. The third author of this paper once went to look at a house to rent but when she arrived, the landlord told suspiciously told her that it had been taken. She immediately told the second author about this who then phoned the landlord and asked about the house in her U.S. American accent, and was told that the house was still available and to come around. When they both then turned up the landlord told them that he was sorry but he was just on the phone and had finalized a deal with someone else so the house was no longer available. Unfortunately, the law is that unless the landlord says something explicitly about the colour or race of the persons involved, there is no way to prosecute or even file a complaint. Our informal talks suggest that this scenario is very common for Somali in Hamilton.

In summary, all of these conditions are typically part and parcel of being a refugee, and our experience is that despite the great trauma and abuses the refugees have suffered, their main depression and stress arise from these factors all combined rather than any “unresolved” trauma issues. If any of us were to experience all these problems simultaneously, we too would almost certainly have ‘severe depression’ or other sorts of stress problems.

### **The Everyday Life of Somali Refugee Women**

Life is very different for Somali women when they arrive in New Zealand compared to their lives in Somalia. These differences impact on the most fundamental ways that they have run their life previously, not only in the more obvious changes such as the clothing and language of New Zealanders. For example, at a very basic level of



health, life expectancy at birth in Somalia is 47 years whereas it is about 78 years in New Zealand (Ministry of Health, 2001). The under 5-years mortality rate in Somalia is 211 per 1000 live births but only 8.5 in New Zealand (Ministry of Health, 2001). Maternal mortality rate is 1600 per 100,000 live births in Somalia but only 5.1 in New Zealand (Ministry of Health, 2001).

Of most impact, however, is the total fertility rate in Somalia of 7.2 children born per woman and only 2.0 in New Zealand (Ministry of Health, 2001). This means, for example, that life (and bureaucracy) in New Zealand is designed in such a way as to cater for women having, on average, two children, not seven. In the refugee situation, women often look after children of other family members who may have died or are still in Africa so that a Somali woman looking after 10-15 children is not unusual. This can make life very difficult for a woman to deal with schools, child benefit payments, and car seats.

### ***The Major Impacts on Daily Life for Somali Women Refugees***

Figure 1 presents our generalized observations of the events that impact on daily life for Somali women—events that sometimes provide benefits but often present challenges and stress. In discussing these factors, we will often draw upon our experiences in developing and establishing one of our intervention projects concerned with increasing healthy physical activity amongst the Somali women, a project initiated by the Somali women (Guerin, Diiriye, Corrigan, & Guerin, 2003). A major point to emphasise is that developing this intervention (or any intervention) has required looking beyond the immediate topic (physical activity, in this case), since physical activity cannot be compartmentalized to the extent it can for westerners. That is, while there might be

individual women participating in the physical activity programme, the whole community is involved in many and subtle ways.

[Figure 1 about here]

**Gender.** Gender roles are an important consideration in the day-to-day life of Somali women. What this has meant in the development of the physical activity programmes is that the programmes required the consideration of these issues, or the programmes would have never worked. For example, it was necessary to find appropriate facilities for the women to exercise; they could not exercise anywhere, as can western women.

For the majority of the Somali women, it is inappropriate to exercise where men might see them. We first found a community centre with a gym facility in the community where many of the women lived. It was necessary to have all the windows of the gym painted over so that men could not see in and we needed to be diligent about having the doors locked so that men did not inadvertently enter the facility during our exercise sessions.

At another time, the women had requested the use of more equipment for their exercise programmes, so we arranged gym memberships at a women-only facility where the women could use more equipment and exercise without the possibility of men entering the facility (Guerin, Diiriye, Corrigan, & Guerin, 2003). However, there are not many women-only exercise facilities available, and exclusively women fitness centres are very expensive. So many people suggested to us that we establish walking groups for the Somali women as this is a low cost physical activity option that can be done just about anywhere. But the women will not just go walking in public, partly because of their high

visibility and partly because of their fear of harassment in such a situation. Many Somali women are harassed often in public with name-calling and things thrown at them. For these reasons, we have had walking groups, but these were held after dark, in a high school playing field with no lights so that the women could not be seen (Guerin, Diiriye, Corrigan, & Guerin, 2003).

***Past Experiences Impact on Exercising.*** In Somalia, daily life for these women involved extensive walking. People walked long distances to visit friends and family, when looking after livestock to find pasture, and to go to the market to buy perishable foods (because most situations are such that refrigerators are not available). This is the case for most Somalis, whether they are in refugee camps or not. Refugee camps often cover a large area, requiring lots of walking to get food, supplies, and visiting family or friends in other parts of the camp. When Somali arrive in a western country such as New Zealand, this aspect of the lifestyle changes drastically. In New Zealand, people drive cars everywhere, and as a result of the harassment mentioned previously, many of the Somali women will drive short distances even when it seems like walking would be easier and healthier. We have found, however, that when the women are given a safe, appropriate opportunity to walk they will do so for long periods, enjoy it and continue to request opportunities to do it again.

Another issue of past experience that impacts on current daily life of Somali is the experiencing or witnessing of traumatic events. Women and children are more likely to have experienced traumatic events through their witnessing of brutal killings or rape of loved ones during war and civil unrest. This can cause some disturbances and adjustments to everyday life in their new country. Many, for example, are extremely

apprehensive when meeting police during their first orientation period in the country, since their experiences with authorities in Somalia and in refugee camps have sometimes been traumatic.

***Religious Interpretations of Exercising.*** Islam plays a major role in Somali daily life. For example, Islamic religion suggests praying five times each day. This practice, while accommodated in Islamic countries, is not so accommodated in western countries. For example, in setting up the exercise programmes, it was necessary to consider this prayer time and to have adjoining rooms or facilities available for the women to pray should prayer time coincide with exercise class. Ideally, exercise classes (or any classes) would be scheduled so that they would not coincide with prayer time, but this time changes throughout the year. Either way, this prayer time is an important consideration.

Another religious issue that has impacted on exercise classes is the clothing of Somali women. Even when arrangements were made so that women could dress comfortably for exercise without fear of men seeing them, they still often felt more comfortable exercising in their long dresses and veils. This, however, proved to be a safety issue later when using exercise equipment and required the women modifying their dress for safety reasons. When explained in this way, the women were quite happy to modify their dress. As mentioned above, a Somali woman's dress also makes them very visible in public and easy targets for discrimination.

***Community.*** Women's exercising affects the whole community in subtle ways. During our exercise programmes with the Somali women, a prominent religious leader had visited the local mosque and spoke with the men in the community. Following this, a rumour had spread quickly through the community that this leader had said that it was not

religiously appropriate for the women to exercise outside the home. Consultation with a male leader of the community revealed that this rumour was not true at all and that the Imam had said no such thing. While only a rumour, possibly from a male in the community who was not happy with his wife's going out to exercise classes, it could have led to the stopping of our programmes.

**Family.** As mentioned, Somali women tend to have many more children than western women. While culturally and historically this practice makes sense, it is difficult to adapt in a western culture. For *any* woman with many children in a western country, life can be very difficult. For example, the cost of childcare, food, clothing, can become very expensive. Transportation becomes difficult, if not impossible, when the legal requirements for car seats are considered. Often, a woman is left to care for many children on her own because other adult family are either still in Africa, have been killed in war, or work far from home (such as the case in seasonal agricultural employment).

Many of the first refugees to come to New Zealand were women and children. For many of those women, their burden is often increased when extended family arrive with little or no English or understanding of western culture. Although it is very stressful when extended family is still living in refugee camps or war-torn countries, other stresses arise when the extended family come to join their family members in western countries. For example, when a woman and her children are taken in by a country (such as New Zealand), the family that is left behind in Africa depend on that woman to send money to them back in Africa, not understanding that her income is usually very low. When extended family arrives in the host country, they depend on that woman for housing, transportation, translation services, food, clothing, and any other resettlement issues. It is

not unusual for a single woman with a number of her own children living in a three bedroom house to suddenly find herself with 10 members of extended family on her doorstep. Again, it cannot be stressed enough that having extended family arrive removes a lot of stress and anxiety, but it also creates different problems

*Cultural Practices and Organisation.* The culture in Somalia is very different to that in New Zealand. As one simple example, keeping your receipt (i.e., docket) when you make a purchase from department stores is a completely new concept. Dealing with bureaucratic systems is a big challenge with all those forms to fill in by people who do not have any formal education, who cannot write their own names (Schneider, 2000). At the same time, while adults are struggling to adapt, the children seem to be adjusting to a point where they want toys, cartoons, posters of musicians, skate boards, or any item that are trendy with their western friends. The differences in adaptation of parents compared with children can often lead to creative exploitation of the children of their parent's lack of information. For example, we know of one Somali girl who told her parents that it was a school requirement to watch "The Simpsons" every evening after school.

*Language.* Older Somalis do not necessarily read and write the Somali language since it was only formally written in 1972. This makes living in a western country difficult as most, if not all, of the western system is based on reading and writing. So, for example, western documents, forms, pamphlets, and information cannot just be translated into Somali as a solution because many of the people cannot read it anyway. This means that health promotion information can be useless even if translated into Somali. The hope is that at least someone in a large household will read either English or Somali, but getting this done does not always eventuate.

***Environment.*** The climate in New Zealand is very different to that in Somalia; it is particularly cold in New Zealand compared with Somalia. It is understandable therefore, that we have found some families putting their heaters on day and night during winter, without understanding the high cost of such a practice until a month or two later when a very large power bill is received. With little English, it is then very stressful for them to try and negotiate payments with power companies or to understand why the bills are so high.

***Transport.*** One of the biggest problems for Somali women adjusting to life in a western country is transport. As mentioned, in Somalia people walked long distances and were familiar with their environments. Learning how to use bus services, route numbers, and timetables, are all very new experiences and once again require English. Learning how to drive in New Zealand is also a big challenge when all the rules are in English. Driving can be difficult for women with many children, as mentioned, due to car seat requirements and insufficient seating in the cars that are affordable. This results in women spending most of their time at home and either sending other family members to do the shopping and run errands or only going out to do shopping when help is available to look after children.

### ***Organising Exercise Classes for Somali Women: A Community Event***

Despite all these problems and set-backs, the exercise programmes for Somali women that were run were very successful (Guerin, Diiriye, Corrigan, & Guerin, 2003), and the aerobics classes are still running now except that extra time at the end is now spent on teaching Somali dancing to the younger girls. Presently there are too many women wanting to join the classes and extra sessions will be necessary.

There were many benefits that arose from these classes for both the women and the community. Not only did fitness seem to improve, but there was also added social cohesion and sense of community developed, and in the gym programme the women got some exposure to western women and the way of life. One woman recently put it well when she remarked that the men got their day at the Mosque on Fridays and so the women have their time at the exercise classes and traditional dancing on Sundays.

On the other hand, there were also many new issues that arose in the setting up and organizing of the classes. Of particular concern were the many reports of harassment the women get when they leave the home, and part of our future research will be addressing this issue. There were also difficulties in arranging and maintaining attendance at the gym centre, partly due to staff and partly due to the women's inexperience in how gyms operate. Finally, we have mentioned the occasion that a rumour was spread about prohibiting women from exercising out of the home.

The bigger point to make from this is that even setting up relatively simple exercise and fitness classes involved community-wide changes and adaptations. There were individual women attending the classes and doing exercise, but the issues (and benefits) that arose involved the whole community including the men. The issues that arose and the benefits and changes that occurred were not restricted to the people doing the exercises. This is unusual for westerners. It became clear to us that we could not go into the community, set up exercise classes and do nothing else. With so many needs, we, as researchers, have taken the responsibility of ensuring that we contribute to solving the problems and issues that we learn about, whether casually or through our research.

### **The Everyday Life of Somali Refugee Children**



When we start to interact with and observe Somali children there are a number of obvious differences to the way “western” children behave. Figure 2 shows our rough representation of the main influences on western children. Time is typically divided between home/family and school, with other activities being either minor or part of these two arenas. For example, peers and friends are a major influence on children but they typically are found through school networks, except perhaps for children with strong church ties. Similarly, sports are important, but they also typically function through the school with family in attendance sometimes.

[Figure 2 about here]

This arrangement sets the context for the ways in which parents and others can influence children. Typically, again, options for parents and teachers include praising the children, punishments of some sort, affecting the reputation or access to peers and friends, or, more and more importantly, using the access to commodities as the way of controlling children’s behaviour.

Figure 2 also presents our rough representation of the influence on Somali children, and this is a good framework for those dealing with these children to think about the children’s lives as they observe them. Typically, there is a very strong triangle formed between the Somali community, Islam, and the family. Most issues and events revolve around these, and typically the people involved in each of these know each other. If you make changes in a family, then this impacts in the community and at the Mosque; this was the message we have already discussed from setting up exercise classes for the Somali women.

These influences are also seen in the way that parents and community leaders can influence the Somali children (Tarazi, 1995). Usually, a first approach at changing the children's behaviour is to ask them what the impact upon Islam would be—how what they might be doing conflicts with their religion. They would also then talk to the child about how what they are doing might impact on the reputation of their community in the wider Hamilton community, and then on the reputation of their family within the Somali community. These sorts of influences tend not to work on western children, and appealing to how what they do reflects badly on their neighbourhood does not lead to much in the way of change.

### ***Somali Children and School***

What can also be seen from Figure 2, that is important for understanding the Somali children at school, is that school is seen as secondary to this triangle and the links are typically one way only. That is, family, religion and the community affect the children's schooling but the school does not affect much in return (Kahin, 1997; Naidoo, 1999; Parker-Jenkins, 1991). If anything, the triangle can set up situations of conflict with the school.

There are many examples of this one-way influence with school. In Somalia, for example, parents were typically not involved in the schools, and indeed, if a parent was asked to go along to their child's school this would be seen as a negative situation—the child must have done something bad that will reflect on the family and the community. So Somali parents are very hesitant about being involved in their children's schooling here, and being asked to be on a Parents' School Board or Council will initially be viewed as being in some sort of trouble. Similarly, homework existed in Somalia but

here parents might not expect that their children have to do homework and rely on the children to inform them. The example given earlier of the girl telling her parents that the “Simpsons” were part of her homework is a good illustration.

When dealing with Somali children, then, there are multiple influences that are not always apparent but can be very potent in a situation. This creates some complex situations that also contribute towards stress in settling into a new place (Naidoo, 1999). For example, schooling often comes to be seen as in conflict with teaching the Qur’an to children. This is not a necessary conflict but typically occurs through some complex paths. A typical conflict along these lines occurs when considering the time and place to have Qur’an lessons. We have found almost identical disputes occurring in the Hamilton Somali community as we read in a report of Somali communities in Toronto and London (McGown, 1999). In Somalia, Qur’an lessons were naturally incorporated into the normal school curriculum as a matter of course, and further classes not necessary, whereas school and religion are typically compartmentalised in the western world:

*Many families recognize Qur’an school as a crucial element of value transfer and community socialization. Somali teenagers and adults talk of their Somali schooldays being divided between hours spent at the dugsi and hours at school. Many teenagers remarked that it was strange to them not to have religious (Qur’anic) education incorporated into their regular school day. The idea that religion was extraneous to education, and had to be worked into extracurricular time much like sports or games, was to them a peculiar arrangement. (McGown, 1999, p. 104)*

Adding to this the problems of English language for the children and parents, and the stresses we saw for the women earlier, a typical conflict occurs between Qur'an lessons, sports, and school. Qur'an lessons have to be put after school but this means that the Somali children cannot join in with others in sports (and often this means that they have to form their own segregated teams). But because of the nature of large Somali families and their refugee status (low income), the children also often have been caring for younger siblings or helping out with household chores after school, especially girls (Mayall, 1991). Moreover, because of a common poor ability in English, they also need after-school classes in English and other schoolwork. All these factors mix to make the time after school very complex to organize and stressful for both parents and children. Most of the children want their Qur'an lessons but are made to choose between Qur'an lessons, extra schoolwork coaching, and sports practice. This is a difficult choice for them, and we have had situations identical to those reported in McGown (1999) occurring in the Hamilton Somali community. As an Education Refugee Coordinator told us: "After-school help in Maths was offered to Somali youth during 2000-20001 but without fail they opted out and preferred to attend soccer practice".

Further problems, better known ones in general, occur in other areas of schooling—teaching fine arts, performing arts, sex education, and health and drug education. There are solutions that can find a peaceful compromise between parents, school and children, but these need to be made known in interventions so that conflict is avoided. For example, drawing the human body is in general prohibited in the Qur'an but where necessary for living, and not just for pleasure, it is permitted. Sex education is something that should be talked about between father and son, or between mother and

daughter, and strategies along these lines can be worked out with teachers and community workers.

Less well known problems can occur for clothing, and the wearing of veils (*hijab*). These are not exclusively symbols of the oppression of women, as has been emphasized recently with the Taliban in Afghanistan, but serve many purposes that lead women to want to wear them. Up to a certain age there is much choice, and most girls exercise this choice:

*Aman: I hope that I will wear the hijab [veil] sometime, but I don't know when. That's my dream actually. I don't know why I don't. I will decide someday... Most of the people I know who wear hijab, they don't have as many problems as we do in society.*

*Hawa: The thing is that when you're wearing hijab, you're gonna act differently than when you're not, because when you're wearing it you're gonna refuse to go to movies and stuff like that, and you can follow the rules. But if you're not, as we are, you're gonna act like you're non-Muslim and that's gonna affect you. And other Muslims are going to say, 'Why are you doing that and that?' and that's hard. (McGown, 1999, p. 122)*

Sometimes teachers also ask children to do things in class that seem quite innocent to most western children—such as girls holding hands with boys. In such cases, not wearing a veil is seen as problematic:

*Hawa: It's hard. You can't go to the teacher and say, 'I can't hold hands.' He's going to ask you why, and you'll say, 'Because I'm Muslim.' But you don't*

*have the symbol to show it, the hijab. You feel ashamed that you don't wear hijab then.* (McGown, 1999, p. 122)

Finally, there can be problems at school from discrimination and prejudice against Somali, as indeed there is in the more general community. In this regard, Somali are at a disadvantage because they differ in so many ways from typical New Zealanders—in religion, colour, race, clothing (that stands out for the women), language, and practices.

Our research interviews with children have found that discrimination depends very much upon the social context, and some schools have almost no discrimination between children whereas others have a lot (Anderson, 2001). Somali children, in general, are quite forward and assertive, although a lack of English often makes them hesitant to say things they normally might in Somali, but we have found this in the children when confronted with prejudice.

A young Somali girl we interviewed in a lower Primary school reported that a boy once came up to her and said in a nasty way: “*You're black. Really black!*” [This description refers to a complex chain of slurs involving Maori as brown and others including Afro-Americans as black.] When something like this happens the children at this school are taught to go to the teachers and tell them, but in this case the little girl stood up to the boy and said: “*I happen to like that colour!*”

### ***Somali Children Adapting to the Western World***

It is often reported that children have an easier time adapting to new things and new places than adults, and this might be true in many circumstances. However, in our observations this is often reversed for the Somali refugee community, and children can have more stresses and pressures put on them than their parents have.

One reason for this is that many of the parents, especially the mothers, do not interact as much with other members of the community as do their children. A health survey we conducted found that whereas the men went out of the house on average about 6-7 days a week, the women went out only about 4-5 times a week on average (Guerin, Abdi & Guerin, 2003). This means that many women will only get out of the house infrequently. Interaction with non-Somali community members is even worse than this, however, because the men will typically go to the Mosque and mix together and the women will go shopping together and straight back home.

So the Somali children will often have more western influences upon them than their parents, and this shows up in many of the conflicts found. These stressful conflicts are a result of influences on the children that their parents might not even experience.

*Observations of New Behaviour Patterns.* One obvious effect for children is that they get to observe a lot of the western patterns of behaviour that they might not have seen before. Gender roles are a clear example of this, with children observing females in almost all positions in society and learning through their schools that women are not to be differentiated in work or activities from men (e. g., the Prime Minister of New Zealand is female). Girls learn that they can do a lot more activities than they have been told, although the downside to these activities for the Somali community is not explained in schools. Girls see other girls in all variations of clothes, and learning all sorts of activities. While Islam does not explicitly prohibit most of these, and interpretations vary, they get firsthand experience of alternative patterns of gender roles and behaviour.

The children also directly observe the western notions of control and the autonomy of the individual. Whether misguided or not, western values and philosophy

puts an overwhelming emphasis on individuals controlling their own behaviour and on individuals having the right to control their own behaviour (Guerin, 2001; Shelley, 2001). They see other children who appear to pay little attention to what their parents or community (if they even have one) want, and seem to flourish in total freedom and autonomy from others (“I don’t have to do it if I don’t want to”). They see a society that values individual freedom over the community’s freedom to cooperate and work together. In the extreme, which is quite frequent, being “cultureless” can also come to signify the highest status position, since it entails total freedom to do what you like (Perry, 2001). Once again, of course, the downside of not belonging to a close community is not mentioned since it is assumed a totally free and autonomous individual has all the money they need to buy people in and get things done that once would have been done by community members.

Somali children also soon notice the value placed on commodities, and purchasing commodities (Guerin, 2003). Having the latest toys, clothes or gadgets becomes something to value even over family and community. Parents become seen as your purchasing power and parental respect becomes a close function of parental income. The Somali children not only see variety in clothes but, moreover, they see the value placed by peers on such clothing. New realms of valuing open up and if they wish to become adapted or assimilated to their new “culture”, it becomes vital to get the same purchasing power.

Finally, and related to this last point, the children see a whole new variety of social influence methods—ways of influencing parents, leaders, peers and family.



Parents will not understand what is going on when these are tried out at home, however, but the children can still get away with breaking the rules.

*Easier Availability of “Prohibited” Materials.* Another western influence is the availability of materials and events that were not previously available. This can be through religious prohibition, cultural prohibition, or previous unavailability. At the least, this can make children aware that such events and goods are out there and that other children do those activities and come to no immediate or apparent harm. This can include alcohol and tobacco, drugs and substances of abuse, gambling, new technologies, indecent materials, dating and sexual activities, and events such as dances and nightclubs.

In the Hamilton Somali community, problems such as these are presently on the fringe, with only a few “wayward” youth doing these. All the literature suggests, however, that these will all become more prevalent in the future, so part of our research and intervention is to find ways to allow youth to do mild forms of these activities without breaking up the whole community through stubborn resistance and punishment as the only options for parents. Perhaps there will be ways found to prevent these problems altogether, but the literature suggests that it will be almost impossible. Some parents, for example, have already begun moving to Australia where there are larger Muslim communities in which their children are less likely to be exposed to such things.

Therefore, we are also conducting research into groups who have had similar problems some years ago, to find out successful ways to deal with these problems, so we can explain them to the Somali community and prevent the worst excesses if and when the time comes that these activities become more frequent among youth. For example, we are currently interviewing parents and teenage Indian girls about how their parents

have dealt, successfully or not, with dating and boyfriends. We hope that some of the strategies that led to minimal conflict within Indian families and communities can be implemented in the Somali community.

***Overarching Role of Money in Affecting Social Relationships.*** Another subtle western influence is the ubiquitous role of money and how it influences social relationships, even familial ones (Guerin, 2003, 2004). A common predicament is that children begin to earn more money than their parents and their elders, and begin to escape their control. Conflict is not necessary but frequently can occur.

***Time Orientation.*** Another common but often unrecognised problems is the constant exposure of children to the western orientation towards time, that is, that everything is run by the clock. As mentioned earlier, parents are often not exposed to this since they mix mostly with other Somali and punctuality is not as valued as it is for westerners. But children at school have to learn the necessity of being at certain places at certain times or risk punishment.

***Monopoly of English Language and Western Practices.*** Finally, children also learn the overall monopoly that western practices and the English language have over life in their new country. Probably more than their parents, they learn that they just have to deal with western bureaucracies and paper forms, with formal procedures for employment and housing, and that family and community influence do not count as much for anything as they did in their country of origin.

#### ***Key Areas of Conflict/Change for Somali Children and their Parents/Communities***

While there seem to be many areas of conflict for refugee children, and Somali children in particular, there are some key areas of conflict identified in past research that

can help us identify crisis points. The Somali community in Hamilton is only just reaching a problem point on many of these conflict issues, and our hope is that pre-emptive or early interventions can avert most of the damaging conflict that has occurred with other families and communities, in which the children become turned away from the family or community altogether.

***Generational Breakdown.*** A key area of potential conflict is with generational breakdown—that is, where the younger people become distanced from the elders and parents. Several parameters of this are key indicators that something is wrong:

- Lack of respect for religious/community leaders
- Gender codes modified, such as Somali girls wearing western clothes
- Disinterest in things Somali, especially the language
- Religious/community influences seen as “pressuring” instead of the natural, unquestioned thing to do
- Changing parental roles, and changed parental methods of influence

With each of these, the outcome does not have to be conflict, but they are signs that conflict is likely because the young people are changing. Our goal is to do something about these before they become major issues, although this can be very difficult because the leaders and parents can see the researchers/interventionists as people meddling in their affairs and turning their children against them.

***Cross-Cultural/ Religious Marriages and Intimate Relationships.*** Another interesting flashpoint for integration is when children from close communities begin to want to “date” or have boyfriends and girlfriends. Somali, for example, would traditionally have not allowed dating or intimate relationships, although the girls and

boys would certainly have know each other and be aware of aspirations for marriage.

A major indicator comes from how parents then react to their children seeing a community member of the opposite sex on a regular basis. This is difficult for parents, especially when the children can see each other at school on a regular basis outside of the parents' control. Some European immigrants allow their daughters, for example, to go out with a group of girl friends but accompanied by their brothers, as a compromise solution. But the really difficult indicator comes when the children wish to date or go out with friends of another race or ethnic group. This is often a point at which parents will draw a line and begin refusing to allow the practice.

Like generational breakdown, there are ways and strategies for handling these situations that can reduce conflict or exacerbate it, and if all the other influences were not acting on the children, the parents could possibly prevent such events occurring. However, with all the influences outlined above occurring, it becomes very difficult for parents to find ways to influence their children without making matters worse. They are put into a very stressful and hurtful situation.

As for the other issues, we hope our research can identify strategies used by other refugee and immigrant groups to resolve such conflicts peacefully and that we can then apply those strategies to other groups, or at least inform the people that there are other ways they can handle things. By using the multicultural groups' experiences and diversities, we can perhaps help new arrivals to overcome the predictable problems and issues more peacefully.

***Emphasis on Money, Income and Commodities over Community and Religion.***

The final key indicator is when the children begin placing more emphasis on making

money and buying clothes and commodities over spending time with their families. As mentioned above, this change in life strategy is right at the (negative) foundation of western individualism (Guerin, 2001, 2003), and with all the western influences acting on the children, it is unlikely they can escape this influence easily. Once again we can only really hope to minimize its impact when it occurs, and find ways for families and communities to survive these impacts with the best of their culture, community organization, and participation intact afterwards.

Already there is some tendency for children to be more interested in television and techno-games than the community or family. In visiting Somali homes, we sometimes see children playing with playstations, video games or computer games and online chatting and the parent being quiet in a corner, oblivious to the world their children are in. In Somalia, usually after dinner children would gather around a parent or grandparent for a storytelling time. Parents were entertainers of their children. This is not the case anymore. Children are enjoying the modern (western) ways of entertainment and therefore even at home they are not socially connected to their parents. The western monopolies are leading to this disconnection between parents and children. Also, because many parents are unemployed and stay at home, their status in front of their children is not as significant as when they were the breadwinners for the family in their country and respected in the community.

### ***In Summary***

We have tried to present some overviews of life in New Zealand for Somali children and women. Both have many pressures and stressors on them that are not of their making. The women have pressures from a new way of life and drastic changes in

the way the family has to run with little appreciation of the problems from western bureaucracies. The children have pressures on them from observing and being forced to take part in so many activities and practices that are new or that go against what they are told by their parents. If they do not change they have conflict with peers and if they do change they have conflict with their parents and communities.

Based on this, our experience with the Somali community is that there is a professional over-emphasis on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and its labelling. Most of the depression, anxiety and “mental” health issues we see and talk about with Somali, are directly due to the enormous list of pressures on these people—pressures, to say it again, not of their making. The immediate stresses of life are the ones we hear about that are troubling and serious. This is not to disregard the trauma that many or most have suffered, and is not to say that it has not had a major impact on their lives, but we find too many professionals willing to assign a PTSD label after an hour’s interview when our informal talks with the people tell us about all the real stresses and strains they have that cause them problems.

The difficulties of life for Somali women and children come, then, from their history as refugees and arriving in a refugee state, and from sudden exposure to very non-traditional practices that seem to be blatantly exposed in public in a way they have never had to deal with before.

To finish with an example, one of the authors took an older Somali woman into the city of Hamilton very soon after she arrived from a refugee camp in Kenya. In the middle of the street she suddenly started screaming hysterically, and any professional would have been thinking about agoraphobia from war-trauma or about war-trauma from

seeing a bustling city again. When questioned afterwards, however, the woman said that she had seen a young couple leaning on a street post up against one another and kissing, and that this was the shocking thing that set her screaming.

The good news from reviewing past research and our own approaches is that many of the problems and issues are well-identified and many immigrant and refugee groups have been through the same problems and their communities have remained more or less intact afterwards. This gives us hope and courage that similar strategies can be advised to the Somali community to help them through what will be a very rough period. Interventions can therefore be made before problems become too acute.

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