



Challenges Affecting Somali Bantu Families

Kimberly Haynes, Strengthening Refugee Families and Marriages

Lyn Morland, Bridging Refugee Youth & Children's Services

This publication has been collaboratively developed to assist staff working with Somali Bantu families at USCCB's Strengthening Refugee Families and Marriages project sites¹

Child Support and Inter-family Relations²

- Somali Bantu families traditionally practice limited polygyny. However, to be accepted for resettlement in the U.S., it was required for husbands with multiple wives to choose one wife and divorce the others, **resulting in the separation of many families**. Many ex-wives and their children have chosen to resettle in the same community as their former husband and his current family.
- Somali Bantu traditionally consider children to be the wealth of the family—the more children they have, the greater their fortune and social status. Combining this value with the practice of early marriage—usually between 16 and 18, but reportedly as young as 13—results in **a high number of children, especially for fathers**.
- Although everyone agrees that fathers should remain responsible and engaged in all their children's lives, **Somali Bantu fathers cannot afford to financially support multiple households here in the U.S. as they could in Somalia**.
- **Sites are reporting that the child support payments legally required of fathers are either impossible for them to pay or affecting their ability to support themselves and their current family. The pressure to pay child support can exacerbate tensions between families.**

Child Rearing Practices

- In Somalia and in the refugee camps, children spent most of their time outdoors, and were supervised, disciplined, and cared for by the entire community. **Recently arrived refugee parents may expect others to be watching their children when they are outside, often leaving children inadequately supervised in what is a very different and more dangerous environment**. On the other hand, spending so much time together indoors can increase tension within large families.
- Although Somali Bantu traditionally use a wide variety of methods of disciplining children, **physical discipline is common**.

Changing Family Roles

- Women and men have very different and well-defined roles in Somali Bantu culture. **Men are the primary decision-makers, while women handle most household tasks, including childrearing**. During USCCB-led focus group discussions of marriage among these refugees, the women tended to take a background role, even deferring to their teenage sons in some

¹ This project is supported by the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR/ACF/USDHHS).

² For more information, please refer to BRYCS' publication "Somali Bantu Refugees: Cultural Considerations for Social Service Providers" available for free download from <http://www.brycs.org/documents/SBantu%20Service%20Considerations.pdf>.

cases. However, there are reports from the camps and other places noting an increase in women's leadership both within and outside of the family.

- Somali Bantu refugees were historically severely oppressed in their native Somalia, and are currently undergoing tremendous changes as they resettle in this country. ***These changes combined with reminders of past losses, current separations, and lack of autonomy may result in a sense of demoralization or depression here.***
- In addition, the stress of change, combined with lack of extended family and community support here, may result in increasing rates of domestic violence. Although divorce is traditionally common in Somalia, ***Somali Bantu women in this country may feel afraid to leave their family, despite ongoing violence against them.***

Suggestions

- ❖ ***Provide additional Cultural Orientation components on parenting in the U.S., discussing U.S. child protection laws, alternatives to physical discipline, and the importance of child care and supervision in this country.***³
- ❖ ***Hold educational workshops on specific topics, such as U.S. laws on polygamy, allowing a supportive discussion among refugees about the difficulties of transitioning to a new family structure. Domestic violence is an important topic to cover, especially the legal ramifications on refugee status in this country if convicted of committing domestic violence.***
- ❖ ***Work together with refugee women who are single parents to develop a support network for each other. For example, some women have developed collaborative child care (while two women go to work full-time, they may pay a third woman to stay home to care for all their children, or some women may prefer to develop a child care center in one of their homes for the community). In Oregon, community gardens have proved to be quite successful in bringing people together, while providing additional fresh food for families.***
- ❖ ***Work together with your local Somali Bantu refugee community to encourage recognition of these issues and to solve problems. Work with community members to identify local leadership and to set up a meeting and decision-making structure, if none exists. For example, some communities have engaged the men in volunteer or other constructive activities during the day, decreasing the likelihood of demoralization, depression, or shifting of family structures. Agencies have supported the development of community leadership by providing technical assistance, a meeting space, or helping organize a community forum.***⁴
- ❖ ***Help families to enroll their children in school-sponsored programs; most refugee families need assistance in accessing these opportunities. Enlist older children and teenagers as tutors and mentors to younger children, so that youth are engaged in constructive activities and all children remain connected to their community.***

³ See BRYCS publications (http://www.brycs.org/brycs_resources.htm) for helpful materials, including the BRYCS manual Strengthening Services for Refugee Parents: Guidelines and Resources and curricula such as Parenting Teens for Cambodians: A Model Curriculum.

⁴ Contact Omar Eno and Dan Van Lehman at the National Somali Bantu Project, an Office of Refugee Resettlement Technical Assistance Provider (go to <http://www.bantusupport.pdx.edu/contact/index.php>) for assistance in working together with your local Somali Bantu community.