A Gap in their Hearts:

the experience of separated Somali children

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Acknowledgements

This is a report on the special problems that Somali unaccompanied children suffer; it is not an indictment on child migration or the difficult choices that Somali adults make. For the purpose of this book, IRIN has looked at the personal experiences and vulnerabilities of children who were smuggled into European and North American countries without parental or guardian support – in the hope that the plight of such children may in the future be better addressed both in the homeland and in the host countries.

IRIN gratefully acknowledges the many people in Somali territories, Sweden, Britain and Kenya who made this book possible. In particular, IRIN would like to acknowledge the participation of the Somali children and young adults who were generous with their time and courageous in their honesty.

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A Gap in their Hearts: the experience of separated Somali children was researched and written by Lucy Hannan.

(Photo:UNICEF)

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Summary of observations

- A persistent social emergency after a decade of conflict and international neglect in all Somali territories encourage adults to send separated minors abroad despite the high cost

- The condition of Somali children ranks among the worst in the world, according to humanitarian statistics; children have no legal or institutional protection in Somali territories

- Lack of education at all levels in all territories is given as the main reason for sending children away; including the lack of recognized qualifications even in post-conflict areas

- Additional international security after the events of 11 September 2001 temporarily stemmed the flow of children out of Mogadishu; but smugglers were able to continue the trade by increasing cost and changing routes and practices

- Child smuggling in Somali territories is sometimes facilitated by corruption and fraud in immigration departments in transit and receiving countries

- Smuggling of Somali children include cases of trafficking, as defined by the UN Special Rapporteur, and is linked to international criminal networks

- European and North American officials have shown a willingness at times to use illegal deportation methods in the absence of a recognized Somali government, including employing the services of local agents involved in illegal migration practices

- The category "separated" or "unaccompanied" is an imperfect one in the case of Somali children, as the number of those seeking asylum does not necessarily reflect the number arriving in the country; neither does the conventional category reflect the variety of circumstances and outcomes for Somali children who arrive at a port of entry without parents or normal guardians

- Deception, pressure and force are used by family members and smugglers to make Somali children adopt false identities, use fraudulent documents and travel abroad

- Somali children forced to migrate without an accompanying family unit face special risks and vulnerabilities, including neglect, exploitation and abuse

- Living with a false identity in a foreign country causes minors serious psychological problems

- Somali children are used by adults to exploit social security systems

- Recent trends show more registered separated Somali girls than boys

- Bi-cultural separated Somali minors who are returned to the homeland under duress or through deception are in danger of harassment, extortion, rape and murder

Executive Summary

A Gap in their Hearts: the experience of separated Somali children

This report is about Somali children whose parents are faced with desperate choices. It looks at how that despair has been turned into a lucrative and exploitative international child-smuggling business, which delivers the agonies of a failed state to the doorstep of the West. IRIN sheds light for the first time on why parents pay smugglers up to US $10,000 to abandon their young children in airports and railway stations in foreign lands, and what happens to these "separated" or "unaccompanied" children if they are later sent home by the Somali diaspora.

Child migrants and their unhappy fate is but one small part of the greater immigration debate. Immigration is one of the most important issues in the West today, attracting much public and political concern. According to recent studies, there may be up to 100,000 separated or unaccompanied children from more than 60 countries living in Western Europe at any one time; but very little is known about them. There have recently been a number of high profile cases that have tragically illustrated migrant children's special vulnerability – for example, the case of Victoria Climbié, a nine year old girl from the Ivory Coast who was sent to the UK for educational opportunities, but abused and murdered by her aunt and the aunt's partner. Other cases involve the bodies of children found in the undercarriage of airplanes, like the two young stowaways from Ghana found dead at Heathrow on 5 December 2002; and 87 refugee children who went "missing" in Sweden in 2001.

Somali children are consistently one of the largest groups of separated children arriving in European and North American countries since the collapse of the Somali state in 1991. Up to 250 children a month are sent out of the Somali capital, Mogadishu, smugglers and humanitarian agents told IRIN – although international security measures after the events of 11 September stemmed the flow and increased the cost. Even in post-conflict Somali areas, families continue to send children away because of poor services - particularly education. But, once abroad, Somalis count as one of the least "visible" groups of unaccompanied children, as they are almost without exception claimed by clan and extended family soon after arrival, often circumventing the official registers and support services.

While some unaccompanied children may end up in the competent care of relatives, all are an unwitting part of an international racket. They arrive burdened with a false identity – a new name, a different age, an imaginary history - which they have been coached and threatened to maintain. In one way or another, they are considered a kind of investment by parents who see no future in their own country. Many are used for benefit fraud. In the more extreme cases, some are also used as domestic labour, or for prostitution, or fall into the hands of international criminal gangs. All too frequently, the struggle with serious psychological problems and neglect ends up in criminalisation or institutional care. "Often the family just wants social service benefits, and does not give the child any affection or proper attention… I have heard of suicide cases, where these young Somali children attempt to kill themselves," Dahabo Isa of a British NGO the Somali Development Organisation told IRIN.

The arrival of a child without its parents or guardians poses unique challenges to the host country, raising serious questions about the rights and mental health of that child. IRIN looked at both sides of the story – the conditions in Somali territories as well as in the host countries – based primarily on interviews with the children and their parents, and a broader circle of professionals and officials. In the course of the research, success stories were hard to find. Even separated children who had ultimately excelled in the education

system were unanimous in their "don't do it" message, citing psychological distress and cultural confusion. Ilan, who arrived in Sweden as an unaccompanied child, told IRIN that out of an original group of 15, she was one of only two to make it through the education system: "Some got pregnant, some became alcoholics, some are on drugs, and some ended up in juvenile centers."

Those who "fail" may ultimately be sent home by the Somali diaspora. They are known as "family deportees" in Mogadishu, where thousands of returned teenagers are languishing in a sort of cultural no-man's-land. Conspicuous in the way they talk, dress and behave, these returnee minors face daily bullying and isolation. At worse, they meet with extortion, rape and murder in the hands of child-gangs – a consequence of some of the terrible conditions their peers have suffered in the homeland. A shocking glimpse in the report at the situation of children in Somali territories – including abused children in adult prisons - shows why so many parents are prepared to take the risk with the smugglers. "You can see why, for some, sending a child away on a plane is considered the biggest favour you can do", says UN Human Rights Officer, Fatuma Ibrahim.

After a decade of international neglect, Somalia's unique circumstances mean it is a country that continues to produce a significant number of unaccompanied children. ***A Gap in their Hearts: the experience of separated Somali children*** hopes to show that development and aid is imperative, particularly in the field of education, rather than relying on erecting more barriers in the receiving countries. The report hopes to act as a reminder that Somalia remains an international responsibility, and that continued neglect comes with a price for everyone.

Separated children

Save the Children and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) define separated or unaccompanied children as "children under 18 years of age who are outside their country of origin and separated from both parents, or their previous legal/customary primary caregiver. Some children are totally alone while others…may be living with extended family members." According to the Statement of Good Practice for Separated Children in Europe, issued by these agencies in October 2000, the word "separated" is preferred, as it "better defines the essential problem that such children face [being] without the care and protection of their parents or legal guardian and as a consequence suffer socially and psychologically from this separation."

The migration of separated children is by no means a new phenomenon. In the late 1930s and 1940s the UK received many unaccompanied Jewish children, and in the 1970s Vietnamese "boat" children began arriving in Europe. The most recent influx of separated children are Iraqi Kurds and Afghans, where previously in the 1990s children from Somalia and the former Yugoslavia were among the most numerous. However, official figures are based only on those children who register an asylum claim; humanitarian agencies and human rights groups believe there are many more who pass undetected over the borders and through the ports of entry, often from one destination to another, or into the hands of criminal cartels.

Table I: Unaccompanied children seeking asylum in the UK (all nationalities)										
	1992	**1993**	**1994**	**1995**	**1996**	**1997**	**1998**	**1999**	**2000**	**2001**
At port of entry	185	245	360	490	477	671	1083	1498	1394	1647
Of which Somali	53	38	79	64	54	122	88	156	99	57
In-country	N / A	30	59	113	156	434	1954	1851	1339	1822
Of which Somali	N / A						65	33	78	141
Somali total	53	38	79	64	54	122	153	189	177	198
Total	**185**	**275**	**419**	**603**	**633**	**1105**	**3037**	**3349**	**2733**	**3469**

Source: UK Home Office Statistics
Notes: aged 17 or under

The terms trafficking and smuggling are often used as loosely interchangeable words to describe the illegal child migration business. But trafficking is clearly prohibited by international law, although there is no common international definition. It is defined by a European Union Joint Action as "any behavior that facilitates the entry into, transit through, residence in or exit from, the territory of a Member state, for the purposes [of] sexual exploitation in relation to a child".

The UN Special Rapporteur on the sale of children considers the following definition to be the most workable: "Trafficking consists of all acts involved in the recruitment or transportation of persons within or across borders, involving deception, coercion or force, debt bondage or fraud, for the purpose of placing persons in situations of abuse or exploitation, such as forced prostitution, slavery-like practices, battering or extreme cruelty, sweatshop labour or exploitative domestic servitude." (See the report of the Special Rapporteur on the sale of children 1999; and the UN Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography, UN General Assembly, 25 May 2000.)

Where IRIN has used the term smuggling in this report, it has no international legal definition, but refers to the illegal transportation of children for profit. The term trafficking has been avoided, but the research did show that in many cases the smuggling business in Somali children included trafficking, as defined by the UN Special Rapporteur.

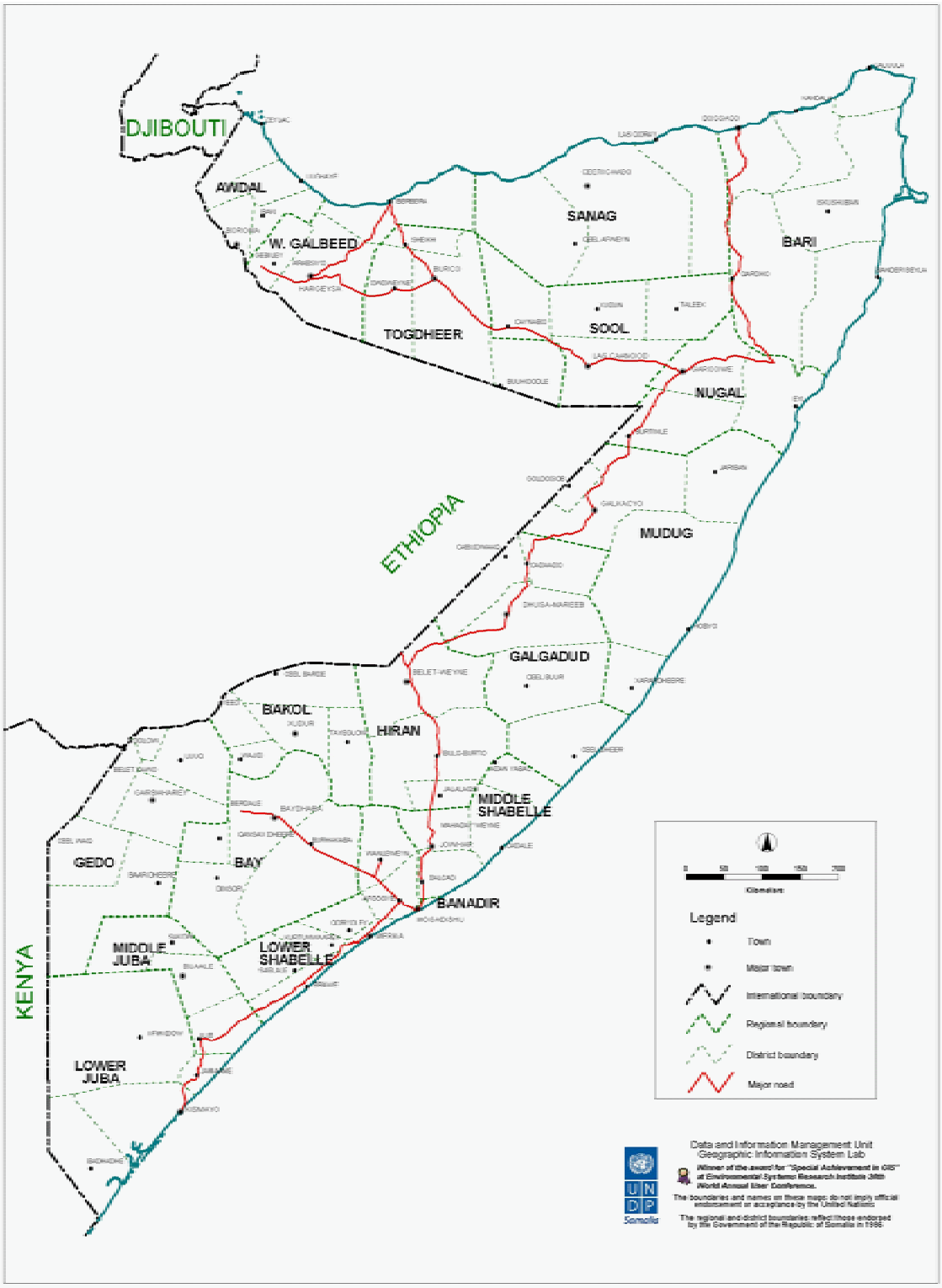
Photo: IRIN/Jenny Matthews-Network

The IRIN project

Carried out independently by IRIN, this project received special funding by the Swedish government and the European Union. It is based on research by IRIN in 2002 in Sweden, Britain and Somali territories, and includes interviews with Somali separated children, parents and families; state authorities, immigration and police officials, and professionals working in the support and welfare services of the host countries; as well as Somali smugglers and "fixers" who arrange the transportation of the children out of Somali territories. IRIN also interviewed returning Somali diaspora children and families, Somali NGOs, local Somali officials and humanitarian workers.

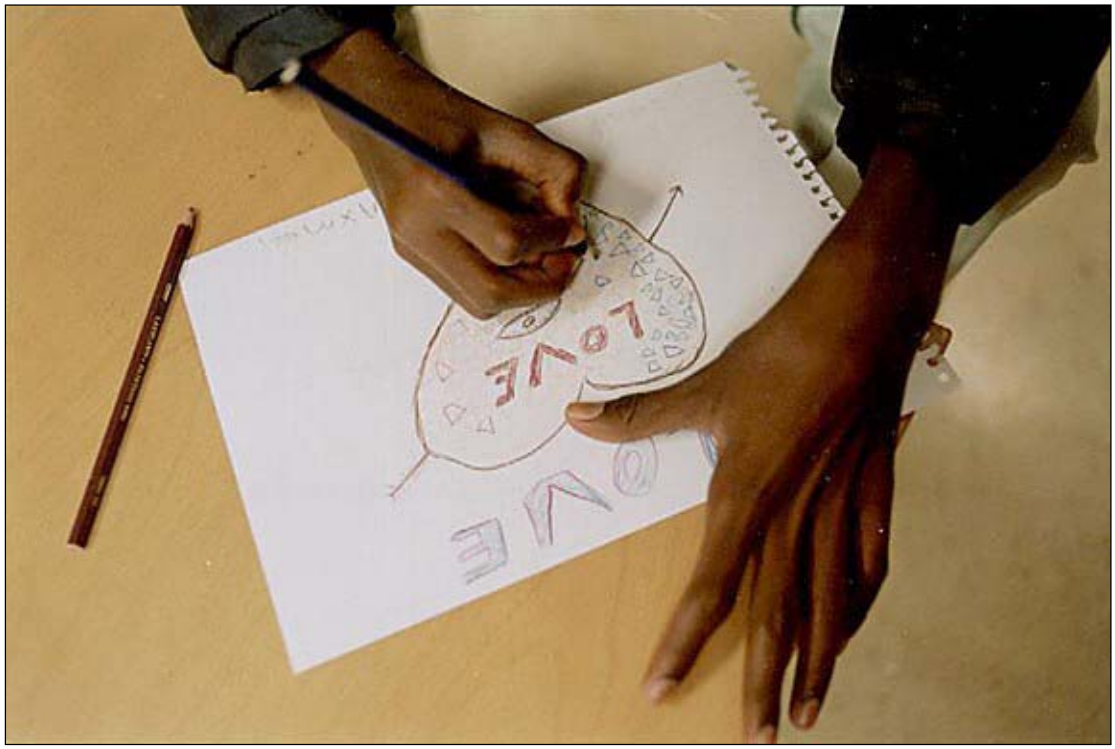
The booklet looks specifically at Somali children, with special focus on their circumstances and personal experiences, and their situation in the homeland. While there have been a number of significant studies on unaccompanied children seeking asylum, the reasons for sending children away are less well researched. IRIN has sought to contribute to these studies and balance the information on the child migration phenomenon by illuminating the reasons why parents send their children away, and the relationship of the children to their home country and the Somali diaspora.

Throughout the booklet, the terms unaccompanied and separated are used to describe the children. As it is vital to protect the children interviewed during the course of the research, IRIN has used a composite storyline, based on actual interviews and experiences, which runs at the top of each chapter. It illustrates the more intimate and traumatic issues affecting a separated Somali child.



Map of Somalia.

The term “Somali Territories” is used in this book to describe all areas within the boundaries defined as Somalia prior to the collapse of the central state. In the north-west, the self-declared state of Somaliland claims the former British Somaliland borders, with Hargeysa as its capital.



Safiya's Story

IRIN has used a composite storyline, based on interviews and actual experiences, which runs at the top of each chapter. It illustrates some of the more intimate and traumatic issue affecting separated Somali children, while protecting the children IRIN interviewed.

(photo: IRIN/Jenny Matthews-Network)

Chapter 1: Unaccompanied Somali children: the push factor

I am not Safiya from Somalia any more; I am 12-year- old Fatuma flying abroad with her uncle - that is what my mother told me this morning before I was taken to the airport. He is sitting so close to me on the plane now, but never looks at me. When he came to the house last night, my mother told me, go with him and do everything he tells you. If I move my arm I can still feel pain where he held me hard, in the airport, when they were stamping my new document.

When I cried for my mother this morning, he shouted at me. She pushed me out of the house, and my heart and my stomach emptied. Now, I can't stop thinking about how we ran together from the war. It runs through my head like the noise of the plane. When we ran together from the guns, we were screaming and falling and dying. But here, every one stares in front of them as the roar of the plane gets louder, and louder. They make no noise. I have never seen so many people with such beautiful clothes sit so still and so quiet: where are they all going?

Introduction

Children are sent out of Somali territories because of a chronic social emergency after a decade of destruction and international neglect. Many of the separated Somali children arriving in Europe are coming from areas affected by insecurity or actual conflict in southern Somalia and Mogadishu, but children are also sent from the more peaceful post-conflict areas.

Loss of livelihood, continued conflict, and the absence of basic services - particularly education and health - has meant there is a general lack of faith in the future. Sending teenagers and young children abroad has become a widespread economic strategy, in the hope that the child will eventually be in the position to regularly send money home.

Photo: IRIN/Jenny Matthews-Network

"She will miss her parents because she is young, but it cannot be avoided – there is no education here" – Arriving in the children's house, Carlslund Refugee Centre, Sweden.

Background

Somalia has been without a functioning central government since 1991, when the regime of President Muhammad Siyad Barre collapsed, and competing warlords and clan-based factions tore the country apart. The exodus from Somalia began in the 1980s when Barre turned his security services and military might against his own people, forcing many to flee abroad, or into refugee camps in neighbouring countries. In the absence of a functioning central authority, continued conflict, and chronic international neglect - as well as other factors - the exodus continues.

Always having had a culture that has used travel and kinship to defy boundaries and pursue trade, the Somalis found they must use old habits in an entirely new way. An established network of Somalis, regionally and internationally, became a lifeline for the hundreds of thousands trying to escape from the home country. From a relatively small population of about 7-8 million1, Somalis established a vast and widespread. Life in the sprawling, harsh refugee camps became for many merely time in transit, as funds were channeled into ways and means of getting to Britain, North America, Europe or the Arab states. Even the most distant relatives abroad held a traditional and moral obligation to assist in a time of unprecedented suffering as war, starvation, anarchy and poverty hit the home country.

In 1992, inter-clan fighting and the armed looting of food aid resulted in a deadly famine that, at its height, was killing 1,000 people a day in the south – and the cost of armed protection for relief supplies equaled the cost of the food delivered, according to humanitarian agencies. A US-led United Nations International Task Force (UNITAF) saw the deployment of 30,000 US troops in Somalia with the mandate to "create a secure environment for the delivery of humanitarian relief" throughout the country. At the time, conflict and famine in Somalia was described as the worst humanitarian crisis faced by any people in the world, killing an estimated 400,000, and forcing some 1.5 million to seek refuge abroad. Ultimately, the killing of peacekeepers and US soldiers triggered a pull-out of the international community in 1993. The perceived failure of the intervention in Somalia became an important international precedent in future responses to conflict and humanitarian disasters.

Following the collapse of the central government and the pull-out of international troops, the state fragmented into separate administrations and clan-based factions. In 1991, northern Somalia unilaterally reclaimed its original separate status, and declared itself Somaliland. Other regions – notably Puntland in the northeast – declared self-determination and established independent administrations. And while some Somali territories have since enjoyed periods of peace and development, few Somalis yet feel they can guarantee the security and well being of their families. At the best of times, it is a difficult and precarious existence, often without basic facilities, institutions or governance. In Mogadishu particularly, competing factions and warlords still make peace an illusive commodity, and there are reports of killings and kidnappings every week.

By the turn of the millennium, the world seemed to have washed its hands of Somalia. The international community has sustained open skepticism that Somalis will ever achieve a lasting peace, as attempts to re-establish a functioning central authority have floundered or failed. Yet, after heavy fighting diminished in the mid 1990s, many areas managed to achieve some degree of normality. Businesses have been rebuilt, families gradually reunited, and homes and streets refurbished. In the absence of a central authority, local communities have "responded with a wide range of strategies to establish the minimal essential elements of governance"2. But this has been at enormous cost, both in terms of lives and economic survival.

As a result, Somalis hold on to their "other world" abroad – the sending of remittances, maintaining businesses and homes overseas, seeking education and work in foreign lands, yet all the while focusing with fierce determination on the home country. Somalis remit hundreds of millions of dollars a year, and maintain community coherence despite the fact they are scattered. Having a relative abroad has become one of the greatest investments the vulnerable Somali family can establish – and some will go to extraordinary lengths to achieve it.

[1] According to the UN, overall population estimates range from 5.4m to 6.6m in 2002. In the absence of an official census, some claim that as many as a quarter of the population is missing, having left the country for refugee camps or destinations abroad, or killed in conflict and famine during the 1990s.

[2] Ken Menkhaus 'Stateless stability' in New Routes, published by Life and Peace Institute 1998

Extreme conditions, desperate solutions

According to Amina Haji Elmi, founder and director of the Institute for the Education and Development of Women in Mogadishu, Somalis will go to extremes to try and send their children abroad. "Parents are selling their houses and moving in with relatives to send their children…I think it's a combination of fear and lack of educational opportunities." Where there are six or more children, the parents try to send at least two, generally the older ones, Amina told IRIN. "Everything has collapsed here: they say, how can I keep my children here?" She believes the only way to stop the practice is to have "schools, hospitals, disarmament, peace, a government and more".

Others emphasise the economic strategy. "The point is that the child, once sent abroad, becomes a source of income," Abdirashid Haji Nur of Concern, Mogadishu, told IRIN. For many, it is the income a child will provide once on welfare in the host country that appears to determine the decision to send them abroad rather than quality of education.

One Somali humanitarian worker in Hargeysa, the capital of Somaliland, described the desire to get a visa as a national obsession. "Each person here would sell their soul to get a visa – they would sell their house, their camels, their possessions, their gold. They are happy to pay up to US $10,000 to an agent and take a gamble to get someone abroad." Although Somaliland is relatively secure and peaceful, residents say the absence of decent education facilities, and hospitals, and a poor, limited economy still encourage families to send children overseas.

In Mogadishu, many parents who have sent children abroad said they planned to join them once their youngest children were safely out of Somalia. However, over time, the children and the parents become culturally estranged. Parents and the extended family have to reconcile themselves to the fact that their children will shed much of their cultural identity, abandon their language and become lax in the practice of their Islamic religion. One mother, Fatum Muhammad Ali, 43, said when she eventually saw her oldest son again, he barely stayed two weeks in Mogadishu. "He came and asked to leave immediately," she told IRIN – but said she did not regret sending him away, despite being hurt by his behaviour. "I suppose it would be sad if these were different circumstances, but as it is, we have bigger problems – our main problem is the war."

Those interviewed in Mogadishu pointed out that many of the families who sent children overseas were wealthy enough to afford to protect their children, either by keeping them safe in their guarded compounds or providing them with armed escorts. But as such an existence is stressful and expensive, many prefer to find a way to get the children into a productive and secure environment overseas that will benefit both the child and the family. These families can afford to pay for education in Mogadishu's private schools or hire individual tutors, but prefer to accumulate a much larger sum of money to smuggle them abroad. "My children are my assets", one woman who had sent four children to Sweden and UK stated bluntly.

Relative in Hargeysa, on decision to send 14-year-old girl overseas alone

We are forced to send her away because of the poor education here. We want her to get a good education so as to secure her future. Her parents are poor, but we, the relatives, can foot the expenses involved… We will use the passport of people who have already got travel documents in the country abroad. We are being helped by people who have experience … We will first send her with relatives who have proper documents, then when she reaches her destination, there are other people waiting for her.

Yes, she will miss her parents because she is a young child, but it cannot be avoided – there may be peace here, but there is no education. We are even breaking with tradition by separating a daughter from her mother. But it is well known that whatever a woman possesses is not out of the reach of her parents and relatives; a young woman has more responsibilities than a young boy and is more settled. It is our hope that she will support her family.

We believe we must do this, even at great cost. There is a proverb that goes "what you see is what you believe". We have seen other people doing this and we have to believe that she will go safely and accomplish her goals.

Adapting traditions

Somalis are ready to take the risk of sending unaccompanied children away partly because it is "not an entirely alien concept", one Somali aid worker explained to IRIN. Traditionally, Somali society is nomadic, with families depending on the clan network as they move around geographically – often covering great distances and moving across national borders and ethnic boundaries. Before the collapse of the Somali state, it was normal to send young children away to stay for long periods with grandparents and close relatives. However, with the collapse of the state and the resulting exodus, this tradition has been distorted: young children are being sent away to alien cultures for indefinite periods without the support of close relatives.

Initially, more boys were sent abroad than girls. According to figures from immigration sources in Europe, more Somali boys were arriving in Europe in the early to mid 1990s. Families sent them away in the early stage of the war, fearing they would get caught up with the "morians" – young armed militia – either as fighters, or as targeted victims of the clan-based war. This was coupled with the fact that tradition favoured education privileges going to the older male siblings. However, by the late 1990s, there was a demonstrable change in the trend, with an increasing number of unaccompanied girls being sent abroad. In Sweden, immigration figures show of 461 unaccompanied children arriving in 2001, 48 are Somali, of whom 29 are girls. Somalis were the second largest group after Iraqi Kurds – 186 of whom only 20 were girls.

Investing in girls

Research by IRIN in Somali territories showed that girls were now often considered a better investment. Somalis said they had learnt that girls were "more trusted" and "more productive" overseas, while boys were more likely to slip into criminal behaviour and fail to send money home. This is likely to be related to the particular difficulties many Somali boys and men have when in the Western culture they lose their traditional role and authority, exacerbated by unemployment. Women, on the other hand, say they find their role is elevated in countries - like Britain - where the female head of household claims and collects state

benefits. In Somaliland – a highly conservative society – this shift towards girls is a recognized social phenomenon. Recent plays and poems have reflected the relative merits of sending girls abroad, and the problems the young boys and men face in the West.

But the breakdown of traditional family structures has exposed these young separated Somali girls to particular vulnerabilities. Formerly there were strict rules governing the identities of the relatives who could be trusted to look after a daughter. One mother explained how it used to work: "I would trust my sister with my child, but not my brother, because he would be married to another woman, who would be looking after the children. My husband's sister I can trust, but not my husband's brother. But if my brother or my husband's brother is a bachelor, I can trust him." Under the present social emergency, Somali families have become willing to send children away to very distant relatives. Moreover, relatives who might be traditionally entrusted with the care of children may prove to be highly unsuitable as guardians in a Western environment. "Parents here don't realize that an uncle has changed dramatically in the Western environment, and now drinks, and is jobless, and has no one to look after the house, and can barely afford to look after himself," one "returnee" from Britain said to IRIN.

Yet Somali families remaining in the home country are unwilling to acknowledge how difficult it is for relatives abroad to look after unaccompanied children; the perspective is that anything abroad must be better than home. "We are willing to take more risks, because we believe that anyone living abroad must be living in luxury," said one mother. Because of the strong oral tradition of Somali culture, the extent of communication - particularly through telephone and Internet - maintained between relatives abroad and at home is unusual, compared with other diaspora and refugee groups. It has had the effect of encouraging families to send young children overseas, in the sometimes misguided belief that the clan network continues to work as effectively abroad.

As a result, some adamantly refuse to believe that a child can end up living a lonely existence in a hostel. "I don't believe our children are ever alone, because every child has their lineage they can always find a relative - maybe they get called 'unaccompanied' because the relatives are afraid to come forward to the authorities," stated one Somali. Few realize just how enormous the gap is between the dream and the reality.

Girls are considered a better investment – An increasing number of Somali girls are being sent abroad.

Photo: IRIN/Jenny Matthews-Network

Ismahan

At the height of the war in Mogadishu Ismahan spent more than a year in Kenya and Ethiopia trying to get out to Europe. Her family made a number of attempts at the airports to get her out, initially without success. When she finally arrived in Sweden, she had become a different person:

The agent gave me a different name and age, and even told me the street where I should say my home was. I learned my story over two days. He left me at the door of a police station, and told me not to talk about him.

With support from her teachers and relatives, Ismahan has made a life for herself in Stockholm - but would like to return to Somalia:

My relatives tried to get me out in 1992. I was the only girl, and they were fearful of what might happen to me. I was brought up by my grandparents, as my mum was only 16 when she had me, so I knew her as a member of my family rather than my mother...

I didn't know I was coming to Europe. I didn't want to leave my grandmother - I loved her, she was the whole world to me. He [the agent] came and took me from home, but no-one told me exactly where I was going. He gave me a different name and age. I was 14 at the time, but he told me to say I was 11, and gave me a different name, and even told me the street where I should say my home was. He left me with someone and I learned my story over two days. Then he collected me and took me to the airport.

Here [Sweden] we went through the passport control together. Then he took me to his relatives and I slept there for one night. The next day he left me at the door of a police station, and told me not to describe his face or talk about him, and that he would be in contact with me later. I never heard from him again.

The police asked a lot of questions, in English: Where were you born, how did you come? They took fingerprints, my picture, and took me in a police car to an asylum centre. I was there for two days, then they took me and told me I would be allocated a guardian in the asylum process...

I hadn't met any Somalis at that point, and I was miserable. I regretted leaving home. I expected a better life to come instantly, but I found instead the people very cold, and the weather awful. I didn't trust anyone; I couldn't really speak. I ended up in Carlslund refugee centre. With my own room, at first it feels a bit like detention. There are many rules, what time to get up and have breakfast, what time to go to sleep, what to do. But at last I met lots of Somalis.

Then I started to move more freely, and I found it a nice atmosphere. There was a group of us that kept tightly together, like a family - Somalis, Iraqis, Bangladeshis, and people from different countries. If someone was in trouble we would protect each other. If someone was outside, we would look out for them.

Everything was fine, but I missed my grandmother too much. I felt neglected and sad. Later I was able to contact my grandmother, and eventually I also contacted my mother in Italy. I took my own apartment, but it was tough. I was alone, at 17, dealing with the bills and trying to study. You are encouraged in Sweden to be alone, that is the idea here - your classmates are always talking about moving out, and some leave their families by 16.

My aunt went to my teacher and said I needed support, which I was given. I had a good relationship with my teacher and I liked my independence. But I didn't have such a good relationship with the Somali community. I went to Italy in 1997 to see my mother. That was great, but I remember my mother as being tall, but when I saw her she had shrunk and she had become just like granny. I now live in an apartment in Stockholm, and I would like to go back to Somalia.

Chapter 2: *Hambaar*: The Smugglers' Network

"Passport." That word I understand, but I don't have it – Muhammad the agent took it away when he left me at the telephone box outside the airport. Then he told me to wait until my aunt called. Always tell your story and nothing more, Muhammad told me; otherwise you will be in very big trouble.

I stood and watched the telephone for hours, all wet from the icy rain, until someone brought a man in uniform. I don't like the way this loud white man keeps waving his finger at me now. My teeth are making noise and my body is shaking, but it makes the big man talk louder when I pull my shawl around my face. I dare not look at him; I cannot talk to him. I think he has arrested me.

Where are they taking me? I want to go back home immediately. The translator told me the name of this country and said they would look for my aunt. He asked me to stop crying. He said I should talk to them, and then I would not be in trouble. But he didn't believe I was 12 years old. "Fatuma," he said, "they know you are lying."

Introduction

Child smuggling from Somali territories is now so widespread that it has become a critical informal institution. The phenomenon is not restricted to privileged or "elite" children – as widely held in the receiving countries – but has become a typical responsibility within the wider Somali family. Those who arrange the transportation of children out of Somalia now consider it a legitimate strategy of survival.[3] The more respectable term "agent" is used for smugglers.

"If an agent manages to smuggle five children out in the course of 30 days, he becomes flavour of the month. There will be people queuing outside his offices," said Abdullahe Allas, director of the Dr Ismail Jumaleh Human Rights Organisation in Mogadishu. A common phenomenon in the capital, Abdullahe said child smuggling had become widespread enough for it to enter the conversation of modern Somali society. It is known colloquially as *hambaar*, which means to ride piggyback. "When someone looks tired, people say: he did not sleep last night; is his daughter *hambaar*?"

Smuggling practices

There is no precise method of establishing how many children are smuggled out of Somali territories. Immigration figures in European countries show that Somalis are among the largest groups of unaccompanied children, but the data is based only on those children applying for asylum.

Smugglers in Mogadishu told IRIN that some 250 children were being sent out of the capital every month before the 11 September 2001 event, but that increased security at airports worldwide had stemmed the flow considerably - reducing it to about 40 to 60 children successfully delivered to their destinations each month. However, a year later, traffic out of Mogadishu was said to be picking up again with the most resourceful agents opening up different routes. Children are instead being ferried out to midway destinations in South East Asia or

[3] See definition of trafficking and smuggling in introduction. In the absence of any evidence of "trafficking" from Somali territories, the term smuggling has been used in this chapter – although there is a strong possibility of some of the Somali smugglers being linked to wider international trafficking gangs.

previously unexplored countries in the Middle East, with countries only marginally involved in America's "war against terror" most likely to become choice transit points.

Agents in Mogadishu use international carriers, and private airlines operating on a limited regional basis. The tickets are purchased at travel agencies in the country of destination or at a nearby midway point, such as Dubai and Amman. Smugglers say they always use cash.

Prices have doubled since 11 September 2001, with the average transfer up to $7,000 from $3,500, according to research by IRIN in Mogadishu and Hargeysa. Agents have also shied away from smuggling the older teenagers, and tend to limit themselves to transporting no more than two children from the same family. One agent told IRIN that it now cost $10,000 to smuggle older children abroad. With the odds of success slimmer and the cost significantly greater, families involved say the traffickers are now required to return one third to half of the sum in the event of failure. However, agents say that many people are willing to try again if they fail the first time, and that the second attempt is nearly always successful. Final destinations are selected on the basis of the country's welfare policy and the presence of relatives.

The repercussions of failure are generally borne by the children themselves, with the agents abandoning them at the first sign of trouble – even if they have not reached their final destination. According to human rights activist Abdullahe Allas, six children were abandoned at the airport at Istanbul by an agent a few days before his interview with IRIN in June 2002. "It took airport officials a long time to establish where the children were from: they had been ordered [by the smuggler] not to say one word."

Somali mother who failed to reach Sweden

Two months ago I tried to join my sister in Sweden with my four children. The agent arranged it so that I would be his wife and the children our children. I had to pay $5,000 a head, for a total of $25,000. Because we failed, the agent gave me back $3,000 per person, so it cost me $10,000.

We were at the airport in Bangkok and they started interviewing the children. The younger ones were OK without speaking Swedish, but the oldest one is six, and they asked, how come she does not speak Swedish if she is in a Swedish school?

It doesn't matter; there are many ways. Money is not a problem; my sister sends me some, and also my husband's family in America. We are trying again soon, through Nairobi. I hope to go to Sweden or America – whichever is easier. My husband died a year ago. He died of malaria in Addis Ababa, waiting for the flight to America.

Smuggling – the paperwork

There are many ways to smuggle children abroad; agents operate successfully because of a wily willingness to constantly change strategies and routes. Agents are also a diverse group of people - men and women, young and old - who may be smuggling on top of a regular business or job, or devoting themselves exclusively to this profitable black market trade. Smugglers are well known in Mogadishu and, although not particularly well liked, appear to command a degree of respect for the work they do. Immigration officials in Europe told IRIN that smugglers live in European cities and travelled frequently to places like Nairobi and Addis Ababa to conduct their lucrative business, but that the security and the legal systems are inadequate to deal with them.

Table II: Asylum applications from unaccompanied minors in 26 European countries

Year	1998	1999	2000
Applications	12,012	15,190	16,112

Source: UNHCR / Separated Children in Europe Programme

One agent agreed, on the condition of anonymity, to explain to IRIN how he operated from Mogadishu. He said there were five ways of smuggling people into Great Britain, the destination he deals with exclusively. The first, and most common one, involves the use of a legitimate passport issued to a Somali child with British nationality. The agent "borrows" the passport in Britain for about $720 - or 500 pounds sterling – and takes it to Mogadishu. There, he screens children and selects those with vaguely corresponding facial features. Sometimes, boys are passed for girls and vice-versa. "Sometimes what happens is you have a passport for a 15 year old girl, and you have to take out a 13 year old boy," explained one of the staff of an NGO operating in Mogadishu – "the boy has to dress like a girl". Agents confirmed that this has been successful as a strategy.

The second most common method involves filing a claim for a lost passport through the post, but submitting a different – but similar – picture. The request apparently takes only a few weeks to process, with no contact ever taking place between immigration officials and the applicants.

The third, and most risky technique works through a racket inside European immigration offices, the agent said. "Virgin" passports are stolen, photographs attached, necessary stamps added, and then sold to the smugglers. The passports are genuine documents, but the identities they eventually acquire have no legitimacy. When they are put through a computer, the passports will betray the false identity. "I had two girls the other day, and they [immigration officials] did a check on the computer and we had to come back," the agent said. He was evasive when pressed on the fate of the girls.

A fourth method is to assume false paternity or maternity of the children, who are then placed on the "parents'" passport. Finally, another method involves manipulating rights regarding unification of families. Agents of both sexes claim the right to be rejoined with false spouses, and then apply for citizenship.

Mogadishu agent, on smuggling children abroad

Most of children we smuggle are unaccompanied and have no relatives to receive them. Some parents will tell us to take their child to the airport and abandon them there…People entice you with the money [which] is by no means meager. In two months you can make between $10,000 to $15,000…The readiness of the Somali people in parting with their money to get to Europe is astounding.

There are many ways of getting the children in…You can write to the immigration office saying you have lost your passport, and get a new one in the post. You can work with some people in the immigration offices…We alternate routes…Sometimes we drop off some of the children in places we transit through…We have a 60 percent success rate on the first try, 100 percent success rate on the second.

I teach [the children] to believe that I am the father. I tell them the name on my passport and cram them with all the details…But staff at the airports in Europe are very kind to children and do not press them with questions…It makes it simple to get the children to their destinations quickly.

Table III: Nationalities of unaccompanied child asylum applicants in selected European countries (2000)

Country	Number of applicants
Angola	1191
China	1059
Sierra Leone	973
Yugoslavia	956
Guinea	896
Afghanistan	854
Somalia	762
Iraq	523
Sri Lanka	287

Source: UNHCR / Separated Children in Europe Programme
Countries of asylum: Belgium, Germany, Ireland, Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland, UK

Immigration rackets

Somali smugglers would not be able to operate so effectively without facilitation by international criminal gangs and internal immigration fraud. Corruption within immigration departments in neighbouring countries is a critical link in the chain.[4] Both Kenya and Ethiopia have significant populations of ethnic Somalis, so those fleeing Somali territories can hide among legitimate citizens, obtain national identity papers, and use clan connections with officials. Young Somali adults now living in Europe, who were smuggled out when they were children, told IRIN almost without exception that they were first taken to a Nairobi suburb, Eastleigh, or were dealt with by agents in Addis Ababa.

A British official told IRIN that immigration fraud associated with the Somali exodus to Ethiopia became "more organized" around 1995. As a result, a new policy of DNA testing was introduced by the British embassy in Addis Ababa, specifically for Somali claims. (Prior to that, DNA testing was used voluntarily by an applicant to prove a relationship, but the British government decided to use it in the case of Somalis as a blanket policy to *disprove* identity claims associated with reunification.) According to the official, this was because there was

[4] For example, Kenyan newspapers carried numerous articles in 2002 on corruption scandals in the immigration department. See Daily Nation, 30 August 2002 "Travellers detained over forged papers" and Nation expose of immigration rackets in a series of articles in February 2002.

"a massive problem of identification" with people returning to the embassies with different identities – and the British government was convinced that the cost involved was justified. In the mid 1990s, the British Foreign Office had issued authority to the British embassy to grant visas to Somalis for reunification purposes, based on specific applications by those who had a legitimate status in Great Britain. While it proved extremely difficult to track down the real relatives - as many were dead or missing in the panic exodus - many others presented false identities and documentation in the hope they could secure a way out.

According to the official, this included "a lot of dishonesty over children". There were some genuine cases where a separated child - picked up in Mogadishu or during the exodus - had been brought up by others as their own child, but many cases concerning children were opportunistic and fraudulent. "You could say there was good reason for the lying, there was desperation, and visa officers had some compassion…[but] there were some Somali groups abusing the system, taking money, and becoming organized," the official told IRIN.

Those "working the system" were not only Somalis, however. Former British immigration officials called "immigration consultants" offered advice for a price to those desperate to get out of the region. With their knowledge of immigration procedures, these people could "run rings round lawyers and make a lot money – some even came to Addis Ababa", an official source told IRIN. The source said some of these "consultants" lacked moral scruples and use their specialist knowledge to assist drug and child traffickers. They tend to work on 50 percent immediate payment, and 50 percent on completion. These former officials were particularly successful, said an official source, as "immigration in general is a matter of balance of probabilities rather than proving beyond reasonable doubt." Another group that benefited from the panic exodus were some British Somalis who had turned the plight of their people into a profitable business by the mid 1990s, official sources said.

Deportation practices – using agents

The Somali agent network also exploits the movement of people back to the homelands – sometimes with the complicity of those who condemn the outward traffic. Agents have worked as 'middlemen' for Western governments deporting rejected asylum seekers back to Somali territories, in the absence of recognised authority or official structures. How to return rejected asylum seekers to Somali territories is a contentious and shadowy issue, as deportations and repatriations must, according to international law, follow recognized legal procedures with recognized governments and structures. In practical terms it appears to be left to the Western governments to decide how – if at all – to approach deportations. For example, in the self-declared state of Somaliland - which has been accorded a sort of informal recognition in that international agencies operate through the official structures set up there - there have been recent approaches to the authorities by the British government to start receiving repatriated Somalis from abroad. In the case of Mogadishu, where the partially-recognised Transitional National

Ethiopia and Kenya shouldered a massive influx of refugees during the collapse of the Somali state, in the late 1980s and early 1990s. At the peak of the influx in late 1991, Kenya hosted some 300,000 Somalis in refugee camps in its North Eastern and Coastal provinces, while others moved into the capital Nairobi and other urban centres. Ethiopia received and hosted the exodus from northern Somalia – now known as Somaliland – when an estimated 300,000 crossed the border in 1988. Many of those forced to flee tried, at all costs, to avoid getting trapped in the harsh, impoverished environment of the official refugee camps. Getting overseas was pursued with indefatigable determination.

Government was established in the capital in October 2002, there were reports in British and US newspapers that a group of about 30 Somalis with American citizenship (or who were in the process of applying for it) were deported to Mogadishu after the events of 11 September.

Local Somali officials and individuals complained to IRIN during the course of its research on the child smuggling phenomenon that embassy staff from neighbouring countries employed local agents for deportation cases. According to local authorities in Somaliland, initial deportations by European governments were no more than a dumping exercise from light aircraft on the long runway in the northern port of Berbera.[5] In some cases, embassy staff have hired agents operating in Djibouti to receive the deported person, who then arrange the return to Somali territories by air or land. Somali officials also claimed to IRIN that the embassies made deals with local airlines, and arranged the tickets through a third country - like Dubai – to get the deportees brought in like any other passenger. "These cases are arranged informally through the agents [smugglers] without involving transit countries on an official level," complained one Somali official. As a result, some deportees were brought back to the wrong territories, or arrived in a traumatized state, convinced they will be killed at the airport.[6]

"The way they do it contravenes all proper procedures and laws regarding deportation - the deportee finds himself on the way back, in the hands of agents, and asking: Am I safe? What clan is controlling the airport? Am I going to die?" said one Somali official. "Western governments refuse to recognize Somaliland, or the government in Mogadishu, but are happy to deal with any authority – or none at all – in order to send Somalis back."

[5] Such cases took place around 1996-8, according to sources in Berbera and Hargeysa

Somali boy, on travelling with agents

I was 15 and fled because of fighting. The fixer got me a passport, and took me to the airport in Kenya. He told me to say he is my father; he taught me a whole new identity and told me to remember that my name is Liban now… He travelled with me on the plane.

We arrived in Paris. He told me to join another group, who would take me to Britain. He took me through the airport and [into Calais, where] I stayed in a small hotel. He handed me over to two other people, Africans. I was very, very scared, and thought a lot about my family. I thought I would not survive. Eventually, we were given another passport, and we were taken to the Euro train. We were put on the train, but in Calais the police told us to get off because our documents were not valid. One African took us back… He told us to try again.

After two days we went back to the Calais train station, and this time it worked. The police did see us, but they couldn't get us off because the train was already moving. On the train, some other officials gave me a form to fill. At Waterloo, in Britain, they called me off the train and took me to an immigration office.

There was one policewoman there, and they got a Somali interpreter. They interviewed me for about three hours. They asked me if there was anyone I knew in Britain, and I gave them the number of a cousin. He came and took me to his house – but I soon learnt that my cousin had no money and was in a difficult situation…

Now I am in a hostel with my cousin. I know my family is in Kampala [Uganda]… I am trying to do a family reunion for them. But there has been no answer…A lawyer told me recently that I don't have the right for a reunion because I am the wrong age and I don't have good accommodation.

International criminal networks

There is a paucity of hard information on child smuggling and trafficking. An official of Interpol told IRIN that that while there were major investigations carried out on prostitution rings, pornography and international criminal cartels, relatively little was known about the international child trafficking networks. Authorities in European countries admit that in many cases they never get to see a child as it transits illegally through from one destination to another. Sometimes the children end up being left for long periods of time in "middle countries" before arriving at the intended destination. In a minority of cases, international criminal gangs snatch or recruit the children. For example, a group of Tanzanian girls in Sweden described to psychiatrists how an African woman came to their parents and offered girls "educational opportunities" abroad. The girls were taken to Sweden by the woman, kept in her house and shown sex videos – for "technique" – and then put on the streets as prostitutes.

Somali father, on sending his first child away

My oldest daughter is 15 and she left for Sweden last week. She went through Dubai… I paid the agent $6,000 because we are from the same place and we went to school together – this is a favour he is doing for us. He is pretending she is someone else. She will live with him.

I did not want to keep her here. She studied in private school and is a good student… She will finish school and get a job. I haven't heard from her; I was told not to call for the first three months. But I know she is all right because I haven't received any phone calls.

The agent told me that when she gets her passport, she can ask for her family to come. I don't know how long that will take – the agent said a year or more. I have five children, all girls. I will send the second one when I get the money.

In 2001, 87 unaccompanied minors in Sweden went 'missing' - meaning they arrived, were registered or accommodated by the authorities, but then disappeared to an unknown destination. There is speculation that international organized crime accounts for a small number of these 'missing' children.

All professionals working with unaccompanied children agree that the children have become more vulnerable as communication technology becomes more sophisticated. According to staff in the Carlslund refugee centre in Stockholm, almost every child gets a mobile phone three or four days after arrival – "we don't know from where, or how". There is a debate in Sweden on how far the refugee child's liberties should be restricted in the interest of safety.

The main refugee centre is an open unit, and the children travel freely to town. They also have access to the Internet in the centre's library. The majority of 'missing' children are believed to have been moved on to another country by relatives, or gone "underground" if the asylum process is "not going their way". But one social worker told IRIN that "even if we lost one child to the international gangs, and didn't know about it, that is a huge scandal". She also pointed out that according to the principles of the UN Children's Convention[7], no separated minor should be put in the position where they lose faith in the official process.

At the open refugee unit in Sweden, the police are concerned about the ease with which some people can come and contact the children without having to give any details about themselves. The children in Carlslund know one such person as the "mobile phone man", a police source told IRIN. While there is no hard evidence that unaccompanied children in Carlslund are being used by organized crime for child pornography and prostitution, the police source said, "I'm sure it has happened and might happen again, we just don't have the evidence."

An international police source agreed that there was little information on missing unaccompanied children, and said that the special vulnerability of these children was a relatively recent problem. The source pointed out that in Sweden, there is no available legislation[8] on trafficking or smuggling, and the police must use the penal code until new legislation is adopted.

[7] United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted by consensus by the UN General Assembly 20 November 1989 Resolution 44/25

[8] Concerns over legislation were voiced by Swedish police at the time of the interview February 2002

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child[9]

Article 22

1. State Parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure that a child who is seeking refugee status or who is considered a refugee in accordance with applicable international or domestic law and procedures shall, whether unaccompanied or accompanied by his or her parents or by any other person, receive appropriate protection and humanitarian assistance in the enjoyment of applicable rights set forth in the present Convention and in other international human rights or humanitarian instruments to which the said States are Parties.

2. For this purpose, States Parties shall provide, as they consider appropriate, cooperation in any efforts by the United Nations and other competent intergovernmental organizations or non-governmental organizations cooperating with the United Nations to protect and assist such a child and to trace the parents or other members of the family of any refugee child in order to obtain information necessary for reunification with his or her family. In cases where no parents or other members of the family can be found, the child shall be accorded the same protection as any other child permanently or temporarily deprived of his or her family environment for any reason, as set forth in the present Convention.

More resources were also needed to investigate child trafficking, including tracking down missing children, the source said. Canada, for example, compiles a missing children's list; and the United States has recently injected more funding into investigating Internet paedophile rings. In Europe, human rights and humanitarian organizations have called for greater efforts to be made to protect unaccompanied children, both in terms of appropriate legislation and resources available for investigating the trafficking networks.

The unique situation in Somali territories means that child smuggling is a growing industry, in an environment that facilitates smugglers and international criminal networks. Continuing international isolation and a general absence of development or emergency assistance encourage this.

In Mogadishu, the centre for child smuggling in Somalia, there are no functioning security organs or institutions with the capacity to challenge the trade, let alone work to halt it. Where a functioning authority exists, moreover, there is no inclination to stop a trade that has to all intents and purposes become an accepted means of survival – smuggling a child abroad accrues no social shame in a society where the future is so bleak and circumstances so extreme. Even in a relatively successful post-conflict society like Somaliland, children continue to be sent overseas because of the on going socio-economic emergency - specifically, the lack of education and health facilities.

But as a strategy of survival the cost is high. All the evidence suggests that the effect on the generation of children being shipped out of the country will be a traumatic legacy for Somali society.

[9] For the full text of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child go to http://www.unicef.org/crc/crc.htm

Comments on a missing Somali girl, February 2002

Member of staff at the refugee centre:
She was in the Children's House at the refugee centre for three weeks. Then she disappeared. We don't know too much about her circumstances, because generally we try to help on a day-to-day level, but we don't ask too many questions because it makes the children afraid and suspicious of us. They think we are spies for the migration board. We think she had relatives in Denmark or the UK and was just brought to the wrong country by the smugglers.

Teacher:
I was surprised when I heard she had disappeared. I was teaching her Swedish, and she seemed very motivated to learn the language. Usually the ones who know they are going to another country don't bother to try, but she seemed settled, and eager.

Social worker:
The missing girl left a letter in her room. It said she was OK. She said she was going back to her country, she was lonely here, but she was grateful for the help we had given her. While she was in the home, she used to get a telephone call from Russia every day. Before there were mobiles, every call had to go through the office and we knew where the calls came from and who was calling. I think the mobile phone might now be part of the smugglers package.

"Muhammad"

"Muhammad" is a Somali agent in Mogadishu who has smuggled children abroad for nearly a decade. He has a British passport, and works with a relative who lives in London

Some parents will tell you take the child to the airport in London and abandon them there. The majority of the children are unaccompanied, and have no relatives to receive them at their destination

He told IRIN how he smuggled children abroad:

We charge US $7,000 to $10,000 per child. We pay US $720 for a borrowed passport – in fact, just this morning two children came from England and I want to contact them to get their passports to use for other children. We return the passport to its owner when the children are safe inside [the chosen destination].

Before [the events of] 11 September, we charged US $7,000. Now we charge more for older children because it's more difficult. For the smaller children we used to charge US 3,500, but now it is US $7,000. The only difference is the charge for Italy: that was always US $7,000, because the girls get jobs as housekeepers and can start sending money home immediately. We take children of all ages. I once took a girl who was only three.

Before 11 September, I think there were about 250 children sent out of Mogadishu every month. Now there are about 40.

We spend about US $900 on the air ticket. If we borrow the passport, we pay an extra US $720, so we have a US $1,880 profit on a US $3,500 hambaar. Now it is more. We use all the airlines: BA, Royal Gulf Air, Singapore Air, Daallo, Juba Air. We buy the tickets through travel agents in Britain or Dubai. We always pay in cash. We don't follow only one route, we alternate. The main routes are Ethiopia and Dubai directly to London, or Dubai-Frankfurt and then to London.

Sometimes we drop some of the people in places that we transit in Europe. Once going through Stockholm we left a boy and girl. Sometimes you get caught midway and you don't have a way of communicating with the family in Somalia or the family you are heading for…

There are many ways of getting the children into another country. You can borrow someone else's passport. We make passports for children over five. Someone with a British passport claims to have lost his passport and applies for a replacement. When the immigration office asks him to provide them with his photograph, he posts them photographs of the person in Somalia who needs to travel. He then sends the passport to Somalia.

You can work with some people in the immigration office. You pay them and they give you a stolen passport. The passports are genuine documents with a valid number, but without an identity. They are a bit dangerous, because if [officials at the immigration controls] run them through the computer, the number comes up, but not the name. I had two girls the other day, and they did a check on the computer and we had to come back. It's not a problem. You just come back and try again.

We have a 60-percent success rate on the first try, and 100 percent success rate on the second. Most of the children are unaccompanied, and have no relatives to receive them at their destination. Some parents will tell you to take their child to the airport in London and abandon him there. The child is made ready with tales from Somalia – he must tell the authorities that his parents were caught up in the fighting, or dead, or he may request that his parents be brought at a later stage. We do not accept to take more than two children from the same family; it's dangerous.

When the children are young, and I am planning to take them, I pose as the father and teach the child to believe that I am the father. I tell him the name on my passport and make him cram the details. Staff at the airports [in Europe] are very kind to the children and do not press them with questions. We also dress the children like the children in London. On most occasions, the agents posing as their parents end up answering the queries for the children. This makes it very simple.

You encounter lots of problems. For example, in 1998 I smuggled two children, who were seven and eight years old. We lost each other at the airport, and I looked for them for two hours. Eventually I went to town and told the people who were supposed to receive them. They rushed to the airport, and found the two children had already been questioned and were about to be sent to an area where they get Somali people to help them…

People entice you with money …In two months, you can make between US $10,000 and $15,000. The readiness of the Somali people to part with their money to get to Europe is astounding.

Once they get in, they are set. Life is good there. They get a house, free school and hospital, and every Thursday the [British] government gives them 80 pounds [sterling]. And if you are a Somali already living there, they will give you money to take the child into your home, which is another 80 pounds a week.

Chapter 3: Looking after separated children

"You can sleep on the floor."

My uncle seems nervous tonight. I know that woman is his girlfriend and I know she will stay the night. All that talking he does – how happy he is to have someone around in this freezing little – hah...jeel baag ku jiraa [yes...I am in prison]. When I say my name is Safiya, he gets so angry! "Fatuma, make tea; Fatuma, bring the food." Does he think if he keeps on saying that name, I will become someone different?

Anyway, at least he will be happy tonight. Perhaps he will forget to punish me for trying to telephone my mother again.

I hope so.

Introduction

Once through the port of entry, the separated child moves into a new life. It is a challenge to the receiving country to treat these children with the specialised care they need, and fully respect their rights as a child, while at the same time establish exactly where they came from, how old they are, and what to do with them. Even official procedures designed to be humane can do little to alleviate the shock of arrival. The child is thrown precipitately into a foreign culture and language, often with extreme weather and environment change and, simultaneously, must take on adult-like responsibility for its own basic and complex needs. Some teenagers also arrive with very young siblings or relatives to look after.

In Europe, the legislation and institutions available to deal with the increased number of unaccompanied children generally appear to be inadequate to meet their unique and complex needs. Children also pose a special dilemma to the diaspora - families struggle to cope with even their most basic requirements. Many of the problems that arise come from the fact that unaccompanied children almost without exception have been burdened with a false identity by the smuggler. It puts them in conflict not only with the authorities and their guardians – but also with themselves. They have to live a lie. "I have seen many children living with false histories, and if they can tell their real story, in my experience, it is almost always worse than the false one," said psychologist Marie Hessle in Stockholm.

Receiving separated children

"The children are in a state of bewilderment, fear and confusion…they did not make the decision to leave their own country, they have not been given the right information; they want to go home," said one official working with newly arrived separated children. Somali children are in most cases later claimed by relatives who have been informed of their arrival, or given the authorities the name of a relative to contact.

In Sweden, unaccompanied minors are looked after in the children's unit at the Carlslund refugee centre. They see a psychologist, undergo a health examination, and are allocated a contact person to assist them through the asylum process. In Britain, the child is received at the port of entry by immigration officials, and then become the responsibility of the local authority.

But about one third of the children suffer such acute fear that they do not want to reply to questions asked by an interpreter, and are not in a position to take in

information, according to staff at Carlslund. Some arrive seriously traumatized, the cause of which is not easy to identify – it may be due to their experience in the country of origin, in the family they have left, or with the smugglers. Staff at Carlslund said children who were severely traumatized had to have special care. "If necessary, we send them to a special psychiatric unit…Sometimes it is difficult to find a place to keep them, and they have to stay in a hospital."

The receiving country must try to establish critical information about the child, including origins and age, while respecting their rights as a child. However, many of the separated children will have been instructed to give different ages, identities and stories in the hope of disguising any links to the smuggler and facilitating the granting of asylum. Depending on the country they have arrived in, the children will receive a medical examination, be fingerprinted and photographed, and may be subjected to DNA testing and X-rays, as well as going through lengthy official interviews. In some countries, unaccompanied children may be detained. In a 1999 report on separated children arriving in Britain, Amnesty International said unaccompanied children were particularly vulnerable, where refugees in general posed a challenge to host communities. Of refugees, Amnesty said: "They arrive as packages of complex human rights issues, demanding that those rights which have been stripped from them are restored by the international community… When an unaccompanied refugee child seeks protection those challenges are magnified, not least because, having recognized the vulnerability of children in general, the law makes greater provision for their welfare."[10] While processing and verifying claims for asylum, the host country must also deal with medical needs, mental and emotional disturbance, and provide shelter, food, advice and security. The result is often an imperfect system.

Procedures in the host country

A Save the Children report said in 2001 that a significant number of young separated refugees interviewed in the UK "had chaotic and disturbing experiences on arrival and received little or no support".[11] In Sweden, there has also been public criticism voiced over how the system treats unaccompanied children, with no clear delineation of responsibility between the immigration office and the social services. The lack of specialised care and personnel for unaccompanied minors is an issue of concern to social workers and psychologist working with separated children in Europe. "Staff might have the best of intentions and be very nice people, but they do not have the competence to deal with the sort of problems these children have… You have to be more than nice," one humanitarian observer said.

Official statistics on the numbers of unaccompanied children are poor, immigration officials acknowledge. "Many children show up, apply for asylum, start the process, then disappear", said one European immigration official. "We don't have the right to do much checking." Immigration officials told IRIN that one of the greatest concerns with Somali separated children was the fact that they appeared to be absorbed by the Somali community and were claimed by "relatives", while there was no real system – either through the immigration board or social services – to establish what the real relationship of the adult was to the child, or whether the home was suitable. In Sweden, one immigration official who had worked on Somali cases for more than a decade said she believed the intake of Somali separated children was "very organized…I can meet the same woman declaring herself to be a relative a number of times." But such officials say they remain in the dark as to who is organizing the movement of children, "we suspect it

[10] *Most vulnerable of all: The treatment of unaccompanied refugee children in the UK (*Amnesty International, May 1999)

[11] *Cold Comfort: Young separated refugees in England*, (Save the Children, 2001)

may be people here who set up a network."

When the child arrives, one of the first priorities of the host country is to try and find the parents. With some of the children, relatives proved equally keen to contact the parents so as to persuade them to take the child back, immigration officials said. While there is suspicion that some of the "relatives" are organizing child smuggling, there is also awareness on the part of the authorities that members of the diaspora are unwillingly burdened with responsibilities through the extended family. Over the last few years, there has been greater awareness of the pitfalls of taking on separated children, and in some cases, relatives help immigration officials contact the parents and persuade them to take the child back. Almost invariably, the child wants to return home immediately. However, some social workers and psychiatrists warn that this policy of return is controversial and may not be in the best interests of the child, who may return to a dangerous or abusive situation, or may face the wrath of the family.

Marie Hessle, a psychologist working with unaccompanied children in Sweden, says the process of arriving in a country and going through official bureaucracy is extremely stressful. "When they go for interview, they might be accused of lying. I've had to counsel young people because of that alone." She says the children have been coached and threatened to give a particular story. Once they are under scrutiny, it is very stressful for the child to give a false history, and then to live with it, she told IRIN.

Marie Hessle, psychologist specialising in work with separated children in Sweden

These children have deep psychological problems, but it is difficult sometimes to know the origins: from before the journey, or during the journey, because of the journey, or because of separation from their families. Some cry uncontrollably when they do talk…It's difficult to get sense out of them.

I would say every unaccompanied child experiences problems of some sort; it's just the degree of severity – inability to sleep, nightmares, and anxiety about parents, loneliness, self-preoccupation. Some suffer posttraumatic stress and depression. Among the boys, we see many of them 'acting out' their problems – getting violent at school

.

The process of leaving home is shocking. They are told just a few days before that they have to leave, or sometimes they are told immediately before the agent takes them. Some become desperate and try to hide, they cry and beg. Then follows the new trauma – they go to countries they don't know; some of the girls are abused or raped by the agents; many are just dumped in railway stations or at the airport.

Not much research has been done on how these children cope, and how they might go on to establish an adult life. There is one word really that describes the feeling they have: loneliness. I would say they don't really live inside society, but on the edge of it…It's not a good prognosis.

One of the likely issues of contention during the process is verifying the age of a young person; if they are 18 or older, they are not entitled to the special protection afforded to children. Social workers, immigration officials and psychologists say many of the unaccompanied minors claim to be younger than they are, in the belief they are more likely to get favourable treatment in the asylum process. Some children genuinely do not know which year they were born in; and a small number believe they are older than they actually are.

Humanitarian agencies and human rights organizations are concerned that attempts to accurately establish age by the authorities are likely to breach the basic human rights of the child. The use of X-rays is "inaccurate as well as potentially harmful", according to the UK Royal College of Paediatricians. The UK Refugee Council supports a holistic approach, using a process to assess the experiences, skills and needs of unaccompanied children, in order to make a judgment on the age range a child or young person is likely to fit into. The Refugee Council's adviser on unaccompanied minors also warns that young people may appear older because of the impact of extreme circumstances and events.[12]

Diaspora responsibilities

In most European countries, a person is considered a child up to 18, and is entitled to particular rights and treatment. This Western definition may contradict other cultural concepts of what childhood is. For example, in very traditional Somali culture, girls as young as nine may be considered adult; young teenage boys could be taking on the responsibilities of an adult in their home country. Faced with significant cultural contradictions and tough economic and social circumstances, the Somali diaspora find it difficult to raise and educate children, particularly separated children.

When a Somali family living abroad takes on a separated child, there is often little comprehension as to what responsibilities that entails – particularly, the specific entitlement of rights bestowed on that child, and the ensuing state responsibilities. It is also unlikely that there is any understanding of the special needs a separated child might have, including issues of identity, depression and trauma. This can lead to serious conflict in the child-guardian relationship, and means a separated Somali child may "resurface" years after their arrival in official figures for crime, juvenile detention, truancy and drug abuse.

Torn between two cultures

Once in the host country, children – and particularly young teenagers – feel a heavy burden of peer pressure to assimilate. Children are likely to learn the language quickly and adopt "appropriate" cultural behaviour, whereas adults are more likely see it as their responsibility to retain and protect the original culture. Some children have to become a bridge between the two cultures. They must translate and respond to the outside world – for example, reading school letters to their guardians, and writing the reply – while at the same time responding to pressure at home to be worthy and respectful repositories of Somali culture. Attempts by the diaspora to retain the Somali culture include Koranic lessons and insisting on speaking Somali at home. Conflict arises in the family when the child rebels against "Somaliness", and takes on the lifestyle and values of the host culture to an extent that is detrimental to basic adult authority in the home.

[12] See *Cold Comfort: Young Separated Refugees in England*. (Save the Children, 2001)

On taking care of nine-year-old in Canada, returnee in Hargeysa

When we fled, we were given a nine-year-old girl by my aunt - like a wedding gift. Her parents had died in the war, and it was a cultural obligation then to take at least one person you could look after.

We took her to Canada, but hit problems when the girl was about 13. She wanted to be allowed to dress like Canadians, and used to come home half naked, with tight trousers – she was smoking, drinking and going out in the evenings. I wouldn't let her do this; all this is very non-Somali.

In fact, she rejected all things Somali. At the time, in the early 1990s, Somalia was constantly in the media, with pictures of fighting, starvation, and images of the US intervention. She was the only Somali at school, and she found it very tough.

One day, she just didn't return home. I was shocked, because on the day she left, we had not even had a big argument.

After three days, she came back in the company of a girl with a notorious reputation in the neighbourhood. She had gone to the authorities and said I was not her mother and that she needed the help of social services.

Somali parents said one of the biggest problems they faced in raising children overseas was the restriction Western culture places on discipline. "Smacking and beating is seen as normal discipline in the Somali community, and a lot of adults are astonished, and outraged about the role the authorities take," said one Somali mother. Added to the frustration and confusion is the fact that diaspora parents and guardians also face criticism from teachers and police that they are unable to control their children. "In the school, both the teachers and the parents blame each other for the absence of discipline. We think our children are rude because the teachers don't smack them and the children don't respect them – but when we go to see the teachers, they say, why don't you control your children?" said one Somali parent.

Traditionalism versus assimilation

Many Somalis living abroad, or who have returned home, dwell on stories about Somali parents or guardians who had children forcibly removed from the home over matters of discipline. One woman who did voluntary work with social services in Canada said she had come across "a few cases" where Somali children were removed from the family into temporary or permanent care after one of their children complained to the police about corporal punishment at home. She was involved in one case where a seven-year-old child telephoned the police when his mother was smacking his five-year-old brother for hurting his little sister. The seven-year-old had been taught at school to call the police if there was any violence at home. As the mother was unable to speak the host language, the onus was on the seven-year-old to receive the police and translate for them when they arrived; but he became fearful of his mother and of the police when he realized the enormity of what he had done. "The mother had no idea why the police had arrived at her home, and became hysterical, and so displayed behaviour that was detrimental to her own case. When I was called in, the children had all been taken into temporary care until the case was sorted out."

Parents and guardians also feel their authority is undermined generally by the more permissive, welfare-oriented societies in Europe and North America.

When young teenagers appeal to the welfare state for help, they may be entitled to accommodation and benefits that allow them to leave the family. For many young teenagers struggling to assimilate, rejecting adult authority in the house is part of the drive to reject the culture of origin. Others find crucial aspects of their own culture have no practical relevance in the new environment – where, for example, Somali teenage boys are expected to take a dominant male role in the household at 14, but find they are living in a female-headed household in a society that openly condemns the notion of male superiority.

Such "cultural confusion", said one member of the diaspora, tends to bring out extreme traditionalism in adults and obsessive "assimilationism" in the young. Adults retreat into their own culture; their children get to know the foreign system better, are better educated, are better versed in the host language and appropriate cultural behaviour, and are also likely to deal with any paperwork (letters from school, officials forms etc) that comes across the threshold. "The authority of the adult is ambiguous, to say the least," said one Somali parent.

Many adults in the diaspora try to minimize this culture 'gap' between the generations by making sure Somali remains the language of the house. The children receive religious education from Koranic teachers in the evenings or at weekends, and the Somali community works together as much as possible through local organizations and social contacts. However, when all else is seen to fail, children are "deported" back to the homeland – sometimes with disastrous consequences (see Chapter 6 Returning Home).

Living on the edge

Some unaccompanied children suffer more than others. Most at risk are those who have been abused or used for exploitative purposes, ranging from benefit fraud, domestic labour and prostitution.

An unknown number of these children are exploited by using them to manipulate the welfare state. In Britain, this is a category of at-risk children who are of particular concern to Somali voluntary welfare organizations. "Often the family wants social service benefits, but does not give the child any affection or proper attention…The children know they don't have an equal life, an equal share, with the other children in the family, and that leads to misery and problems," said Dahabo Isa, a community organiser in London.

Benefit fraud

Where a state welfare system gives priority to women with children, a child may be used to secure accommodation, or to get welfare payments that are used by the rest of the family. Concerned members of the diaspora say the Somali community abroad turns a blind eye to this practice, either because it is useful for claiming benefits or out of shame that it is being done – or through fear that exposing it might threaten legitimate benefits. One Somali teacher in London said children exploited for benefit were a visible "underclass" in the community. In one of the schools she taught in, the teacher said she became concerned for one eight-year-old Somali boy who appeared unnaturally thin and disheveled. "He used to come to school having not eaten and it was obvious he had no care at home…he said he was living with relatives whose children hated him, and he had to look after himself." The boy was left to get his own breakfast and find his way to school. He was poorly dressed despite the cold, and frequently ill. According to the teacher, he described himself as "alone in the family".

Through her work in the Somali Development Organisation, Dahabo Isa seeks out separated children in the community to try and give them advice and support. It is only recently, she says, that diaspora organizations have realized

the scale of the problem of unaccompanied children. She describes most of the separated children as "hidden", as they stay with clan members or a distant relative – "We try to do what we can, and find them through word of mouth, through relatives…Sometimes they come to our attention because they have been used to claim benefits and then the family doesn't want them any more." The Somali community has resisted attempts to collate lists of unaccompanied children and highlight their plight. Dahabo blames this on a particular section of the community. "Our people refuse, they don't want it known that there are unaccompanied children, because they want to keep on getting the benefits", she told IRIN. She said her organization has had little success when trying to petition social services about the plight of the unaccompanied, because social workers believe it is sufficient that the child is staying with relatives. "We try to help these children, meet with the duty worker, go to the asylum section for unaccompanied children, but too often they say the child should stay with relatives and friends. 'This case is not a priority', they say."

In its study on unaccompanied children in England, Save the Children underlined this concern when it observed the lack of interest on the part of social workers in the families which took in unaccompanied children. "We did not identify a single case where an adult carer accompanying a separated child had been assessed for their suitability to take responsibility for the child."[13]

According to Marie Hessle, research carried out in Sweden showed that of a group of 100 separated children of different nationalities, 58 percent had such severe problems that they needed special help. Hessle said that during the autumn of 2001, 12 unaccompanied children of different nationalities under the care of the state had attempted suicide. She said it related to the trauma in their home countries, as well as the situation in the host country. "Some have witnessed awful things, and some have been abused; some have come from violent families." She added that some of the girls were raped and abused by smugglers or lured into prostitution; some discovered they were HIV-positive.

Dealing with the paperwork – Deqa, in London, struggles to understand an eviction order.

Photo: IRIN/Jenny Matthews-Network

[13] See *Cold Comfort: Young separated refugees in England*, (Save the Children, 2001)

Ilhan

Ilhan was smuggled out of a neighbouring country at the height of the conflict in Somalia. Her father and two sisters were killed in the southern port of Kismayo; she was separated from her mother and brother when she fled across the border.

Ilhan has made a success of her life in Stockholm, but told IRIN she had seen many unaccompanied Somali children struggle to cope:

Of the group of 15 I joined in 1995, only two of us got through to the end of the education system. Some got pregnant, some became alcoholics, some are on drugs, and some ended up in juvenile centres. Some are on their own in flats and ostracized by the Somali community. One Somali girl is about to have a baby. I don't think any remain with their relatives any more. Another lives on her own and has a three-year-old child. There is another Somali girl of 18 who had a baby and is living in one of the Swedish homes. You could say she is a bit of an outcast.

When Ilhan was flown abroad, she was told only the day before. This is her story:

When I was told I had to go away, I was devastated. It was all too unknown: I was without my mother; I was living with an aunt. I was told I "might" find my relatives. I cried. I said I wouldn't, but I couldn't resist.

I met the smuggler at the airport. I was told nothing about him before. Then I was told that "this is your father now". He carried a passport for me. I had no problem going through immigration; it was obvious he had done it all before. I thought I was going to the United States at the time. He didn't talk much. He told me what to eat, that sort of thing. I was scared, and tongue-tied. I don't remember the flight well.

When I got out of the plane, he told me "sit here and I'll be back", and left me somewhere in the airport. I waited for hours. I dozed. A policeman came to me eventually and spoke to me in a language I didn't understand. But I realized I was not in the US. He pointed at me, and said, "Somali?", and I said yes. He took me – he was businesslike, quite cold with me, and carried on sometimes speaking at me in Swedish. He took me to a room where I stayed for a very long time. I was very hungry, and cold.

Eventually, they got someone on the phone who acted as a translator. He asked my name, and then questioned it, which made me angry. After that they took my fingerprints and my picture. I had a small bag, and they looked through it. They gave me a card, and a train ticket, and told me to go to the refugee centre at Carlslund. Another Somali man had joined me, so we travelled together. We didn't know anything! Trying to get to that centre!

We reached Carlslund at about 10 p.m. I met other Somalis, which was a relief. They offered me tea and bread, but by that time I just couldn't stomach anything. They showed me a room, with sheets and blankets. After that, I started the asylum process.

I didn't know I had relatives here, but after five months my mum's cousin showed up. He knew I was here through another cousin. At first it was very difficult for me. I was very quiet, subdued, it was tough. I remember it as a very long, scary time - but then you start to adapt and it gets tolerable.

I went to live with my mum's cousin. It was just him and me, and it felt a very uncomfortable situation to begin with. He was dating. I was always around the house and his lady friends would show up. But then I went to school later, and had contact with women and girls, and I went to high school. I made friends, and I got on all right with the language. I am qualified to go to university, but I want a break.

I now have contact with my mother. My uncle found her after six years - it was amazing. After all those years with no shoulder to cry on, I found her. We arranged a meeting in Kenya, but she could see that after all this time, I had grown, had become an individual, and she cried a lot for me. We had two months together in [the Kenyan capital] Nairobi and then she had to return with my brother to Somalia. I asked her if I could bring her into Sweden through immigration, but she said she was too old to adapt to a new society.

I would like to go back to Somalia. I'll always feel Somali. But I know it will be difficult. Here, it is a very individual culture. Even in Nairobi, I felt odd. I felt out of place. I would want my children to be brought up in Somalia. Here it is very difficult, because you are not allowed to discipline children; but I believe you have to be able to smack them and keep them in line. I have seen too many young Somalis here fall into bad habits like drugs and alcohol - it would be much better to have a family in Somalia.

Chapter 4: The dream of education

Another day alone; sitting among all these happy, talking children. Is it worse when they look away, or when they look towards me? When that girl stopped me in the corridor, I thought she was going to be my friend. But then, I could see she was talking to her group, her supporters, and not to me. She plucked my clothes. She stuck her face near mine and made stupid noises. She placed her beautiful black shoe next to my sandals and laughed. When I told her to stop it, she got louder, and closer, and swore at me – so I pushed her back.

Well, if I sit here in the classroom and keep quiet, no one will notice me... I love the pictures in this book and the way the white paper looks so clean and smells so new. I could look forever at this one with the photographs of the sea and the desert and the hot sun. That village, with the goats and the camels...

"Fatuma!"

Now I'm in trouble. I can tell by the way the teacher swings past my chair and sighs when he glances at me. I tried to explain about that girl, but the teacher said he would have to tell my uncle -"We don't behave like that. We don't do things like that in this country".

Introduction

Getting an education is the number one reason given for sending children overseas. The situation in the majority of Somali areas means that for rich and poor alike the compelling need when it comes to education is simply to have one. To many parents the prospect of having no education at all for their children, or being limited to a rudimentary, Koranic one, justifies extreme solutions. But the experience of separated children seems a far cry from the "golden opportunity" the parents perceive it to be.

Very few adults in the homeland appear to appreciate the unique difficulties unaccompanied children face in attempting to realize the dream. In reality, most separated children fail to fulfil even their most basic potential and struggle to cope with daily life in a foreign school. The few who do succeed in the education system and gain the enviable qualifications unavailable at home are often plagued by emotional problems concerning identity, belonging and separation.

Within the diaspora, there is a growing unease over the experiences of these children. Significantly, it is the failure of children in the education system abroad that has been cited as one of the main reason for sending children *back* to the homeland.

Somali schools

The formal education system collapsed along with the central government in Somalia in 1991, and many school buildings were occupied or obliterated in the ensuing conflicts. Over the last decade, local efforts have established some form of educational facilities, and UNICEF has supported the re-establishing of primary schools in some of the big towns. However, education remains a chronic need, with most of the school buildings still derelict or occupied, along with an absence of equipment and furniture. Teachers are in short supply, often work for little or no wages, must weather unstable local administrations and, in some areas, cope with the frequent resurgence of conflict.

After the early years of unprecedented destruction and ruin, private education in Mogadishu has recently grown. The capital now had more than 100 private schools catering to roughly one third of the city's children, Mogadishu teachers told IRIN. Typically, rudimentary schools function in gutted buildings with broken windows, a few pieces of furniture, and fragments of blackboard. In the absence of notebooks and textbooks, pupils use single sheets of paper handed out by the teacher on request. Every available teacher from the now defunct Ministry of Education has been employed by the private schools; others rely on "teachers" who learn what skills they can from the radio. A private school costs parents about $15 a month, and offers basic primary and secondary education. Koranic schools are also in operation, many with the support of Muslim charities.

The general environment is as much a factor in the education of children as the state of the formal schools. Over the last decade, libraries, books, shops, museums and centres of learning have been destroyed without trace, as have countless homes, private collections of books and personal possessions. This, combined with the stress of poverty and insecurity, has made the education and personal development of a generation of children exceptionally difficult to achieve. Parallel with the poor provision of formal educational services are the emergency conditions in which many children are forced to live – restricted primarily to their residence, surrounded by a culture of conflict and weapons, and deprived of basic provisions like clean water, sanitation, electricity and telecommunications.

Even in post-conflict areas, educational opportunities remain the primary motive for sending children abroad.

Formal education was restored to Somaliland on a modest scale in the early 1990s with the revival of a few of the elementary schools and the establishment of a Ministry of Education[14]. There is now an elementary base of some 165 primary schools, a handful of secondary schools, up to a university institution established by the diaspora in Boroma. However, the quality of education is generally considered to be of a low standard, and problems in the school reflect the considerable social and economic problems bedeviling the territory. Many parents view schools not as places of learning, but as places to keep their children off the street and out of trouble, points out a report by the humanitarian organization, War-torn Societies: "Attrition rates are high, even in the lower grades, but parents are relieved with each year they can keep their children out of 'gun-school' … the *dey-dey* culture of the streets."[15]

Like the Koranic schools, Somali private schools typically use a strict form of corporal punishment, discipline and rote learning, and base intake on learning ability rather than age groups. "Even before the total collapse of the education system [in Somalia] schools were poverty-stricken…Teaching methods were formal, underpinned by strict discipline and considerable reliance on rote learning," says teacher and writer Mohamed Kahin.[16] Kahin points out that it was not unusual for a class to contain children of widely varying ages, and that there was a distinct gender gap at all levels "with the disparity more marked in higher education as many girls drop out to settle into married life".

Now, in all Somali areas where local administrations have set up government structures, the education "ministries" struggle in the absence of funding, recognition, skills and basic facilities. Some communities have felt moved to establish their own schools, often with diaspora resources. As a result, the standard in schools varies widely, as does the language of instruction – Somali, English, Arabic or Italian - and the certification procedure. Qualifications are not recognized outside Somali territories, making it effectively a "dead-end" system for the children.

[14] See Rebuilding from the Ruins: War-torn Societies Project (WSP) 2000

[15] Ibid

[16] *Educating Somali Children in Britain*, Mohamed Kahin (1997)

Fitting in

The experience of separated children in the education system of the host country is probably one of the most significant factors in terms of quality of life and future adult potential. Even those who succeed find it a lonely experience.

Houdan, who is reading for a degree in Bio-Medical Technology in Stockholm, arrived in Sweden as an unaccompanied child at the age of 13, with the responsibility of a four-year-old and eight-year-old sister. Despite her academic success, she told IRIN she struggled to make friends, "ached" to be back with her family, found her responsibilities for her sisters had made it difficult to study at home, and felt a continued sense of isolation: "I feel however long I have been here, I will never belong …My school work was good because I concentrated hard on my studies to stop myself from thinking about what has happened to me."

Houdan is adamant in her belief that Somali children should not be sent away by their parents, because the problems they suffer outweigh the advantages: "It is tragic; the children cannot handle it well, and they don't make it. They can't take advantage of the opportunities they are sent for because of their circumstances."

Lost in an alien system

The experience of an alien education system is particularly agonizing for a separated child, as it is the most critical socialization and assimilisation process. But the circumstances of separated children – the feeling of rejection, confusion over personal identity and other problems like trauma and anxiety – often means school operates in the reverse, and widens the gap instead of closing it.

"They get lost in school life…they can't make friends because of the communication gap, and the teachers can't understand them, and their guardians can't help them…the child feels a sense of negligence and abandonment by the teachers and school, which develops into a feeling of inferiority…The other children know they have a weaker person in the class, and so they torment and bully them", Somali educationalist Hussein Hassan told IRIN in London.

Education specialists, social workers and government officials pointed out to IRIN that, as a group, Somali refugee children tended to do poorly in the education systems in Western Europe and North America. This is attributed to a number of problems the children face, and should be seen in the wider context of problems faced by all refugee and migrant communities. For example, most Somalis are forced to enter schooling by year group rather than ability, despite the fact that nearly all have enormous gaps in their education because of the circumstances in their homeland. Trauma and separation are also factors in adapting to a new environment and culture. Language and religion can also be significant obstacles in the system.

Rudimentary education and unrecognised qualifications make it a "dead-end" system for children

Photo: UNICEF

Teacher in Sweden, on unaccompanied refugee children learning Swedish

The older ones find it difficult. The younger ones assimilate more quickly, but I think they miss their parents more. Some are depressed, some get angry towards the other students. Some are very neurotic, and some do not even come to school after a while.

They have big problems in their heads; it preoccupies them. The biggest problem is whether they are going to stay in Sweden or not. You see them get frustrated, and then they start to go down. We try to make school time good for them. Sometimes the children grow to like us, see us as objective players in the whole process, and talk to us about their problems. Some can learn, some just can't – some don't have the language ability to tell us what they are suffering. I would say in the best-case scenario, it takes about two years to learn Swedish. Then, even if you are a good student, you have to go on to the Swedish school system, which is very difficult – each subject uses specific terms

We don't have the resources to cope with the worst cases. They begin to stay at home, stop coming; they drop out… Some of these children just disappear…these unaccompanied refugee children should get the same sort of care our own children get. But I think that people generally feel it is somehow not as important as if one of our own disappears or sinks in the system.

In the classroom

In his study of Somali refugee children[17], Hassan recommended that schools should adopt an approach to the psychological issues affecting refugee children, particularly racism; and that the schools should be more flexible on the admission policy, allowing pupils time to adjust and develop their linguistic and academic capabilities, instead of being categorized by age only. He noted there had been little research done on the experiences of unaccompanied Somali children in the education system, but said community leaders were particularly concerned about this group of children. "The community leaders observed that the worst [cases] are those unaccompanied children who came here without parents. The majority of [children] in detention are of this category."

Hassan gives a psychiatrists' list of some of the problems refugee children experience, including sadness or irritability, poor concentration and restlessness; aggression and disruptiveness as a result of distress; fear of loud noises or voices, or of groups of men, or men in uniform; physical symptoms such as nightmares, aches and pains, loss of appetite; frustration and insecurity. In one study on refugee children in a London school, a head teacher reported this: "Some of his refugee children had appeared to run amok one afternoon, and had been quite unable to settle, and the whole school had been disrupted by their wild behaviour. The trigger for this behaviour was the local police helicopter circling overhead."[18]

Studies of refugee children in schools show that racial and sexual harassment is a common occurrence, particularly in mixed sex schools, and is exacerbated by religious intolerance. Somali girls wearing the hijab[19] say they face racial taunting, social exclusions and at times physical

[17] The Educational Experiences of Somali Refugee Pupils in the United Kingdom, Hussein H Hassan Dissertation submitted to the University of Oxford 1998

[18] Working with Refugee Children: One school's experience, by Caroline Lodge, in Jill Rutter (ed) Refugee Education: Mapping the Field (Trentham Books Ltd, London) 1998

[19] Hijab is the Islamic dress worn by women that covers much of the body.

attacks. After the 11 September 2001 events many Somali girls and women in London were terrified into removing their scarves because of the number of assaults – including spitting, insults and harassment – IRIN was told during the course of research there.

Conflicting values at home

Hassan points out in his study that the refugee children suffer from a whole range of stresses that are not easily identified - for example, conflicting values and demands in their two worlds, the school and home. Guardians are likely to impress upon children that they should do what is expected of them at school, while at the same time insisting the children abide by the customs and norms of the family at home. If they fail to cope with the education system, the likelihood is that the children will fall on to the edge of society and be particularly vulnerable to anti social or criminal behaviour. "Our children join the 'no-hope' gangs and go shoplifting… They learn to drink and take drugs", one Somali community leader told IRIN.

Social workers and teachers also say that problems for the children arise from the fact that many Somali adults do not engage with the education system, either because they are unable to (illiteracy and language problems), or because they are unaware of the expectations of the Western mode of education. Most are unfamiliar with the "form-filling" culture, which means children are excluded from vital lists, and sometimes unfairly penalized. For example, if a parent fails to write a letter when their child is sick, the child will acquire the stigma of "unauthorised absence".

"I concentrated hard on my studies to stop myself from thinking about what has happened to me" – Houdan, reading for a degree in bio-medical technology.

Credit: IRIN/Jenny Matthews-Network

Somali woman on her experience with schools in Canada

The problem with the schools in Canada is that both the teachers and the [Somali] parents blame each other for the absence of discipline. The teachers used to ask me, why are your children so rude? I would say to them, they are rude because you teachers in school don't smack them.

I was horrified by what I saw in [the Canadian] schools. I saw one teacher tell a young boy to sit down, and his response was "make me". You find students with their feet up on the desks, answering back, not addressing the teachers in a respectful way – it would never, never be tolerated in our country. This is totally unacceptable in Somali culture.

Before the government disintegrated in Somalia, it took care of the education of our children. The only role the parent had was to make sure the child went to school and the homework was done. But in the West, the guardian is expected to take a very different, interactive role. Also the children learn in a different way – they have to think in a different way. I feel sorry for our children. They are placed according to age and have to enter this system regardless of the gaps in their education, or their language ability.

Where unaccompanied children do manage to adapt to the new system, they may find themselves vulnerable to disapproval of the more conservative Somali community. Ismahan, interviewed in Stockholm, was smuggled to Sweden as an unaccompanied child when she was 14 years old. She was left outside the door of a police station. After trying to contact her family through the Red Cross, she accepted life in Sweden, and eventually got an apartment of her own when she was 17. "It was very tough at first to manage my studies…at school the kids swear and show no respect…I was alone, dealing with the bills, and trying to study. Eventually I had a good relationship with my teacher, and I liked my independence. But I didn't have such a good contact with the Somali society."

Other difficulties include adapting to an entirely new method of education that stresses initiative and self-discipline rather than learning by rote under strict supervision. As a result, many Somali children struggle to understand their place and role in a liberal society, which frowns on the disciplinarian upbringing they are likely to have experienced at home. They find themselves in a culture that encourages them to question their own guardians and traditions, but is frequently dismissive or contemptuous of minority groups, perceiving them as unruly and aggressive. According to Hassan, Somali children are considered aggressive in schools because of the way they tend to respond to teasing and bullying - "Culturally, Somalis are told at home, don't lie down, defend yourself, prove yourself a man."

In London schools, Somali children had a reputation of being quick to pick a fight or pull a knife, IRIN was told by a variety of professionals. With the violence they are likely to have experienced in their home country, and the cultural taunts they may experience from adults at home, Somali children have been shown to tend towards violent behaviour in the playgrounds and on the streets.

"Our boys are particularly vulnerable, because they have very poor role models at home – unemployed male relatives who chew *qat*[20] and talk about the war," one Somali teacher told IRIN in London. Expulsions may end up in criminal behaviour, prison or juvenile detention,

[20] *Qat* is a narcotic leaf grown in East Africa and imported by the Somali diaspora.

and alienation from the Somali community. Negligence and frustration at school also leads to under achievement, failure to secure qualifications, and disapproval -and sometimes rejection - by the Somali community as well as the host society.

Mulki Muse Galal, on Somali children and the education system in Britain

Since most of the older Somali generations are illiterate…Parents very often find it difficult to help their children with their homework. They also fail to turn up for parents' evenings at schools because they cannot communicate with the teachers…

The academic achievement of Somali children is limited both in comparison with other groups and in terms of their potential…Children who arrive in the UK at the age of 11 years or over with little or no previous schooling stand little chance of going beyond the basic social skills…Most teachers are not trained to deal with traumatized children, and because of the fact that there is a language barrier, the children get pushed to a corner of the classroom where they spend most of their time wondering what on earth is going on. It gets even worse when they are placed into a classroom with disruptive children. They then start to feel that they are not learning as much as they should and get terribly frustrated. Then they adopt bad behaviour [patterns] from their peers and become disruptive children themselves…

Being a Somali bilingual teacher myself, I feel that each and every Somali man and woman has contributed to the destruction of our great society and, worst of all, are still doing so by not taking the lives of our children seriously…It is sad to see the children walk out of school after five or more years without a single GCSE [General Certificate of Secondary Education] grade.

From Variations on the Theme of Somaliness, International Congress of Somali Studies, Finland 1998

Cycle of prejudice

The problems of refugee children in a foreign education system have become a well-known – but under-researched – issue in Europe and North America. In some countries, like Britain, it has contributed to a general disapproval or hostility towards asylum seekers. Following the influx of Somali refugees into Britain in the early 1990s, the tendency towards violence in schools created distrust and antagonism among other parents. A British official who had worked on immigration matters with asylum-seeking Somalis confirmed this: "The arrival of traumatized Somalis had a negative effect on the communities which took them in. In 1996 a six-year-old Somali child stabbed another in London, which caused the communities to turn against Somalis."

According to this official, there was no real effort on the part of the government and the local authorities to have an integration policy in the schools: "It would have been better to make a proper placement – the children came with a different religion, different language, a strong sense of culture, and because they came in such large numbers, they …were resented."

Building relationships

But where there had been efforts to understand refugee issues, the results were positive, psychiatrist Shelia Melzak

told IRIN in London. Working with traumatized refugees, including separated Somali children, Melzak pointed to a case where complaints against the Somali community in a London borough resulted in a meeting between the headmaster and Somali parents and guardians. Guidelines to the school system, the role of teachers, and the expectations the school had of parents and guardians were then translated into Somali by the community and printed as a booklet. This improved the relationship with the school, and also helped the Somali children.

Other initiatives made by the Somali community include the setting up of homework clubs. For unaccompanied children, the battle to cope with life in a classroom is more than matched by the struggle to cope with homework – frequently not understood, and typically difficult to achieve at home.

Ahmad, who was sent to London when he was 15, was left in a phone box by the "fixer" who flew him from Nairobi, through Dubai, to Britain. He ended up with distant relatives, in a family of one woman and seven children in a small apartment. The other children became "abusive" towards Ahmad: "They treated me differently; they didn't like me." Ahmad ended up sleeping on the floor of a community organization, shifting around hostels for the homeless, and staying with various Somali families. For a long time, he didn't go to school; when he did, he hated it. "I had a problem at school…I had a language problem. I sat in the class, but there was a lot I didn't understand…it was very difficult to do homework because the place I was living was very overcrowded…I was always in trouble and eventually I stopped going."

Accessing education

Despite the fact that an unaccompanied refugee child is entitled to the same education rights as a native child in Western European and North American countries, much depends on the ability with which the foreign child can access such an opportunity. In the case of separated children, there are many internal obstacles – personal trauma, depression, preoccupation, homelessness and isolation – and external obstacles – language problems, xenophobia, bullying and religious intolerance – that are likely to interfere with the child's development and capabilities. The evidence suggests that it is unlikely that a child sent away by its parents will fulfil "the dream" of a superior education and good employment opportunities. Success stories are few.

If they fail to cope with the demands of a foreign education system, there is, moreover, a high probability that the child will become vulnerable to depression, abuse, drug dependency or criminal behaviour. It is at this stage that a dangerous gap opens up between the two worlds - or the two identities – and the separated child falls into an emotional chasm.

Homework club in London – Negligence and frustration can lead to under-achievement.

Photo :IRIN / Jenny Matthews-Network

Houdan

Houdan is now 20 years old and lives in a flat in Stockholm, Sweden, with her sister. She is studying for a degree in biomedical technology, and is training to become a laboratory scientist, but despite her academic success, Houdan feels strongly that children should stay with their parents and not be sent abroad:

Overall, it really is not a good thing – absolutely not. The children are not secure, they do not do well, it is tragic. I have seen young ones here - they are not handling it well, they can't make it. They can't take advantage of the opportunities they are sent for because of their circumstances.

She arrived herself as an unaccompanied child of 13, with responsibility for three other children, including a four-year-old. This is her story:

I left [the Somali capital] Mogadishu and fled across the border with my uncle, aunt, my sister and a number of other children. My mother was dead, and my father had been killed in Mogadishu. We went to [the Ethiopian capital] Addis Ababa and stayed with relatives…

Four of us travelled to Sweden eventually. I was just told that I was going. It was difficult for me, because I had friends in Addis Ababa and I didn't know the uncle I was going to live with. I was nervous, but didn't resist. Arriving in Sweden was actually very smooth, because my uncle came and collected us and took us straight to his home. Then I went through the asylum process.

For a year I learnt Swedish with other asylum seekers. It was very difficult in the beginning, but I found learning Swedish straightforward – I knew I needed it. I tried not to think about things, about what had happened - it was my way of putting it behind me. I concentrated on my studies. It helped to have my sister with me.

At first it was very difficult living with my uncle; he was alone before we came. I know he tried to make it easier for us, but it took about six months for us to settle down and get used to him. We were all girls. I was a teenager, and a lot was happening to me at that age. His friend had a wife, who would come and try and talk to me once in a while. Otherwise, we were isolated, living in a small place [about 300 km outside Stockholm], so we didn't have much contact at all with the [Somali] community.

For me, school was the only time I could meet people of my own age. Sometimes I ached to be back home. I had no telephone contact. I really felt isolated and alone. After one year I had to leave the local secondary school. I tried to adjust. There was a bit of a gap in my education. I had trouble in English and studied with a special group. It is not easy to make friends. I was not used to being with people outside my family, and [later] I was without my sister. It is not easy even now – that could be my fault, or it could be a problem on both sides [in Sweden].

I had one year, [then] my uncle came to Stockholm so I had to go to a different school. It is really difficult - just when you feel things are going well you have to move and start again. I was totally new, in 7th grade at the high school. My schoolwork was good because I concentrated hard on my studies to stop myself thinking about what has been.

But it was difficult to study at home because of my younger sisters. It could be very annoying. I had a responsible position at home - I was a second mother to them. I was very involved with them, and also did the cooking and had domestic responsibilities. I understand it was very difficult for my uncle. We kept some distance from him once in Stockholm. We had to start over again. Now there was no other female figure, he didn't know any women here. At school they said you could talk to the nurse or the teachers, but I didn't feel comfortable.

After three years, I moved to a school close by. Then I was 16. I made two very good friends. Of course you can talk about women's things and teenage things with your friends, otherwise I didn't get any help. Then I went to university to do a first degree. I moved out of my uncle's house. He was not happy about it. He said it was not a normal thing for a Somali girl to do, that it went against all the rules. But I don't like being compared to anyone; I live by my own rules. We had a fight, and he eventually accepted. But another relative was very harsh and said he would have nothing to do with me and that I was no longer part of the family.

(continued…)

Houdan (...continued)

It's tough on your own, economically. I work weekends caring for elderly people. That gives me some money and I get a loan for university. My family doesn't give me anything, but I don't expect them to, they have a poor financial situation. The advantage of living here is that it has helped me with my studies. You make your own rules here, you are responsible for yourself. When you are with your family, you can blame whomever you like. Here, you only have yourself to blame. I think that is good for me.

I consider moving back to Somalia. I don't think I want to have children here in Sweden. It's good for my kids to be where I should have been. I feel however long I have been here, I will never belong here. You see that – feel that – every day. Things happen that remind you all the time that you do not belong, you are perceived as different. There are a lot of assumptions made about you that are not correct.

I know it would be difficult for me to live in Somalia, but I would adjust. I really want my kids to live in my country. I feel that so strongly. Parents have to be sure of what they are doing. With what I know now, I wouldn't send my kids [abroad]. I think being separated from parents makes it very difficult – most of the young Somalis we see coming here come without their parents.

But, yes, I did get an opportunity. The education has been a great asset to me, because I want to do something for my people. When I can do something for my people, that will be my benefit.

Chapter 5: Identity: living on the edge

He stands there; I stand here; and we shout. Since he found out about the disco, I don't know how many times we have been over the same thing – my tight trousers, my short hair, my naked shoulders, my boyfriend, my bad friends. Diigad baai haysa [I can't breath anymore]. Then he found one of those letters from school in my bedroom.

But I know you well now, uncle, and you won't hit me again. That's why I stand here, with my hand near the telephone, just ready to call for help if you take one more step towards me. Believe me, ha moodin sidii hoore [I am not the same person that I used to be].

Introduction

Unaccompanied children live in a shadowy land of false identity and isolation. Once a separated child has been given asylum on the basis of the story they give at the port of entry, they must stick to that story – or face the threat of deportation. Asylum status can be revoked if there is any evidence that it was gained on pretence. In the case of separated children, who are frequently forced to give a false identity, this has serious implications. It means they must, as teenagers and adults, continue to live with it. "We need a new word for 'lying'", asserts psychologist Marie Hessle, who works with unaccompanied children in Sweden. Hessle and other professionals suggest that separated children need a legal and psychological mechanism that allows them to "confess" their real identity.

Relatives – sometimes distant or exploitative – are frequently unable to cope with the multitude of behavioral and social problems associated with separated children. Normal adolescent identity issues become distorted. "Such a child needs a lot of tolerance, especially in the adolescent stage… I think only the biological parents can really take those kind of ups and downs with children", one member of the Somali diaspora said. Somali educational specialist, Hussein Hassan puts it more bluntly: "our children who come here suffer from an identity crisis. They have a gap in their hearts."

Detention and institutionalisation

Lack of appropriate support means that many separated children end up in correctional institutions. Social workers, police personnel, immigration officials, psychiatrists and members of government said during the course of research that there were a high number of Somali children in juvenile detention, psychiatric units and correctional homes.[21]

In Sweden, the director of a juvenile correctional institution said that while the teenage search for identity can lead to criminality and depression, refugee children are more likely to end up in the criminal system: "foreign-born children are strongly over-represented in the juvenile institutions." A police source agreed that the number of foreign-born children in juvenile centres was high, with more than 80% in some institutions. According to the source, children with identity and separation problems find it particularly difficult to establish a trusting relationship with adults, or figures of authority.

[21] IRIN was unable to find official statistics on the presence of Somali children in such institutions in European countries.

Director of a Swedish juvenile centre, on separated children

Identity problems with these children are critical…A child is normally referred to the centre through the municipality, through social services. Typically the child has got to a stage where he or she is not going to school, has got involved with criminal groups and has become violent…

There was a Somali girl who ran away from her father and stepmother when she was about 15. She complained about home to her teacher at school, and was eventually moved to a Swedish foster home. She stayed there for about six months, then ran away again. She joined a group of about five or six Somali girls who were well known to the social services at the time. They were sleeping around with older men and getting into a lot of trouble…

During the time she stayed with the foster parents, she had said she wanted more family contact – she was extremely preoccupied with her (biological) mother. She had bad memories from war, her mother had died when she was about three, then she lived with her grandmother. She saw her grandmother shot dead. Her father then took her with her siblings to Russia, a transit point, where she got stuck for a while. She had bad experiences there.

When she arrived in Sweden, she was about 14 years old, and she had another name, another age, and a completely false identity. She rejected the new identity. This turned into a crisis with her father. She refused to accept the new identity and started to deny it. She ended up at a treatment centre for two years.

Ilhan, now a young adult, arrived in Stockholm when she was 15. She told IRIN that she had a difficult time adapting at first, and now tries to help other unaccompanied children through her work in a women's group. Many suffer from confusion and depression over their identity, and are preoccupied with issues of integration and "belonging", she said. One of a group of 15 separated children in the refugee centre when she first arrived in Sweden, Ilhan has kept in touch with most of them. She told IRIN only two of the original group managed to successfully get through the Swedish education system. "Some got pregnant, some became alcoholics, some are on drugs, and some ended up in juvenile centers. Some are on their own in apartments and ostracized by the Somali community…we try to help the girls who get pregnant and have children on their own." When she describes the difficult experience of being an unaccompanied child, she talks about feeling "out of place" and being "a bit of an outcast", or being "ostracized" and "lonely".

Isolation and depression

Somali community worker in London, Dahabo Isa told IRIN that it took time for the diaspora to realize the scale of the problem with unaccompanied children, many of whom she describes as now suffering "mental health problems". The stress of loneliness, exploitation for benefit, lack of accommodation, as well as identity problems, can have a shocking toll on young teenagers, she said. "I have heard of suicide cases, where these young Somali children attempt to kill themselves, cut themselves, or throw themselves in front of trains…we try to do what we can, but there is no [institutional] priority given to these children."

On identity problems, educationalist Hussein Hassan

Here, if you are not white, you have to mark out a place for yourself – I am a Somali in my own way; I am African in my own way; I am a Muslim in my own way. Nationality should be irrespective of colour, but here, once you have paper status of nationality your position becomes more viable if you look the part. It's to do with the feeling of what's deep inside you. Do you see a Somali in the mirror, or an English man? It's very psychological… You have crossed the border, you are out of your territory, you hang on the periphery.

In Somalia, we have social control… our parents are considered wise people, and the social system entitles them to make decisions in a regulated society. We have measures of control – partly religious, partly social – in which to bring up the family. It is a cohesive force; our values underpin everything… We are used to seeing things in a culture blended with religion, with clear do's and don't's …

But here, living in London, all the pegs holding it together have been loosened…

Identity is a very critical issue, and our children who come here suffer from an identity crisis. They have a gap in their hearts. They start to use cultural or religious identities in very contradictory ways, and out of confusion comes criminalisation and stereotypes. Here, you learn that even with a suit and briefcase, there is a criminal stigma attached: an old lady will watch you if you walk behind her…

Members of the diaspora point out that even adults struggle to deal with the issues of assimilation and integration, with a varying degree of success. Somalis in exile are generally perceived to have a strong sense of culture and community and a positive self-image. But that sense of belonging to a community, or a family, is something separated children rarely have, professionals say. The exodus from Somali territories has over the last decade resulted in disjointed families; parents are unable to act as a bridge from the old country to the new. Separated children are forced to make the leap without the bridge, and frequently fail to get across.

In a study on children refugees in Finland, Somali adolescents were found to have a good self-concept regarding physical appearance compared with other refugees – and even rated better in the study than the Finnish adolescent.[22] But the same study found that a slow system of family reunification meant that Somali children living in orphanages suffered from depression and psychosomatic symptoms, and had, in some cases "started to use alcohol and drugs to cope with reality." It said Somali minors involved in the study who had been waiting for their families for 3-7 years found that reunification can come too late – "family relations cannot be rebuilt, and the cultural clashes have been evident." Unaccompanied minors felt more than anything else that they were alone, with no one to talk to them about their traumatic experiences, the study said. It recommended that separated Somali children "have a friend who would listen and understand. Someone that can be trusted." Other problems listed in the study included a sense of confinement among young Somalis who tended not to go out in the evenings because many of them had experienced verbal or physical racist attacks.

The problem of racism in European countries is an oft-repeated complaint, and is a fundamental part of the stress and fear separated children experience in Europe and North American countries.

[22] See 'Psychosocial Adjustment among Somali Refugees in Finland', by Nina Forsten-Lindman in *Variations on the theme of Somaliness* (International Congress of Somali Studies, Finland, 1998).

"A tendency towards aggression"

The study also noted the high incident of Somali minors dropping out and missing school lessons. This was attributed to depression and poor motivation among young children who missed their parents and pined for a family reunion. Most of the Somali children interviewed had some siblings remaining in their home country; some did not know if their relatives were alive or dead. All described some sort of loss, including those who had witnessed a parent being killed, or siblings dying in conflict or as a result of the upheaval.

Sheila Melzak, a psychiatrist working with traumatized children[23], including separated Somali children, said that Somali children as a group demonstrated a tendency towards aggression and violence in London schools. She told IRIN that, in her experience, there were a high proportion of Somali children in psychiatric hospitals and juvenile detention centres. She attributed this to the high number of Somali children who were separated from their parents, and who had suffered trauma with the collapse of the state. Melzak also pointed to the gap between generations in the Somali diaspora, and the traditionalism of the adults in exile who may be dismissive or distrustful of concepts of mental trauma and depression among the children. Like other professionals, she described institutional and bureaucratic responsibility for separated children in Britain as weak and confused, especially for 16-18 year olds. Under present policies, separated children tend to suffer further instability by being shifted around to different accommodation, to different boroughs, and sometimes to different geographical areas.[24]

Somali minors on racism in Finland

"Five men ran after me with baseball bats in their hands. They hunted me by car. We managed to get in safety to a house. I am always afraid when I am walking in town. They still haven't caught me once. No…There have been many threatening situations. It has lead to the fact that I don't go out so much. For instance today it is Friday, but I am going to stay at home because I am too afraid of going anywhere."

*"Last May I was fighting with a Finn in a bus. The Finn said: "f***, look a nigger. I do not like them. I am allergic to them." I told him to get out of the bus then. He hit me from behind. I hit him back and my middle finger was broken. He left the bus. Every weekend people shout "nigger"…but I have only once been in a fight."*

"I have often been abused. Somebody hit me with a bottle in my head, another one with a base-ball bat- I've gotten stitches every now and then."

Source: *Variations on the Theme of Somaliness* (International Congress of Somali Studies, Finland, 1999)

"The children have so little stability in their lives…[16-18 year olds] don't really fit in anywhere. They stop being the responsibility of the schools, and of the social services, and they are 'placed in the community' – which means they have a very tenuous connection to anyone," Shelia Melzak said. Although some authorities create special teams to deal with separated children, lack of resources mean the teams are often short lived or suffer a high turnover of staff – "so the children don't build up any real trust".

[23] Medical Foundation for Torture Victims, London

[24] Britain has a policy of dispersal of refugees and asylum seekers, which means unaccompanied children are likely to be sent away from their established communities or place of arrival. For more information see Cold Comfort, Save the Children

Cultural no man's land

Although there is a paucity of statistical information on the experience and circumstances of separated children, existing evidence points to a probability that they are likely to end up in a cultural 'no man's land', unable to "belong" to either their original culture or their new country. Such children appear to encounter little tolerance. Both the host country and the Somali community are likely to consider the child's behaviour inappropriate, unproductive and "anti-social". As a result, a number of Somali children are returned back to Somalia by relatives – "family deportees" – in a turn of events that can equal the trauma of being sent away in the first place.

Ismahan:
"I liked my independence... but I didn't have such a good relationship with the Somali community."

Photo: IRIN/Jenny Matthews-Network

Ahmad

Ahmad left Mogadishu in 1999 because of conflict. As their eldest son, his parents were afraid he would either get recruited by one of the young militias, or become targeted by them. Ahmad said he was pleased at first to be going to a new life abroad, but suffered when he ended up having to constantly shift around between different social services and homelessness departments:

I sat in the office from morning to evening waiting for a vacancy to come up... The homeless unit said they had no vacancies, and told me to come back another time. Now I am in a hostel for young people. It is one room, and I have to just sit there. I have a tiny amount of money to live on each week. Life is very lonely.

When Ahmad arrived in London, he realized that no one expected him or wanted to look after him:

I travelled on the plane with my fixer, who came off the plane with me in a big airport in Britain. He took me through the [immigration] controls. He came with me on a bus to central London and took me to a phone box, where he phoned some family friends.

I realized from the conversation they were not expecting me. He just told them I was here and they should come and collect me. He left me in the phone box. I was very nervous. I didn't know what would happen to me. I waited for some time, then someone did come, and took me to their house.

They gave me a place to sleep and some food – I was very young then, so they had to make sure I had something. It was a very big family, with a mother and seven children. It was a bit like a prison to me. I didn't know any of them. I thought: how am I going to get out of here?

The mother was nice to me, but the children - they had been here a long time, and they didn't like me. I was from Africa; everything about me was different. They were abusive and said very abusive things to me.

I lived with the family for about one year, but couldn't get on with them, and was very unhappy. It was very difficult. The family would talk to each other, and laugh, but I was separate, and I didn't understand any of them. I helped myself to food, but I was not getting clothes, and I felt unable to talk about this. My other problem was at school. I had been to secondary school, but I had a language problem. I sat in the class, but there was a lot I didn't understand. It was very difficult to do homework, because the place I was living was very overcrowded.

So I left. I went to social services and said I couldn't stay with the family. They said I was in the wrong zone, so I moved [from the] area. They would not accept me because I was 17. They told me to go to the homeless persons department and gave me a list of hostel vacancies. I was confused. I slept on the floor of a community organization for a about a month. I went back to the homeless unit. I was told: We don't deal with your sort of case, you should go back to social services. Then I was told I needed an assessment. Then I was advised to go to another social services. Then I tried a student advice centre, who phoned social services for me, but I was rejected because I was 17.

A community organization wrote a letter for me. After that, I was accepted by social services and they assessed me. They sent me back to the homeless persons department with a letter. But the homeless unit said they had no vacancies, and told me to come back another time. I sat in the office from morning to evening waiting for the next day, waiting for a vacancy to come up.

Eventually a vacancy did come up in a place very far from here. I was offered a flat on my own. Every day I travelled for about two hours to attend my college. I was very lonely, I was very low. So I was put on a waiting list, and after four months I was shifted. Now I am in a hostel. It's better but not easy. It is one room, and I have to just sit here. It is not a clean place. They provide dinner but during the day you cook for yourself. I get social security and housing benefit, but the cost of the hostel means I live on a tiny amount each week.

I miss my family a lot. I don't know how to contact them. If I had money, I would go – I hope to eventually find them. It was not good to come here; I should have stayed with them whatever was happening. Sending your children away is a disastrous idea. You should never send your children to places like this. There are social services, but it is full of empty promises. I go to see social workers weekly, monthly, and I am always dealing with different people who don't know me or anything about me. Life is very lonely.

Chapter 6: 'Deported' home: between two worlds

So, Hoyo [mother], now I have you back - and you have me. That was my dream! – but I call this a nightmare.

"Qaxooti! [refugee]" – he thinks I don't understand that? He carries the knife like it's a new toy, in this wreckage they call a school. When I jump at the sound of shooting, he throws stones at me as if I am a foreigner. I am too scared to go and face these wild, violent children again – they despise me.

If you wanted a good Somali girl, then why did you send me away? You want me to cover my head, and look after the house, and marry that old man? - then you wasted your money. I wake up and want to die: the flies, the heat, the gunfire, the gossip and the laughing at me. Mama, I don't want your stupid rules, and long, endless days at home. There is nothing here for me.

I am no longer in your world and I no longer want it.

Introduction

There are many "returned" children in Somali territories, struggling with an extraordinary form of culture shock. Often tricked on to the plane by relatives or sent away in disgrace, they go back to a "home" that many barely remember. Conspicuous as they are to their peers and elders – in the way they talk, and dress, and behave – they are an invisible phenomenon in every other way. Little is known about how these returnee children cope or the special sort of difficulties they face. In the absence of effectively functioning Somali institutions, there are no registers to indicate numbers, and no services to give support. But, according to the children themselves and concerned Somali adults, these diaspora minors face daily bullying and isolation; at worst, they meet with extortion, rape and murder

Family deportees

Among those returning, unaccompanied children face particular difficulties. When they are sent back, they are likely to be already burdened with emotional and psychological problems from their experiences abroad.

The trauma of being "deported" back to the homeland is, in fact, very similar to that of being sent overseas in the first place: the child arrives precipitously in an unfamiliar environment, faces language problems and culture shock, and is devoid of critical support and guidance. Many also have to suffer "disgrace" because they have failed to thrive overseas or have become an economic or social burden to their extended families.

Once back home, the returnees are taken in by parents or relatives who aim to subject them to a rigorous programme of re-assimilation, more often than not expressed in terms of "discipline" – religious, educational and cultural. In the more extreme cases, minors are sent off to rural areas to work, boys are sent off to religious boarding schools, and girls are married off to older men. Some find their new life consists of hanging around a volatile and decaying urban centre, unwilling to step outside the front door for fear of what they may encounter. Others become marginalized, finding themselves on the fringes of the society they are supposed to "belong" to and resort to drugs and violence.

"There is no modern system that has evolved to support these children, and traditional systems of social support do not exist for them either. While returning adults can choose go back to their villages and depend on their clan and friendship

networks, there is no such option for the diaspora youngster," Dr Bulhan of the War Torn Societies project, told IRIN in the Somaliland capital, Hargeysa.

The dangers of peer pressure

Returning diaspora children face an unforgiving – and sometimes brutal - response from their peers. "They get bullied because they just don't 'look right', and because of resentment and jealousies", one mother said. In some cases, the daily teasing and bullying result in the children becoming withdrawn, fearful and depressed. Some refuse to leave the house; others have to get used to living in a very restricted, heavily protected environment.

In the more extreme cases, returnee diaspora children have been attacked, kidnapped and killed. They are targeted because of their clothes, their "foreign" manners, and their apparent affluence. When IRIN was conducting research in Mogadishu[25], a Somali boy visiting from the United States was kidnapped for ransom and killed.

The attitude of relatives may compound the children's problems – they jealously protect them and escort them even as they advise the returnees to be "inconspicuous" and dress down to deflect attention. Relatives tend to treat diaspora children as a form of life insurance – or a sort of reservoir of wealth. "When [diaspora] children return to Mogadishu, they are protected, sometimes sent around with an armed escort for fear of kidnappings," Abdirashid Haji Nur from CONCERN Worldwide observed.

Samatar Sudi, 28, resident in Canada, visiting Mogadishu

There are so many teenagers here in Mogadishu who have been deported by their families. You see them everywhere. We have a joke now. We say: Are you a government or a family deportee? When the war started, everyone had just one goal – to go overseas, become a refugee, collect welfare. But then the children [taken abroad] grow up and start doing their own thing. The boys start wearing earrings, the girls start dating. I met one girl who was sent back from Toronto [Canada] because she was dating a Jamaican. Do you get it? She was deported because she was dating a black man. The Somalis are racist, I tell you.

There are so many cases of girls who start wearing tight jeans and short skirts - they get deported. Or cases where children start talking back to their parents - they get deported. Or maybe they get juiced up and start to drink and smoke - they get deported real quick. Sometimes you see younger children because the older ones [messed] up. The parents think: If my oldest child [messed] up, how can I prevent the younger ones from [messing] up too? They think, better send them back before it's too late.

Parents have a hell of a time keeping their children under control. When they get to a place like Toronto, the kids go crazy. I drink and smoke, but there's no way my parents are finding out. Can you imagine ending up in a place like this after living in Toronto? You go crazy. All these [returnee] kids now are going crazy [in Mogadishu] – thousands of them, I tell you. They are all crying.

[25] June 2002. In the absence of functioning institutions, there is no available date on this sort of incident; but it is a known hazard for returning diaspora children.

Mohammad Hassan

In Hargeysa, a 17-year-old boy with Canadian citizenship was killed by a gang of 14- to 16-year- olds in December 2001, when he failed to hand over money, and tried to protect a girlfriend. The case[26] tragically underlines the vulnerabilities of returning children, and aptly illustrates the sort of life children struggle with in post-conflict areas.

Muhammad Hasan lived in Canada with his parents after leaving Somaliland when he was two years old. According to his Hargeysa uncle, Abdullahi Ahmad, it was Muhammad's decision to visit Somaliland, to meet his relatives and see "his culture". "When he first came, he had an accent, he couldn't go out because he couldn't speak Somali well, and he was adjusting. But then he got some friends – mostly returning diaspora children – and they used to gather in a restaurant where he played pool and got his confidence up. He started saying to me that he didn't need to be accompanied any more and that he was now independent."

He befriended a local girl, and started to socialize with her. One evening, on the outskirts of the town, he encountered a notorious gang of 14- to 16-year-olds, who demanded he hand over his girlfriend and money. When he refused and tried to protect the girl, he was severely beaten, and later died of a head injury.

Abdullahi Ahmad, who was with Muhammad when he died, told IRIN that, while he believed that gang-related incidents happen all over the world, Muhammad was in a particularly vulnerable position. "I do think that Mohammed did endanger himself through naivety because he had grown up abroad. He failed to understand how dangerous the situation was, and didn't know how to handle it," Abdullahi told IRIN.

Abdullahi Ahmad on how his 17-year-old Canadian nephew, Muhammad, was killed:

They all went after him and chased him. One boy tripped him, and once he was on the ground, one of the boys kicked him, and one used a sword on his head; another was kicking his body, and used a wooden stick with long nails in it like a club. It was night-time, with no moon, in a bushy area in one of those places with abandoned and destroyed houses. It is a well-known gang area, where they rape girls.

Muhammad was left on the ground, bleeding. He tried to walk. He managed to get to nearby shop, where he pleaded for help. [A woman] called us at about 9 p.m. I drove to find him. There were a lot of people gathered around him. I saw he was in danger; the head injury was big. There is no ambulance here, so I put him in the back seat and rushed him to the hospital. When we reached the hospital, there was no doctor, no medicine, no nurse – that is what Hargeysa hospital is like.

Muhammad was still conscious at this stage, but very weak. He told me they tried to take dollars, had taken money. He was screaming with pain, so it was difficult to talk with him. I was asking: Do you know them? What about the girl? Who was with you? He said he was afraid. He said: I am afraid I have a brain injury, I have a lot of pain in my head.

The two men at the hospital tried to stitch him up. Then they said to take him home. When we left hospital he fell into a coma. I was knocking on doors at midnight. I found one doctor. Muhammad's hands had started contracting. The doctor said there was nothing he could do. In the morning, the doctor came back and said take him to the hospital and admit him. While they were doing the paperwork at the hospital, Muhammad died.

[26] Canadian diplomats from neighbouring Kenya have observed the trial in Hargeysa

Somali boy sent back to Mogadishu from Sweden

No, I didn't really want to come here. My father told me I was going to Kenya to visit my relatives, but when I got there he left me, and I was brought here. It was a trick. If he had told me [the truth] I would have resisted. I had been in Sweden since I was three years old. I was nervous about coming back to Mogadishu. I was afraid I would get kidnapped or killed by the militias, but now I am fine.

It took a while to get used to it. My uncle took me to a boarding school [in Somalia] and left me there. He wanted me to learn Somali and to learn my religion. I didn't have time to learn my religion when I was in Sweden – I was too busy in school and did not know the Holy Koran. Now I do. I didn't even know Somali when I arrived here. At least I can speak my own language now.

I had many problems at first. I had these wounds in my legs and my arms, and I kept scratching until they became really painful [shows scars]. I had problems with some of the other children – it was just that we could not understand each other. Now, I am waiting to go back to Sweden; I want to go back. I want to go to university there. I want to get a job there. Maybe one day, if there is peace in this country, I will live here.

Rough path to re-assimilation

In Mogadishu, all the returning children interviewed by IRIN, with few exceptions, expressed a burning desire to return to their adopted countries. While careful not to embarrass or annoy the adults they were with, they did not hesitate to say they were determined to find a way of going back. Many of them claimed they had been tricked into returning to the homeland, and had very similar stories about the ruses used by their relatives to get them back to Mogadishu. Most often they had been told they were going for a brief visit to get reacquainted with a family member.

The returning children, both at home and at school, must also get used to traditional methods of discipline, which include caning and beating. Compared to their previous experience, they must learn to live in a society without institutional and legal protection.

Teachers interviewed by IRIN said that "deported" children generally encountered a basic lack of compassion. During the process of re-assimilation, they were far more likely to encounter hostility and intolerance than guidance. "Maybe in Europe they could share their problems.

Once back in the capital, the children described going through a tough readjustment process. They were taunted by other children because they did not speak the language, scorned and humiliated by teachers because they did not know the Koran, denigrated and ridiculed for their "foreign" manners and higher education level. They learned to shed the symbols of their former life – to dress down and acquire local mannerisms. They also had to develop resistance to infection and waterborne diseases. Here no one cares; the problem is the country itself," said Abdirahman Maalin Muhammad, the principal of the Ablaal School of Primary and Secondary Education in south Mogadishu.

All the children interviewed by IRIN said they had been sent back to relearn their culture and religion; most seemed to have fallen victim to the culture clash between the generations of the Somali diaspora. While there are no figures on the number of "deported" children, teachers and teenagers told IRIN there were now "thousands" of child returnees in the capital alone.

Children are sent back to Somalia to learn their culture and religion.

Photo: UNICEF

Not all returnee children suffer in the same way. Diaspora children who arrive back to the homeland with parents and relatives benefit emotionally and practically from the uninterrupted family relationship and support, and benefit psychologically from having shared the experience abroad. In marked contrast to the "deported" unaccompanied child, returning diaspora parents and the children set out together on a path of re-establishment and re-assimilation.

But it is not an easy path, according to those who bring their children home. Parents said consideration for children was one of the biggest obstacles the diaspora faced in organizing a return home. "The children initially find they have nothing apart from school and home – it's a big strain on the parents. They try to cope by buying video games and videos," one mother told IRIN. It causes economic and psychological stress for the returning family. "You feel you are not giving the children a quality life. You get frustrated teenagers and terrified youngsters, you have to put them in schools with a poor education [standards] and certificates that no one recognizes."

The children also benefit from family support while they learn how to defend themselves. According to one diaspora mother, relatives have to appreciate what returnee children will be confronted with. "It's a tough environment and they won't survive if they are docile and quiet. They have to give money for their own safety. My own child used to take money to school – we know it was extortion from the gangs."

Somali girl, 14, sent back to Mogadishu

I moved to Ohio, in America, in 1993, and came back to Somalia in 2001. I am here to get my religious education. It should take two years. I want to go back. I want to get my university degree. I'd like to be a teacher or to work with computers.

The worst thing about coming back here was the heat and the dirt. The streets are not clean, and we are not used to the water, which is dirty and makes you sick. I have these scars on my legs from the infection I got when I first came. I didn't know Somali when I arrived, some people made fun of me. In Ohio I did not wear a veil, just a headscarf, and I prefer it that way. I don't really want to wear a veil here, but I have to wear it in my country. My mother tells me "we will go back when you learn your religion." But I don't know when that will be.

Zeinab, on bringing children back to Somaliland

I decided to return my children back home while they were still young so that they could learn their religion and culture and family values, which is hard to teach them abroad. I used to hate the life being led by Somali children in Canada. I saw many families whose children got spoilt and detested to be even called Somali.

There are problems here for the returning diaspora children - their inability to assimilate, and the lack of suitable education facilities. The children are not used to the existing Somali schools. Many refuse to go to school, or become withdrawn, or just don't leave the house. It's normal for children from abroad to be taunted and teased. They get called names and provoked at school.

There are gangs of youths here who feel resentful of the diaspora children, resentful that [the returnee children] have had a better life while they remained here. Most of the ones remaining lost their fathers in the war and are living with their mothers. They are resentful that [the diaspora children] have material possessions, nice clothes, a good education, so they implement a sort of protection racket, extortion

"Separated" children in Somali territories

However, some children who have spent most of their lives abroad with their parents get sent back to Somali territories alone. To a great extent, their circumstances mirror those of the "separated" children arriving in European and North American countries. Having brought them up overseas, the parents then decide that the child will be better off back in the homeland.

This decision frequently coincides with the onset of puberty, or early teenage-hood, when the child's attitude and behaviour changes, and identity becomes an issue. Diaspora parents might feel that they have failed to effectively inculcate their culture into their children, or conflict in the household arises from the generation "clash" in the post-war diaspora. When they are sent away, the children may not realize where or why they are going – much like those who are sent out to European countries.

But sending a bi-cultural child back to an "alien" homeland is replete with problems, IRIN research suggests. Some reject their traditional relatives and rebel in the Somali schools; the social experience that is expected to "straighten them out" proves counterproductive and they end up marginalized in much the same way as they did overseas.

In one case, a young teenager brought up in Sweden had been sent to live with his grandparents in Baidoa, southern Somalia. The father told IRIN that in Sweden the boy had become involved with a group of friends he did not trust, had started thieving, and become difficult to handle. The father said he was worried the boy would be taken into "police care".

Between two worlds

After spending a year in Baidoa, however, the father heard that the boy had moved out of the grandparents' house, rebelled at the local school, and become involved with a local gang of boys. The father told IRIN he was on his way to collect the boy and take him back to Sweden, because he feared his son would join the local militia. Little is known about the effects of this "flip-flopping" between two worlds – characterized by disapproval and identity crises.

The belief by the diaspora that a return to the homeland will automatically "straighten out" children considered delinquent or disobedient is a

misconception, says Fatuma Ibrahim, UN Human Rights Officer for Somalia. “There are plenty of hazards – drugs, alcohol, prostitution, violent gangs – all of which are easy to access. It’s not true that there are fewer hazards here; that is a myth. Every child who is brought back [to Somali territories] because they have a drug or alcohol problem abroad will find it here, easily.”

But it is effective in other ways, she agrees. The general absence of institutions and legislation combined with traditional aspects of Somali culture does give relatives and parents freedom to control and discipline a child without restraint. “You can discipline the child how you wish, lock them in a room, beat them – no one is going to stop you here. Some children get sent out to nomadic relatives as a sort of shock treatment, or get married off,” one returnee diaspora mother told IRIN.

One of the things all the returnee minors have to cope with, regardless of their circumstances, are the gangs of local children who operate in the urban centres.

Child gangs

Child gangs are the result of the breakdown of the family structure in Somaliland, Zamzam Abdi, head of Community of Concerned Somalis, a local NGO in Hargeysa working with war widows, told IRIN. Although a now relatively peaceful post-conflict society, the traditional family structure in Somaliland has suffered as a result of war and the exodus to the refugee camps.

“These children have known more violence than anything else in their lives – their fathers have been killed, they have joined the militia, they have quit school, they deal in qat [Catha edulis], they are the children of mothers who are forced to be the family breadwinner," she said. War widows had to “fill the vacuum” left by men who had either died or left for the refugee camps; or who were supported by men later adversely affected as ex-combatants, Zamzam Abdi explained.

Often working women have to discontinue their daughters' education so that the girls can take on household responsibilities. Poverty, parental absence, and exposure to violence and trauma have been critical causes in the formation of the gangs – which often include children as young as 10, as well as young teenagers. “These gangs are very feared, and have declared some parts of the town no-go-zones as they wreak havoc at night – they extort money, and rape girls.” According to Zamzam Abdi, there is urgent need for the children to be rehabilitated, educated and given opportunities to earn a living

Parents try to keep their children out of ‘gun-school’

Photo: UNICEF

But at present, there are no rehabilitation opportunities for such children – no social workers, juvenile courts or institutional care. Fatuma Ibrahim told IRIN that delinquent or violent children were taken to the adult prisons, where they were likely to be abused. “They are the victims of sexual, mental and physical abuse. The guards tell me they literally pull the older men off the children at night when they hear them screaming. There are a very small number of girls, but they are there –

they are put in the women's quarters with prostitutes and thieves and are vulnerable to abuse by the guards."

Imprisoning children

When IRIN visited the main Hargeysa prison,[27] about 25 to 30 children were being held there, according to the prison staff. A group of about 12 boys were held in an outhouse made of iron sheets near the main prison yard. The children had no bedding, and were confined in the sweltering heat, near an open sewage pit.

According to a prison guard, most of the group had been brought in by parents for drug abuse and violence, and would be kept for about two months – or until the parents told the prison authorities to release them. They are known as *asewaladine* – children who have disobeyed. In most cases, it is the parents who decide the duration of their incarceration. Young girls were visible in the women's quarter, peering out of the bars.

"Some of the children are very violent to the mothers – they beat them for money, and for qat. I've seen them in the prisons at all ages. They stay for about three to five months at a time, and some for as long as 11 months. They are even more traumatized when they get out, so there is a high chance of them returning back to prison again," Fatuma Ibrahim said.

The plight of Somali children

According to humanitarian workers and human rights organisations, conflict and neglect have meant that children have suffered in all the Somali territories - some in the extreme. In Mogadishu, children suffer the consequences of continued conflict and lawlessness as well as the general breakdown of government and society.

The Mogadishu-based Dr Ismail Jimaale Human Rights Centre has tried to draw attention to the particular plight of children – including killings, forcible recruitment, and imprisonment. Other concerns include the many street children, whose numbers in the urban centres increase with repatriation and migration movements.

In Hargeysa, young homeless girls – who are easy prey for gangs – sleep in among the petrol containers in the hope that the smell and the danger of the petrol will keep away potential attackers. Having to live on the streets of the large urban centres is one of the most dangerous prospects for Somali children in all territories. IRIN was told that street children were in some cases forced to beg for gangs after being raped and beaten, or they are killed and abused by militia in areas of continuing conflict. In the rural, nomadic areas and refugee camps, life is no better for these most vulnerable members of society: where poverty is acute, some children were sold by their parents as labourers and domestic servants, humanitarian workers told IRIN.

"So you can see why, for some, sending a child away on a plane is considered the biggest favour you can do," Fatuma Ibrahim observed.

[27] February 2002

Halima

Halima was taken to Sweden as an unaccompanied minor when she was eight years old, but brought back to Somalia by her parents after her guardian complained of her behaviour.

I am afraid that I may be killed here in Somalia. The children in the neighbourhood watch me strangely because I do not know the Somali language. In Mogadishu, people abuse and kill each other.

Halima wants to return to Sweden – but she also fears losing her Somali identity:

I was taken to Sweden after the war broke out, when I was eight years old. I had refugee status for four years, and then I was granted permission to stay. I started school and learnt the Swedish language.

The Swedish government was very compassionate to refugees. Unaccompanied minors were given a hearing and allowed to go into interviews. When the children came into conflict with their guardians, they could go to their teachers, who would ask the children what problems they had – and they almost always helped. In Sweden, they take away and care for children who are battered by their parents.

It is very difficult to live without your parents. I used to live with a kind Somali woman, who was a friend of my parents. Whenever she scolded me, I used to feel very bad. One day I was asked in school if I had any problems, and I told them of the sort of scolding I got from my foster mother. The school authorities came home and told my foster mother that she had to change, and that they would take me away from her if she ever mistreated me. This made her furious. She telephoned my parents in Somalia and told them all about it. They talked to me, and decided to bring me back. I was about 15 years old.

When I first came back, I didn't start school immediately. The children in the neighbourhood used to watch me strangely as I did not know the Somali language – I started school here [Mogadishu] about a year after I came back. It took me time to cope with the other children. My father taught me Somali traditions, while I had a private teacher to teach me Somali.

I don't think the Somali culture is a great one. It lacks civilization. People stare at you as if you are a total stranger in this country. They abuse and kill each other. There is no law and order, and the government here is weak. I prefer Sweden. There, people are civilized. People don't abuse each other or kill each other. If someone does something wrong against you, he says sorry. People share their problems…

But I was unaccompanied there, and I got lonely. Here I am living with my parents and studying too. There are things about the Swedish culture that I realize is not conducive to me, and I am afraid of losing my Somali culture. My father told me he would take me back to Sweden when I finish schooling here. I would be very happy to return – I am afraid that I may be killed here.

Dahabo

Dahabo has a small organization based in Earls Court, London, and operates out of two tiny rooms. The organization receives funding for its role as a community advice centre and the work it does with Somali children.

Dahabo Isa, with Nimo, 18, who arrived as an unaccompanied child

I have heard of suicide cases, where these young Somali children attempt to kill themselves, cut themselves, or throw themselves in front of trains

Dahabo told IRIN there are people in the Somali community who want to keep unaccompanied children off official lists so that they can continue to use them to get benefits from the welfare state.

When people arrived in the 1990s from the wars in Somalia, they found it difficult. There was the language barrier, they were culturally and religiously isolated, and they found themselves in an alien system. They found that although they now had security and accommodation, they had a whole different set of problems. Many were confused, had mental health problems, and were suffering from stress and trauma.

Unaccompanied children have even more problems. They suffer all those things as well as being without family support and affection. In 1993, we began to see a flow of unaccompanied children. Of course, they came right from the beginning, but it was only later we realized the scale of the problem.

Most of the unaccompanied Somali children are hidden. They stay with clan members, and have maybe one relative, so they appear to have "family". But often the family just wants social service benefits, and does not give the child any affection or proper attention. Often the children are still feeling the effects of war, of bereavement, and are suffering from lack of housing, or are stressed because of immigration problems. Then they have education problems on top of it all...

They can become delinquents, and get into problems with the police. I have also heard of suicide cases, where these young Somali children attempt to kill themselves, cut themselves, or throw themselves in front of trains.

We try to do what we can, and find them through word of mouth. The young can't get housing on their own; to be on the priority list you have to be a mother with children, or disabled, but there is no priority given to these children. So, sometimes they get brought along by adults, and are claimed as their own children to secure accommodation. Sometimes they come to our attention because they have been used to claim benefits, but then the family doesn't want them any more - or maybe immigration hasn't accepted them.

So then they come to us, or we hear about them. Even then it is difficult - we want to meet them, put them on the list of unaccompanied children, but our people [the Somali community] refuse. They don't want it known that they are unaccompanied children, because they want to keep on getting the benefits.

The children know they don't have an equal life - an equal share - with the other children in the family. That leads to misery and problems. Sometimes the children go to the authorities themselves. If they are under 16, they ask for a foster home. Sometimes social services refuse and say it is enough that they are with relatives, and they should stay where they are. Social services don't want to spend money on these children. We try to help, meet with the duty worker, and go to the asylum section for unaccompanied children. But too often they say the children should stay with relatives and friends. This case is not a priority, they say.

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