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## **Struggling to Start Over: Human Rights Challenges for Somali Bantu Refugees in the United States**

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### **KEY WORDS**

Refugees; refugee resettlement; Somalia; Somali Bantu; family rights; economic, social, and cultural rights (ESCR)

**ABSTRACT** – Despite persistent challenges to successful refugee resettlement in the United States, migration from Somalia has attracted little widespread attention from human rights scholars. Utilizing longitudinal data from qualitative interviews conducted at three times over the course of ten years, this study shows that resettled Somali Bantu refugees face a range of rights challenges, particularly related to financial concerns and family issues. Rather than solely focusing on cultural differences, interviews highlight the obstacles created by practical concerns and inadequacies – including those that threaten the full enjoyment of economic, social, and cultural rights (ESCR). Recommendations include the extension of support services and the creation of mentorship programs for adult refugees.

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Many Americans today recognize Somalia as one of the world's most dangerous places, home to pervasive human rights violations and the Islamist Al-Shabaab that is linked to terrorist attacks in multiple countries. Within the United States, however, resettled refugees from Somalia's political upheaval in the early 1990s – including those from the minority Bantu population – present their own current human rights challenges and complexities. The Somali Bantu have been highlighted as a refugee population whose distinct cultural background makes resettlement in the United States extremely difficult. Boas argues, for example, that the "Somali Bantu group is among the most culturally dissimilar...in the history of the of the U.S. refugee resettlement program".<sup>i</sup> Lack of sufficient financial assistance to resettled refugees has been cited as a cause of intergenerational poverty that could perpetuate a cycle of refugee dependence that costs the government more than \$5 billion per year.<sup>ii</sup> Once assistance ends after an initial 90-day resettlement period, refugees find themselves in "extremely vulnerable situations" that, without intervention to strengthen education and employment opportunities, could propel refugee children into "lifelong poverty".<sup>iii</sup>

Despite ongoing political turmoil in Somalia and persistent challenges to successful refugee resettlement in the United States, however, migration from Somalia has attracted little widespread attention in recent debates and discussions.<sup>iv</sup> This study seeks to provide data on the lived experiences of resettled Somali Bantu refugees, thereby highlighting the need for further action to improve their enjoyment of human rights and life chances within the United States. Longitudinal data from qualitative interviews conducted at three times over the course of ten years shows that resettled Somali Bantu refugees face a range of challenges after resettlement, particularly related to financial concerns and issues of family separation and obligations. These problems not only impede their successful resettlement in the U.S.; they also present threats to basic economic, social, and cultural rights (ESCR) outlined in international human rights frameworks. Rather than focusing solely on cultural differences between Somali Bantu refugees and the general American public, interview data highlights the obstacles

for integration created by practical concerns and inadequacies. While cultural obstacles are certainly related to inequalities, we argue that they do not fully explain challenges to full integration in U.S. society. Instead, the structure of refugee resettlement does not provide the necessary resources for Somali Bantu to adjust to their new communities and become self-sufficient. Recommendations therefore focus on building human capabilities and opportunities, including the extension of support services and the creation of mentorship programs for adult refugees.

### **Refugee Resettlement**

The U.S. refugee resettlement program began welcoming refugees from the African continent following passage of the Refugee Act of 1980. Initially African refugees comprised barely 0.65% of the overall refugee ceiling of 231,700 that year, but the flow rapidly increased until the first decade of the twenty-first century when a third of all refugee admissions came from Africa.<sup>v</sup> During that decade, a number of observers of the refugee resettlement program in the U.S. began calling for reform, claiming that the system does not provide adequate assistance for incoming groups that are culturally different.<sup>vi</sup> The emphasis on helping newly-arrived refugees to become self-sufficient as quickly as possible means encouraging them to accept the first available employment. In these circumstances, training and educational opportunities that might better prepare them for advancement are not considered and refugees find themselves in minimum wage, entry level jobs with no prospects of improving their lives.<sup>vii</sup>

In general, acculturation and integration are conditioned by the contexts of departure and reception, as well as the characteristics of the refugees themselves.<sup>viii</sup> In other words, the conditions under which refugees leave their homes and those they encounter on arrival in the host society have a considerable impact on their experience. Their success in their new home will also be affected by the abilities and capacities they bring with them. Taking these three sets of variables one at a time, we can say that the conditions of exodus from their home country, the length of time in transit, and whether

they spent time in a refugee camp and for how long, can have a distinct bearing on their resilience on arrival.<sup>ix</sup> Secondly, their experience in the country of settlement will be shaped by what they find when they get there with respect to the social, political and economic structures that determine their access to jobs, education, housing and health.<sup>x</sup> Finally, their ability to settle in and re-establish a sense of normalcy will depend on when they arrived, their age, gender, education, language skills and other aspects of social capital, along with a plethora of other variables such as their cultural difference, their strength of attachment to homeland, where they settled, and the density of their ethnic community.<sup>xi</sup>

### *Contexts of Departure*

The Somali Bantu are a minority population in Somalia who can be divided into distinct groups: those who are indigenous to Somalia, those who were brought there as slaves from Bantu-speaking tribes in other countries and later integrated into society, and those who were brought to Somalia as slaves but who have maintained (to varying degrees) their ancestral culture and sense of identity. This last group has particularly suffered ongoing persecution in Somalia, and many Bantus have endured continued marginalization – including denied access to education or political representation – since their ancestors arrived as slaves 200 years ago. While slavery in southern Somalia was abolished in the early twentieth century, unjust labor laws and the conscription of freed slaves into the agricultural industry led to severe exploitation of this minority group under Italian colonial rule. Over time, some Bantu established themselves as farmers while other found jobs as manual laborers and semi-skilled tradesmen. Overt discrimination against the Bantu continued after Somalia became independent in 1960, despite government declarations that tribalism should end. From the late 1970s to early 1980s, for instance, the Somali government forcibly conscripted Bantu into the military to fight against Ethiopia. Today, the Bantu continue to be viewed and treated as foreigners in Somalia, despite their long

history living in the country, and many refugees face long periods of indefinite residency in refugee camps before resettlement.<sup>xii</sup>

Political upheaval in the early 1990s, combined with long-held discrimination, increased threats to Somali Bantu rights and security. A so-called “regional war” began in Somalia when Siyad Barre’s military government was overthrown in 1991, starting a chain of events that led to the country’s social and governmental collapse. During this conflict, the Bantu were especially vulnerable because they were not affiliated with any of Somalia’s clans and therefore lacked the protection that ruling clans could afford.<sup>xiii</sup> Already “openly discriminated against and derogatively detested as inferior people by the dominant-clans,” Bantu farmers were robbed, raped, and murdered during the war.<sup>xiv</sup> Most of the Somali Bantu refugees crossed into Kenya, where the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) had established camps.<sup>xv</sup> Many members of this minority group unsuccessfully sought resettlement in Tanzania (1993-1994) and Mozambique (1997-1998) before being considered for resettlement in the United States beginning in 1999.<sup>xvi</sup> More than 13,500 Somali Bantu refugees have resettled in the United States since new settlers began to arrive in mid-2003, making them “the largest African group ever granted a non-forced migration to resettle in the US as a persecuted ‘minority’ group”.<sup>xvii</sup>

Notably, the category of “Somali Bantu” ethnic identity has been critiqued and linked to the processes of foreign humanitarianism. Catherine Besteman argues that a variety of actors combined to create the ethnonym for this persecuted minority, thereby identifying a group of refugees selected for resettlement in the United States. By contending that an important dimension of Somali Bantu identity is based on presumptions of racial difference and separation from other clans within Somalia, she makes the case that the category of “Somali Bantu” is a social construction deeply influenced by humanitarian intervention.<sup>xviii</sup> Francesca Declich writes that the patterns through which humanitarian aid is offered seek to create a standard, uniform refugee experience that impacts gender power relationships –

particularly by down-playing the role of women in decision-making – and group identities. In some cases, people who arrive at refugee camps without clear affiliations to Somali patrilineages (and who have curly hair) are classified as “Bantu” by camp authorities even if they don’t speak a Bantu language. The Somali Bantu classification sets certain people aside as those who have faced marginalization and deserve access to resources, yet Declich writes that the term serves as “a sort of device used by humanitarian agencies in order to identify this particular kind of beneficiary.”<sup>xix1</sup>

### *Contexts of Reception*

Somali Bantu refugees entered the United States amidst various cultural differences that greatly impacted their contexts of reception, starting with the legal process itself. The U.S. resettlement process is a long, voluntary process that can take months or even years. It involves a series of interviews with various agencies, including the UNHCR, the Resettlement Support Center (RSC) on behalf of the U.S. Department of State, and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.<sup>xx</sup> For many interview respondents in this study, however, the selection process for resettlement appeared quite arbitrary and difficult to understand. Conditions in refugee camps were often harsh and fraught with emotional and physical insecurity, and these concerns persisted throughout the resettlement process because it was well-known that individuals could be disqualified at any point in the selection process. A number of respondents said that their biggest concern was that examiners might discern inconsistencies in their accounts of where they had lived and when, the circumstances under which they had escaped violence, or who was related to whom and how. Such inconsistencies would be interpreted as evidence of intent to defraud and could lead to a families’ disqualification, or to a husband’s / father’s detention while the

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<sup>1</sup> Despite these important criticisms, group differences – whether pre-existing or socially constructed by the forces of humanitarian intervention – have been internalized by refugees from Somalia. In the communities observed in this study, interview respondents noted that Somalis are Arabic while Somali Bantu are African. Somali Bantu respondents recalled being called “niggers” and even “slaves” by Somali refugees, who tended to have higher levels of education and greater economic resources both in Somalia and in the United States.

rest of the family was resettled in the U.S. The role of cultural beliefs about relationships and time make it likely that many of the inconsistencies were not actually fraudulent. As we will see, several of the women in this study reported that their husbands had been detained in Kakuma, yet the wives had no idea why it had happened.<sup>2</sup>

One of the most striking cultural differences between the Somali Bantu and U.S. society is in the area of values related to family, family size, and fertility. The acceptance of polygyny in both Somalia and Kenya is the first and most obvious difference, but significant differences also exist with respect to values attached to fertility and child bearing. High fertility in Sub-Saharan Africa is attributed to deeply embedded beliefs that are anchored in traditional religions. These beliefs center on the importance of the succession of generations and the importance attached to the survival of the family of descent. Sexual constraints include a taboo against pre-marital sexual activity, but such constraints are countered by the universal marriage of young women, the hope of immediate conception after marriage, the expectation that widows will remarry soon after the death of their husbands, and the widespread practice of polygyny in the region.<sup>xxi</sup> These widespread beliefs and practices, along with reduced infant mortality associated with the benefits of Western medicine, have led to the proliferation of very large Somali Bantu families within the United States. Confronted with U.S. kinship norms, Somali Bantu families face negative consequences stemming partly from this cultural disconnect. “Resettlement turns extended families into nuclear families...and [demands] a reconfiguring of subjectivities and kinship,” writes Besteman.<sup>xxii</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, “challenged the humanitarian rationale for Somali Bantu resettlement” and caused delays to resettlement. Refugee admissions were de-prioritized as the United States shifted its resources to national security endeavors, as well as increased attention to potential security threats. For instance, Somali Bantu who had been screened in 1997 after a failed resettlement effort in Mozambique were re-verified by the UNHCR and the U.S. State Department in 2001. Because the Dadaab refugee camp was considered too dangerous for U.S. personnel, the 11,860 re-verified refugees were trucked more than 900 miles to the Kakuma refugee camp in northwest Kenya for their final screening – at a cost of U.S. \$2.7 million. (Catherine Besteman, ‘Somali Bantus in a State of Refuge’, 14-16.)

In addition to differences in family values, Somali Bantu perspectives on finances are often radically different from mainstream American views. Solidarity, sharing, and mutual dependence are stressed, rather than the accumulation of savings; this method relies on a network of relationships that can help assure future survival. Within Somali Bantu communities, a cultural emphasis on financial cooperation and helping one's family often creates difficulties because many individuals simply do not have the resources to share beyond their immediate nuclear family. Horst's research on refugees in Minneapolis revealed the challenges refugees experience trying to meet family obligations to relatives who remain in refugee camps, as well as the frustrations they experience when those relatives are unable to understand their limited resources in America.<sup>xxiii</sup> More broadly, Maranz argues that the fundamental economic issue within many African societies is distribution of economic resources so that everyone has their minimum needs met to ensure, at the very least, survival.<sup>xxiv</sup> From this perspective, short-term needs take priority, resources that are not currently being used are available, and hoarding is considered despicable. As resettled refugees struggling to adapt to life in the United States, these internal challenges are compounded by discrimination against the poor; Somali Bantu refugees are viewed as "economically impotent" and, relatedly, politically disenfranchised in their new communities.<sup>xxv</sup>

Although the Somali Bantu are certainly not the first group of refugees to arrive in the United States facing cultural challenges, it is difficult to find direct comparisons with other resettled groups. Hmong refugees from Southeast Asia who were resettled in the 1970s and 1980s, for instance, shared commonalities such as the inability to speak English, illiteracy, and unfamiliarity with technology such as electricity, running water, or modern medical facilities. Yet most Americans recognized the connection between the United States and the Hmong due to the Vietnam War; the Somali Bantu arrived in the 1990s without a clear relationship to the U.S., "under the hegemony of neo-liberal ideology, strong anti-immigrant sentiment, and fear of Muslim terrorism."<sup>xxvi</sup> Somali Bantus received far less support than

previous refugee groups such as the Hmong. At the time the Hmong arrived, resettled refugees received up to three years of federal support, along with more English language courses, while the Somali Bantu were expected to be “entirely self-sufficient” within eight months of their arrival to the United States.<sup>xxvii</sup>

## **RESEARCH STUDY**

Data was collected primarily through the use of semi-structured qualitative interviews with resettled Somali Bantu refugees, which were conducted at three times over the course of ten years. In the first year of study, 2005-2006, 76 Somali Bantu refugees (34 men and 42 women) were interviewed. These refugees had been living in the United States for one to two years, and they were located in central New York state (Utica, Rochester, Syracuse), Arizona (Tucson and Phoenix), Ohio (Columbus), Maine (Lewiston), and Vermont (Burlington). Contacts were established in these seven cities through informants located in Utica. Fifteen members of this original group were re-interviewed during the summer of 2009, and 20 Somali Bantu refugees in Utica were interviewed during the summer of 2014. That sample included 17 women and 3 men.<sup>3</sup> Complementary data (particularly related to employment, income, and household composition) was also compiled during the summer of 2011 when a census of Somali Bantu households was commissioned in Utica.

Interviews were conducted through the use of a semi-structured questionnaire designed to explore respondents’ experiences before the war, their experiences in transition and in flight, and their perceptions of resettlement in America. We also wanted to assess their expectations of what life would be like in America before they arrived. Trained interpreters were used in most cases, since many

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<sup>3</sup> Although we believe this study provides important data for understanding the resettlement experiences of Somali Bantu, it is important to note possible limitations of this research. For instance, the sample is comprised of first generation refugees and does not consider second-generation experiences and beyond. The study is also based on interviews, not survey data; sample sizes are small when compared to large samples available through survey methods. The use of snowball sampling to identify respondents may have also introduced an element of bias, though the considerable geographic sweep of the first sample was meant to mitigate this effect as much as possible.

respondents did not speak sufficient English to understand the questions asked. The interpreters varied over the years but were all Somali Bantu who spoke Maay Maay and/or Kizigua; they had been trained by local refugee resettlement centers or at a local interpretation agency owned by Somali Bantus. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. With the assistance of several key informants, pseudonyms were assigned to all respondents in the study. In addition to the semi-structured interviews and several focus groups with service providers, regular contact was maintained with informants at the local refugee center in Utica. Informal interactions with a number of respondents were also kept up over the years.

Longitudinal data shows that Somali Bantu refugees continue to struggle after resettlement in the U.S. and face challenges to their basic economic, social, and cultural rights (ESCR). The 15 interviews completed in 2009, for instance, showed very little progress compared to 2005-2006 in terms of educational goal attainment, employment, or overall satisfaction with life in America. Information drawn from the 2011 census of Somali Bantu households in Utica showed that community conditions had deteriorated, with increased costs of living and rising family sizes translating to greater poverty overall. Interview respondents in 2014 reported a variety of health problems that prevented them from working, hinting at perhaps a greater problem among resettled Somali Bantu as a result of past physical and emotional war trauma. Ultimately, data highlights that the key challenges facing resettled Somali Bantu refugees center on financial concerns and issues of family separation and obligations.

### *Financial concerns*

Although some Somali Bantu (particularly young individuals without family responsibilities) expressed satisfaction with their circumstances and optimism about the future, interview respondents regularly discussed pervasive unhappiness that was often linked to poverty and other financial concerns. These obstacles not only thwart successful resettlement and community integration, but they also hint

at wider human rights challenges to basic entitlements such as the right to an adequate standard of living. Article 25(1) of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) contends that “everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control”.<sup>xxviii</sup> Such protections are reinforced by binding international law, such as the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).<sup>4</sup> In the case of resettled Somali Bantu, economic problems were usually expressed in terms of: (1) unmet expectations, (2) job dissatisfaction and problems at work, (3) the hardship of part-time employment, (4) poverty and dependence, and more recently (5) the inability to work due to health problems.

First, unmet expectations were frequently cited as sources of unhappiness among resettled Somali Bantu. Some of those who did not compare life in the U.S. with their memories of life in the camps tended to assess their current circumstances in light of what they thought they had been promised in the camp by International Organization for Migration (IOM) workers. Rumors that had circulated among camp residents about what life would be like in America also played a role in shaping expectations.<sup>xxix</sup> One Somali Bantu reported that he had been led to believe that he would receive full benefits for several years once he arrived and that he felt betrayed when he discovered that he would have to go to work to earn money to pay his rent:

After three months they took away my benefits. In Africa they say that if you go to America, you will get lots of things and not have any problems. When I was here after three months I had to go to work and that is not the promise they made in Kakuma. In Kakuma they did not tell us that we would need to pay the rent ourselves. You need to welcome us as a refugee for two or three years.

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<sup>4</sup> It’s noteworthy that economic, social, and cultural rights (ESCRs) are frequently more difficult to protect than civil and political rights. Human rights scholars such as Jack Donnelly write that ESCRs are sometimes (mistakenly) viewed as luxuries while civil and political rights, such as freedom from torture, are viewed as necessities. While civil and political rights often include direct violence by government actors, ESCRs often tie to structural inequalities that are more difficult – and costly – to identify and remedy. See Jack Donnelly, *International Human Rights, Fourth Edition* (New York: Westview Press).

Several respondents said that they were disappointed; they wanted and expected money, lots of money. A 38-year-old father of five living in Lewiston, New York, complained:

What I was surprised at was the lack of money, thought there would be more money. When I was in Africa I was told that I would be given an apartment, furniture, everything, food, chairs and I thought I would be given money, a lot of money but when I came I didn't see any money here, only a little money and the house.

Although it was expressed in many different ways, a theme that surfaced repeatedly in conversations with those who seemed blatantly unhappy with their circumstances was the constant anxiety associated with living in a cash economy. Bill paying was an entirely new and unwelcome obligation for most Somali Bantu – and even for those who can fathom the complications of bill paying, it comes as a shock that if you don't have a job, there's not enough money to meet all of your financial obligations. Before their dependence on UNHCR for food and shelter in refugee camps, they had been subsistence farmers who, for the most part, lived outside of a cash economy.

The surprise I saw was a deep difference. When I came I saw Africa was different from the United States. The United States has their own rule kind of like over there in Africa we didn't have that you have to pay rent. Here, you have to pay the landlord, the phone. Those kinds of things we didn't have which is totally different and is surprising me.

Second, perhaps it is not surprising – given the types of minimum wage employment available to most Somali Bantu – that few respondents expressed satisfaction with their jobs. Most regarded their work as a necessary evil. For example, a young Somali Bantu mother of five named Karama, put it this way: “The work is not very much satisfied for me, I just work because I need the money but it's not a very good job for me to work.” Karama explained that she went to work in order to be able to send some small amount of money to relatives in Kakuma and that she had found this job through a recruiter who visited the local refugee center. “I find the job from the center that they come to ask for help. ‘Who

wants to do job with us?' And I said, 'yes'. That's how I find the job, because I see my people are assisting their people in Kakuma, I decided to go to work."

Problems with employment were reported in focus group interviews with service providers and other informants. Absences and tardiness were frequently cited and lack of satisfactory performance of the work led to dismissals. Apparently there were also several incidents where Somali Bantus were fired because they were discovered sleeping on the job. Some employers have also complained that the loose, flowing robes favored by Somalis are dangerous in factory settings where machinery is in operation. Furthermore, service providers said that motivation to work varies among different refugee groups. Some individuals and groups are quite particular about what types of work they will accept. Manual labor in area factories is regarded with special repugnance by Somali Bantu women. Efforts to recruit them to work in a factory located about an hour away met with disbelief and outright refusal. One woman told her employment counselor, "They is going to kill us. If we take this job, we is going to die." When asked why she believed this, she explained that their husbands found the work too physically challenging. She asked how the employment counselor could expect women to do work that even men found too difficult.

Third, many respondents complained that part-time work presented a financial hardship due to insufficient income. This reflects a broader problem of underemployment among Somali Bantu refugees. "My husband is part time," explained Mayuma, a 37-year-old mother of six whose husband works as a dishwasher. "If my husband get first shift and full time it would be good." She explained the circumstances of her poverty in relation to the limitations of part-time employment:

[The] reason we became poor is my husband is working only 4 hours and he is making like \$110 a week. With that \$110 he must pay like insurance and he must pay telephone and he must buy cleaning supplies and he must buy other stuff for kids, so we don't have enough for the whole family.

In order to help fill the income gap created by under-employment, Mayuma expressed interest in finding her own job. When asked what sort of work she'd like to do, she replied: "Any kind of job. I

just need a job.” In a follow-up visit to the home three years later, her husband characterized their life conditions as poor. He explained that they did not have money to pay their phone bill and the phone had been disconnected. His wife had secured employment, but in the meantime she had a miscarriage and was too ill to work. When asked if he had enough money to pay incoming bills, he replied: “I don’t even have enough money to buy shoes for my kids.”

Fourth, the unhappiness expressed by many reflected a sense that they had left Africa to escape poverty and deprivation only to experience a different form of poverty here in the United States – a poverty closely linked to situations of dependence. Most people said that they did not have enough money to feed and clothe their families, and a related complaint was the lack of agency that was tied to being dependent on the government. Respondents frequently articulated a yearning for self-sufficiency and independence. A 27-year-old mother of six, for instance, said: “The first step is to be a self-sufficient, you know to be self-sufficient like no one is helping us, we are paying rent for ourselves and you know, supporting our children.” Sainab, a 27-year-old mother of eight, never imagined that she would experience hunger again once she came to America:

I was hungry, I was from hungry country, when I come here I was expecting to get like, there was nothing in the house, I had to start all over again to complain about food. I am not supposed to do that. We had no food in the house when we came. We had to stay with our relatives for 10 days, until we start complaining. We had an apartment with furniture in it but there was no food. After two weeks they brought food stamps and we had to start all over again to complain about [lack of] food.

Men with large families also have a difficult time, even if they find employment. For example, Ronlie’s husband works as a prep-cook at the casino and earns \$7.40 an hour, but this income does not come close to supporting his wife and six children. They depend on a food stamp allowance of \$500 a month, as well as a WIC program for the provision of juice, milk, and cheese. His wages help defray part of the rent for their apartment. Men with large families are discouraged when they discover that their benefits are reduced when they go to work and finally earn some money of their own. Abdulahi, a

middle-aged father of seven, said that \$630 per month in food stamps and \$850 in cash assistance was “cut off” after finding a job that paid only \$8 per hour.

Women heads of households face even greater challenges because most do not work and they must depend entirely on government assistance to support their families. One Somali Bantu woman explained her frustration: “My life conditions are poor, because I get social services from government. How can I say I am satisfied when I get help from Government? If someone is helping you, you are not going to say you are satisfied.” Ardo, a widow with 10 children, noted that financial assistance doesn’t guarantee that families will be provided for:

I have public assistance. You know, food stamps and from social service also some cash. That money that we receive from social service is just only for soap, shampoo, for washing something like that, you know, for my children and my family, and also, you know is really is not enough for me. \$560 dollars for the rent, \$650 I don’t know, for the food stamps, \$140 per 15 days cash, twice a month. But is not enough.

Fifth, interviews conducted in 2014 showed that 16 of the 20 respondents were unable to work because of health problems. Some said that pre-existing conditions prevented them from working; one man, for example, had been wounded during hostilities in Somalia and has been on Social Security from the outset. Many others, on the other hand, had been working for several years but stopped as a result of a variety of maladies including headaches, seizures, high blood pressure, surgeries, and injuries sustained in car accidents. (While mental health issues were not frequently cited in our interviews, Besteman’s study of resettled Somali Bantu refugees in Lewiston, Maine, highlighted the impacts of psychological trauma and the need for counseling services.<sup>xxx</sup>) We do not claim that this sample is representative of the larger community, but it is noteworthy nonetheless that such a large number of Somali Bantu have dropped out of the workforce as a consequence of health problems. Notably, the “right to health” provided by human rights frameworks such as UDHR and the ICESCR includes medical care for physical and mental health issues. More recently, the 2005 UNESCO Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights stated that “the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health” is a

basic human right, and that “access to quality health care and essential medicines” is required “because health is essential to life itself and must be considered to be a social and human good.”<sup>xxxix</sup>

### *Family separation and obligations*

Interview respondents also cited difficulties associated with the continuing separation of family members, spouses, children, and parents, as well as extended family and friends. Article 16(3) of the UDHR recognizes the family as “the natural and fundamental group unit of society” that is “entitled to protection by society and the State,”<sup>xxxix</sup> and Article 10(1) of the ICESCR notes that “the widest possible protection and assistance should be accorded to the family.”<sup>xxxix</sup> These protections are particularly strong when dependent children are involved; Article 9(1) of the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child requires states to “ensure that a child shall not be separated from his or her parents against their will” (except when it is ruled to be in the best interest of the child by judicial review) and Article 10 creates obligations to allow families to travel for purposes of family reunification.<sup>xxxix</sup>

Family separation occurred for a variety of reasons and in a number of different circumstances. In some cases, husbands or wives were left behind in the camps either because they failed the IOM test or because they were taken out of the resettlement process by the UNHCR or other official agency. In some cases, men left children behind because they had been born to a second or third wife who had either been divorced or had died or been killed. It was not always clear why a spouse was left behind because our respondents were either unable to explain what had happened, or more likely, because they themselves did not really know what had happened to prevent the spouse from coming. Family separation occurred in the chaos of flight from violence, but it also happened when one or more family members went looking for work or searching for food. Medina, 36, came to the United States with three of her four children. Her husband and her eldest daughter remain in Kakuma. When asked what she

found surprising here in the U.S., Medina explained that when she ate, she was so preoccupied with her husband and daughter in Kakuma that she did not feel nourished by the food she ate. She said,

[Better food] doesn't help because my husband is over there and my daughter is over there, she is not with me so is difficult for me, even I eat the food I don't feel it going to help my body. So the problem is you thinking everything by yourself when you are in the house for your child, your kids, you husband, everybody.

Frustration associated with the inability to meet the expenses of everyday life in America surfaced repeatedly, but apparently just as maddening for our respondents was their inability to help relatives who remain stranded in Somalia or Kenya. The importance of extended family in the diaspora has been widely recognized.<sup>xxxv</sup> Our respondents in particular bemoaned their inability to assist relatives who are still in the refugee camps in Kenya. A father of five who works as a dishwasher and supports his family with part-time work, \$500 in food stamps, and \$20 in cash assistance each month noted that there simply isn't money to send home; "What am I going to send? I don't have enough for myself." Halima, whose husband remains in the camp at Kakuma, said "Sometimes when I pay all the bills, \$10 maybe [to send to Kenya]."

The network of family obligations for Somali Bantu is much wider than it is in the West for two reasons. First, the prevalence of polygyny in Somalia and in the camps in Kenya meant that when Somali Bantu men were accepted for resettlement in the U.S., they were obliged to select which wife and children would accompany him. Each polygynous man was forced to divorce his other wives and leave them and their children from those wives behind. It is unlikely that such a litigious requirement would have severed these men's attachments and feelings of family obligation. Second, Somali Bantu frequently refer to others as brother or sister, or perhaps aunt or uncle, when in fact the actual blood relationship is more distant (or even that of a close friend). Regardless of blood ties, these relationships may reflect a much closer attachment than they would in the West. The fluidity of family terms and

categories, as well as the prevalence of fostering, also suggests the very extensive network of family and kin whom Somali Bantu may feel obligated to support if they can.

The Internet and recent innovations in telecommunications have made transnational contact much less expensive and a great deal easier and more frequent.<sup>xxxvi</sup> But Somali Bantu in the U.S. consider such communications a decidedly mixed blessing. While they appreciate being able to communicate with loved ones who are left behind in Africa, they are subjected to a constant barrage of requests for money whenever they speak on the phone. Asim expressed his frustration at relatives and friends thinking that in America he'll be rich. He says the news portrays an unrealistic picture of life in the promised land of the United States. He is committed to work hard and to educate his children, but he can't forget family obligations:

And you come here, you find America have everything more expensive. Everything hard, but you have difficult situation in Africa. The people, our family, our friends, our brides there, people there, they need help too much. You see all they got in America. Oh you know if only you go America oh, you find many, many money. They don't understand why you are hard life here. It doesn't matter. You have a better life here. They don't see what going on here, but sometimes every news is not right. Sometimes, if you hear from BBC or something like that. They don't give you exactly what's going on in America. So this is the reason I tell you we have hard times and we try to improve our kids for education. I tell you now. You go for good education, and you find good position too. You don't forget you family too. You continue to give them too.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Longitudinal data from qualitative interviews conducted at three times over the course of ten years shows that resettled Somali Bantu refugees face a range of challenges in the United States, including threats to their basic ESCR. In particular, these problems center on financial concerns and issues of family separation and obligations. The following key recommendations are provided in order to combat these challenges and protect the rights and well-being of resettled refugees:

*Extend support services for resettled refugees*

A report submitted to Congress suggests that, while America is to be congratulated for having taken in nearly three million refugees in the last five decades, the nation may indeed be guilty of opening its gates to refugees and “simply forgetting about them after they have arrived”.<sup>xxxvii</sup> The report stipulates that “resettlement efforts in some U.S. cities are underfunded, overstretched, and failing to meet the basic needs of the refugee populations they are currently asked to assist”.<sup>xxxviii</sup> In the case of the Somali Bantu, scholars such as Besteman contend that overcoming everyday challenges (such as using washing machines, using toilets, or even driving) is relatively easy, but “the real challenges” include overcoming grief and trauma, defining a new identity in the United States, adjusting to new cultural norms, and “struggling to earn an income and meet the expectation of economic self-sufficiency.”<sup>xxxix</sup> Ultimately, a “one size fits all” approach to refugee resettlement is ill-suited to the culturally divergent influx of the past three decades. It is therefore imperative that the U.S. government, in partnership with resettlement agencies, extend support services for resettled refugees and ensure that newcomers are well-equipped for their new lives in the United States.

Given the range of financial hardships reported in qualitative interviews, extended services should pay particular attention to issues such as literacy, job training, employment services, and money management. Refugees who are illiterate in their native language (due to gaps in education caused by forced displacement or simply due to high levels of illiteracy in home communities) may require special instruction that public school teachers or refugee organizations are not equipped to provide. In these cases, it is imperative that special education programs are made available to teach reading and writing skills. Many Somali Bantu are also unfamiliar with the intricacies of cash economies – including issues such as paying taxes, filling out necessary paperwork, opening bank accounts, paying bills, accessing financial information online, using credit cards and accessing other sources of credit. They may struggle with finding (and keeping) jobs, especially without cross-cultural training that includes lessons on writing a résumé, filling out application forms and tax documents, answering interview questions, adhering to

an American work schedule, and understanding the complexities of standard U.S. workplace etiquette. While these issues may seem simple and commonplace to many Americans, they can be overwhelming to resettled refugees with different cultural backgrounds. Additional funding is necessary to facilitate training on these issues, during a refugee's initial 90 days in the United States as well as during the months and years to follow.

Relatedly, support services must also consider the location and transportation needs of resettled refugees. In many cases, refugees are placed in housing that is far from city centers and public transportation. Without the ability to drive at first (often because refugees do not have driver's licenses, cannot pass their driver's test, and/or cannot afford a car and insurance), many refugees are isolated in low-income communities without employment opportunities in walking distance. In many small cities and rural areas where refugees are resettled, lack of adequate public transportation means that refugees are often late for work or unable to find accessible employment at all. For those who work night shifts, public transportation is often not available during the time periods when it's needed most. These concerns should be prioritized during the resettlement process, when agencies locate homes or apartments to rent for newcomers, and they should also be considered as part of ongoing support services. The organization of car shares and van pools, chartered bus routes for commuters, and other solutions to combat this lack of public transportation are sorely needed. These steps will also help some refugees better access health services, which may help solve unemployment issues related to ongoing medical problems.

#### *Provide mentorship opportunities*

Unmet expectations were frequently cited as a source of happiness for resettled refugees, and many Somali Bantu struggle to transition to life in the United States as a result of practical challenges. The creation of mentorship programs will help refugees make new friends, network with potential

employers and allies, better integrate with local cultures and communities, and learn about their new home from a variety of perspectives. While many refugee mentorship programs have been created around the United States to connect refugee youth with community members, there are fewer examples of mentorship opportunities for resettled adults – including the elderly. Mentorship programs between resettled refugees and local companies, for instance, could provide refugees with contacts to learn more about job-seeking and the American workplace. Mentors can also provide opportunities for practicing language skills and expanding one’s social circle beyond the Somali Bantu community.<sup>5</sup> Mentorships with other refugees – perhaps with refugees who have lived in the United States for a longer period of time and/or refugees from other cultural groups – may also help refugee communities to diversify, share resources, and learn from each other’s past experiences.

Mentorship programs that are sensitive to the changing needs of refugee families would be particularly useful. Although resettled refugees are only entitled to 90 days of comprehensive support in the United States, the common “rule of thumb” within refugee agencies is that it takes 8 to 10 years to culturally adapt to a country of resettlement. In many cases, families don’t run into trouble until a few months or even years after arrival as their challenges and circumstances change. After someone in the household gets a job, for instance, they may need help purchasing a vehicle. Typical issues that refugee families face range from reading mail and paying bills in English to getting rides to appointments and finding day care for their children. Ironically, the family members who are most prepared to deal with everyday challenges – usually young adults with English skills – are most likely to be working away from home (and they are often overwhelmed by requests to help). Although many women in Somali Bantu families lack English language skills, they are often part of a tightly-knit community that support each other. A mentoring project that comes to them, such as undertaking activities in the housing complexes

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<sup>5</sup> However, it is important that mentorship programs screen mentors for potential religious or political motivations. These programs should be centered on building capabilities within the refugee community, not recruiting people into various organizations or belief systems.

where they live or at ethnic-based cultural and community centers where they spend time, has a higher chance of succeeding.

There are several mentoring models currently in use with refugees. In some, adult mentors do group activities and lead discussions on topics of interest to students. Others are focused on job skills. Some involve matching local families with refugee families and helping them during the first 3-6 months. Others focus on high-needs or at-risk youth and match them with a responsible adult. In Utica, NY, a new program that is based in a local community center matches pairs of high school or college students with specific requests by refugee families. Some requests include home visits but others can be accomplished relatively quickly and easily at the community center during mentoring office hours that coincide with other programming for convenience. This project, still in its pilot form, has helped young Somali Bantu women with college applications and financial aid advising, solved complex housing problems, and provided a safe space to talk with others about cultural pressures to live at home, to avoid dating, and to marry young. In the future, this program (and those similar to it) could help with issues related to citizenship, for instance, or resolving undiagnosed health problems.

Somali Bantu refugees face a range of resettlement challenges in the United States, which threaten their ability to integrate into American society and to protect their human rights to an adequate standard of living and family protection. While scholars often solely emphasize cultural differences to explain these obstacles, longitudinal interview data included in this study instead highlight the impacts of practical needs and inequalities associated with financial concerns and family issues. Cultural obstacles are certainly important – and sometimes strongly related to key inequalities – but lack of support and resources to remedy these problems threaten full integration into U.S. society. It is not that Somali Bantu refugees lack the cultural capacity to integrate, but rather the structure of refugee resettlement in the U.S. does not provide the necessary infrastructure for doing so. With this argument

in mind, extended support services and mentorship programs offer two potential solutions for combatting these problems and building human capabilities for successful refugee resettlement.

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<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Alexandra Barbee and Ashley Parcels (eds), 'Protection and Resettlement Policy: Reforming United States Policy towards Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Forced Migrants' (Seattle: University of Washington, 2010). <https://digital.lib.washington.edu/researchworks/handle/1773/15595>. Accessed 9 January 2015. 202, 208.

<sup>iv</sup> Andrea M. Voyer, *Strangers and Neighbors: Multiculturalism, Conflict, and Community in America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>v</sup> Andorra Bruno, 'Refugee Admissions and Resettlement Policy' (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2012). <http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/4f84320b2.pdf%E2%80%8E>. Accessed 9 January 2015.

<sup>vi</sup> Fethi Keles, 'The Structural Negligence of U.S. Refugee Resettlement', *Anthropology News* 49(5) (2008): 6; Doris S. Warriner, 'Language Learning and the Politics of Belonging: Sudanese Women Refugees Becoming and Being "American"', *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 38(4) (2007): 343-359.

<sup>vii</sup> Stephanie J. Nawyn, 'Institutional Structures of Opportunity in Refugee Resettlement: Gender, Race/Ethnicity, and Refugee NGOs', *Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare* 37(1) (2010): 149-167; Yda J. Smith, 'Resettlement of Somali Bantu Refugees in an Era of Economic Globalization', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 26(3) (2012): 477-494.

<sup>viii</sup> David W. Haines (ed), *Refugees in America in the 1990's: A Reference Handbook* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996).

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid.

<sup>x</sup> Alastair Ager and Alison Strang, 'Understanding Integration: A Conceptual Framework', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 21(2) (2008): 166-191.

<sup>xi</sup> Jeremy Hein, *Ethnic Origins: The Adaptation of Cambodian and Hmong Refugees in Four American Cities* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006).

<sup>xii</sup> Dan Van Lehman and Omar Eno, *The Somali Bantu: Their History and Culture* (Washington D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, The Cultural Orientation Resource Center, 2003).

[http://www.hartfordinfo.org/issues/wsd/immigrants/somali\\_bantu.pdf](http://www.hartfordinfo.org/issues/wsd/immigrants/somali_bantu.pdf). Accessed 9 January 2015.

<sup>xiii</sup> Pindie Stephen, 'Somali Bantu Report. Bridging Refugee Youth & Children's Services, Cultural Orientation Africa Project', IOM Nairobi (2002). <http://www.brycs.org/documents/upload/bantureport.pdf>. Accessed 9 January 2015.

<sup>xiv</sup> Omar A. Eno and Muhamed Eno, 'The Making of a Modern Diaspora: The Resettlement Process of the Somali Bantu Refugees in the United States', in *African Minorities in the New World*, eds. Toyin Falola and Niyi Afolabi (New York: Routledge, 2008): 197-219. 198.

<sup>xv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xvi</sup> Dan Van Lehman and Omar Eno, *The Somali Bantu*.

<sup>xvii</sup> Omar A. Eno and Muhamed Eno, 'The Making of a Modern Diaspora', 197.

<sup>xviii</sup> Catherine Besteman, 'Translating Race across Time and Space: The Creation of Somali Bantu Ethnic Identity', *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 19(3) (2012): 285-302.

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- <sup>xxv</sup> Catherine Besteman, 'Somali Bantus in a State of Refuge', *Bildhaan, An International Journal of Somali Studies* 12 (2012): 11-33. 28.
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- <sup>xxvii</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.
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