Somali Parent-Child Conflict in the Western World: Some Brief Reflections

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I. Introduction

According to UNICEF, there are about 14.5 million refugees, of whom 41 percent are believed to be children under age 18. It is also estimated that 1.5 billion children (two-thirds of the world's child population) live in 42 countries that are affected by violent and high intensity conflict.[1] Among these is Somalia, a country without a central government since 1991, and suffering a never-ending cycle of hostilities. As a result, Somali parents, along with their children, are scattered all over the world for safety reasons and for a better future for their children.

In a new home, whether it is Australia, Canada, Europe, or the United States, Somali parents are faced with numerous challenges raising children in Western countries.[2] These difficulties include learning new languages, negotiating a new culture, different housing and transportation options, and juggling work and parenting, often with multiple children that require constant attention. Supporting and communicating with their kids and with their teachers (often with interpreters) should also be mentioned. Child rearing in Western countries has its own set of rules and regulations. There are various governmental, public, and nonprofit organizations that are mandated to intervene in case of negligence, abuse, and maltreatment of children. Fulfilling their dream, as any parent, to nurture a productive citizen, Somali parents are often caught in the middle of conflicts by parenting their children in their old ways while the children are searching for their own identity and space to fit into their new home.

The purpose of this essay is to discuss and instill awareness regarding the challenges of raising children by examining factors that contribute to parent-child conflict in the new environment. Recently, some Somali children in Western countries, such as the United Kingdom or U.S.A. (particularly in the state of Minnesota), have been teaming up as gang members to kill one another.[3] It is difficult to imagine the pain and suffering of Somali parents who thought they had reached a safe haven away from the former insecurity. We have reviewed available literature in our interest for this topic. Our personal experiences of being refugees and our observations and insights from being professionals who work in the fields of public health and social work—working with diverse communities in prevention, intervention, and treatment—have helped us to analyze these issues and put them in some perspective.

II. Conflicts to Reflect Upon

One of the most common issues faced by the Somali immigrants and refugee families is the conflict between parents and children. In fact, it has been suggested that such conflict in immigrant and refugee families may be the norm, rather than the exception.[4] This type of conflict is known as "intergenerational conflict" in the world of social work. Somali refugee families in particular may also experience the kind of conflict arising from the traumatic experiences of family members. Intergenerational conflict is due in large part to differential acculturation between the generations, meaning that the different generations tend to adopt the norms of the new culture at different rates, resulting in differing expectations of behavior.[5]

It has been observed that, "migration is one of the most obvious instances of complete disorganization in the individual's role system."[6] The stressors of the migration process typically lead to changes in family roles and family dynamics, or the ways in which family members relate to one another. These role changes in turn place additional anxieties on the family members. As in the case of individual response to stress, family response is affected by its coping resources and protective factors. If families are highly adaptable–meaning they are able to change their power structure, role relationships, and relationship rules in response to stress—and if supportive community resources are adequate, then families will be able to re-establish balance in their functioning.[7] However, if families lack these internal and external

strengths, or if migration pressures overwhelm these strengths, then family conflict will often result.

As stated above, the major source of parent-child conflict is differential acculturation. Refugee and immigrant children usually learn the new language and customs faster than their parents and grandparents. Thus, the child may be placed in the role of translator or culture-broker in relation to welfare assistance workers, doctors, teachers, and others. This role reversal may lead to a lack of respect for parents and grandparents by these children. Also, children will try to follow the example of their peers in schools and in the neighborhood, behavior that their parents and grandparents may see as bad and therefore upsetting to the elders.

Sometimes the role reversal extends beyond translation and culture brokering to emotional support. Parents may be so emotionally overwhelmed by the weight of the migration process that they are unable to provide emotional support to their children, and may in fact turn to the children for their own emotional support.

Furthermore, the role reversal may result in a loss of parental authority. Children tend to become more assertive than is the norm in their cultures of origin, and they rebel against their parents' efforts to discipline them, viewing their parents as too rigid and autocratic. In addition, children soon learn that certain kinds of discipline are considered abusive in the new culture. Some use this knowledge against their parents. For example, when they do not get their way, the children threaten to report the parents to teachers or the police for child abuse.

Another source of conflict between children and parents can be gender roles. Parents may have gender role expectations for their children that are incompatible with behaviors the children need in order to function effectively in the new society. For example, parents may expect girls to be quiet, obedient, and subservient, whereas in order to achieve success in school, initiative, independence, and competitiveness are needed. When faced with these contradictions, the girls may rebel at home. Furthermore, parents may place more restrictions on the behavior of girls than on boys within the family, leading to resentment on the part of the girls when they see that this often does not happen in non-immigrant families.

To illuminate the case further, during the graduate program of one of the authors, Amin Mohamed, as a Family Youth Counselor, he interned at a place called The Bridge for Runaway Youth. This is a

short-term shelter that provides counseling and therapy for families and their children having conflicts. One of the nights, a Somali female, age 15, was brought in by the Bloomington police and Mr. Mohamed had the opportunity to meet her for assessment. She described her problem being merely parent-child conflict. She stated that she had been locked in her room for a while and that she had been physically abused by her father and older brother. According to the police report, her family was planning a trip to Kenya. She did not want to go because her family intended to use harsh discipline, then force her to have female circumcision and make her marry an old man. She hung a note asking for help in her window. When help did not arrive, she set her mattress on fire, resulting in the police and fire department coming to the apartment. She eloquently described her problems at home and that she was not getting along with her family, particularly her father and older brother. She told Mr. Mohamed that her father beat her up and she was locked away and not allowed to go anywhere. She said that according to her parents, she was not following the Islamic way of life, such as wearing the *hijab* or hanging out with older Somali girls to learn from them. She responded that she sometimes got into trouble by not complying with the rules, because her parents thought that she was culturally changed and thus disrespectful. This girl was not the only one of Somali heritage with such problems that Mr. Mohamed observed during his placement.

Van der Veer has identified seven sources of such conflict: dysfunctional circular interaction; disturbances in communication; family secrets; overprotectiveness; "parentification"; a hierarchy of suffering; and trans-generational phenomena.[8] Dysfunctional circular interaction refers to the situation of interactions between people building upon one another. Thus, a family member who is suffering from symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder brings the condition into the family. However, rather than alleviating the individual's trauma, the family may in fact reinforce it due to dysfunctional interaction patterns. The individual and family distress then continues to build. Relatedly, there may be disturbances in communication in which family members do not accurately decode the emotional messages behind verbal expression. Since most traumatized individuals do not readily discuss their emotions in a straightforward manner, such communication disturbance can easily occur. Family members may misidentify the emotions underlying verbal messages, leading to continued conflict.

Family members may also keep their traumatic experience secret from each other. Often parents keep such secrets from their children in an effort to protect them, believing that the children would not be emotionally able to handle the knowledge. However, this usually causes problems in itself because the children sense that something is wrong, but they don't know what. Further, overprotectiveness can cause family members to act in rigid ways, often adopting stereotypical roles such as protector and victim.

"Parentification" refers to the role reversal between parents and children that was described above. In refugee families this means that children may take on the role of emotional caretaker of a traumatized parent.

"Hierarchy of suffering" refers to families in which one or more members have undergone traumatic experiences, but the members who have had less spectacular or no traumatic experience may feel their traumatized relatives think they have not suffered seriously and therefore should not whine. The member of the family who has low standing in the hierarchy of suffering then has the feeling that he or she is merely "putting on a show" when feeling depressed or under stress, and avoid communication about the problems with other members of the family.[9]

A final phenomenon affecting refugee families is that the effects of traumatic experiences may be transmitted trans-generationally. This means that children may experience symptoms of post-traumatic stress even though they were not the ones who lived through the original trauma. Children may also adopt certain attitudes or feelings toward life or toward other people that their parents have developed as a result of their traumatic experiences. Also, parents may place burdensome expectations on their children with the idea that their children's achievements will redeem their own suffering. All of these family phenomena are likely to lead to conflicts in refugee families, in addition to those conflicts arising from differential acculturation.

A major developmental task of adolescence is identity formation, a life-cycle issue. Immigrant and refugee adolescents frequently experience substantial conflict regarding their ethnic identity. Essentially, they are caught between two worlds: trying to integrate new customs with old customs; and living and thinking in two languages—one for home and one for school. This creates many problems and much identity confusion for refugee or immigrant children. Most of them want to respect the past, but they do not know how. Some wish to forget the

past and totally embrace the new culture, denying their origins. This denial, then, may cause problems for them and their families. Refugee and immigrant adolescents have to somehow define their identities as being both American and Somali. This "double identity" is not easy to accomplish. Adolescents have few, if any, role models for this identity. Their parents are Somalis but living in America. Their peers are Americans. With such dual identities, these children may try to deny one part or the other.[10]

The task of forging an ethnic identity is compounded by competing demands from the two worlds. At school and with their peers they are rewarded for "Americanizing" as quickly as possible, whereas at home their newly acquired habits are often discouraged. Thus, parents may not have an understanding of the identity conflicts confronting their children because the psychological impacts of migration on the two generations are essentially different.

Adolescents' reactions to this ethnic identity conflict vary. Some may reject one culture or the other, effectively removing themselves from interaction with members of that culture. Some may develop a heightened sense of ethnic pride, often in reaction to discrimination or hostility from the host society.[11] Some may experience alternating periods of identifying more with one culture or the other. Some may develop a bi-cultural identity, in which they selectively choose those elements from each culture that best fit their circumstances;[12] note that this is considered to be the ideal outcome.

On the other hand, the ethnic identity conflict may persist into young adulthood, leading to a marginalized outcome of the acculturation process, in which the person feels that he or she does not fit with either ethnic group. These feelings might, as a result, have consequences in the sense that they become involved in the criminal justice system as attested by the recent events in Europe (specifically the U.K.), Canada, and now in the state of Minnesota.

III. Conclusions and Recommendations

Immigrant family experiences of hardship and anguish in a new environment, in search of a better life and new home, are very complicated. Somali-American parents have been striving to provide a safe home and bright future for their children far from their culture, former home, and the environment they knew. The families and the children who were victims of brutal war, killing, and rape have to adjust and

do their best in a new place. Their children, who have been enrolled in different schools to learn different languages (most likely more than once), now have to enroll in the new system.

Immigrant children learn the new language and culture much faster than their parents. As a result, their parents depend on them for translation and advice on how to communicate and approach various situations. These circumstances have created a conflict in the traditional parent-child relationship. Another conflict may arise from gender role expectations from the parents. Somali parents might have different expectations of boys and girls. Furthermore, dysfunctional circular disturbances in communication, family secrets, overprotectiveness, a hierarchy of suffering, and trans-generational phenomena have all been identified as factors in parent-child conflict.

There is a need for macro-level interventions that are aimed at increasing immigrant and refugee access to services and the prevention of problems. In the context of families, macro-level intervention would include developing policies and programs to serve their needs. Service providers can contribute to the continued development of such policies and programs through specific strategies of community need assessments, policy and program advocacy, inter-agency collaboration, and community education. As part of this process, social service providers should advocate for stable funding for refugee assistance programs, since the need persists over decades.

There are numerous approaches to family therapy that have been advocated for use with immigrant and refugee families, and that have at least some degree of effectiveness with these populations. These include psycho-educational, behavioral, and family systems approaches, and combinations thereof.

Psycho-educational approaches aim to increase family members' understanding of the migration-related and culture-related causes of their conflicts. This method also entails a behavioral element aimed at increasing family members' coping skills, effective communication skills, and problem-solving skills.

Moreover, in order to minimize parent-child conflict in the Somali immigrant families, the Somali community agencies and religious institutions (mosques) must work closely with the larger agencies and communities for services. In most Western countries, there are other immigrant groups that have been through the early stages of adjustment. The Somali community has to establish a close working relation-

ship with these communities in order to benefit from their experiences of raising children in a new home.

Agencies that provide services for the Somali community have to create programs to educate parents about their rights in parenting. In many cases, people do not understand their rights as parents or how to discipline their progeny. Indeed, corporal punishment is not a method for disciplining children; however, parents have the right to deny privileges in situations in which the children are not following established house rules. Furthermore, community-based service agencies and mosques must have the capacity to provide culturally and religiously appropriate counseling and conflict mitigation services for the children and their parents.

Education Training Research Associates (ETR), a national nonprofit organization established in 1991 in the United States, initiated a Parent-Child Connectedness Intervention program, which has a positive impact on how parents improve their relationship with their children as well as on the children's success in school and the community. Parent-Child Connectedness is characterized by working to create an emotional bond between the parent and child that is both mutual and sustainable over time. Parents and children who share a high degree of connectedness enjoy spending quality time together, communicate freely and openly, support and respect one another, share similar values, and have a sense of optimism about the future. Parents have to bond with their children to facilitate sharing thoughts and feelings, as well as have fun and a good time. Parents have to understand their child's needs and wants, with empathy, affection, and reciprocity. Parents have to be involved in schools and in their child's life. They have to attend school sports events, help choose school courses, meet regularly with teachers and counselors, and communicate regularly with their children using a language of explanation and reasoning.

Parents need to provide some sort of autonomy for their children so that they feel respected and validated. Children have to be allowed to make some of their own decisions as long as it is not going to risk their future. They need to be encouraged for their own ideas and initiatives. Parents have to monitor and control their child's activities, as well. Based on their age, there should be clear rules of agreement on bedtime, homework, TV, going out, and so forth.

Notes

1. UNICEF 2007.

2. Bernard Guerin, Pauline Gurin, Abdirrizak Abdi, and Roda Omar, "Identity and Community: Somali Children's Adjustment to Life in the Western World" (2004).

3. Jeremy Stratton, "Cedar-Riverside Mourns Death of Somali Teen" (2 May 2008).

4. Ying, "Strengthening Intergenerational/Intercultural Ties in Immigrant Families: A New Intervention for Parents" (1999).

5. Matsuoka, "Differential Acculturation among Vietnamese Refugees" (1990).

6. Bar-Yosef, "Desocialization and Resocialization: The Adjustment Process of Immigrants" (1980), p. 20.

7. Ben-David, "Family Functioning and Migration: Considerations for Practice" (1995).

8. Van der Veer, *Counseling and Therapy with Refugees and Victims of Trauma* (1998).

9. Ibid., p. 45.

10. Carlin, "Refugee and Immigrant Populations at Special Risk: Women, Children, and the Elderly" (1990), pp. 228–229.

11. Rumbaut, "The Agony of Exile: A Study of the Migration and Adaptation of Indochinese Refugee Adults and Children" (1991).

12. Gopaul-McNicol, *Working with West Indian Families* (1993).

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