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New households, new rules? Examining the impact of migration on Somali family life in Johannesburg

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the impact of migration on families in South Africa, with a specific focus on self-settled Somali refugees in Johannesburg, South Africa. It argues that despite a progressive legal framework, which guarantees protection and rights to refugees and migrants in South Africa, conditions for migrant families and family life are bleak given the poor socio-economic conditions and xenophobic context that non-nationals find themselves in. Although international migration to South Africa continues to increase, as the country's political stability, and economic dominance grows in the region, family-centered policy for migrants and public discourse on social inclusion and integration lags behind. At the same time, high levels of unemployment, underemployment, poverty, and social and economic inequality exist in this city, creating a context in which marginal groups like migrants, refugees and the poor experience multiple levels of exclusion and vulnerability. For Somali women in particular these difficult conditions are further complicated by the paradox they face between opportunity and risk given the collapse of social and family structures in the Diaspora.

Keywords: Somali, integration, migration and family

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INTRODUCTION

South Africa has attracted different types of migrants and experienced various migration flows in the last fifty years. During apartheid, the country relied on a steady supply of low-skilled migrant labour from neighbouring countries to boost its productivity in key sectors such as mining and agriculture (Crush 1992). Since the end of apartheid, South Africa has become a destination country for international migrants from the region and further afield, due to its political stability and economic strength. As a result South Africa is home to diverse groups of non-nationals including refugees, asylum seekers, temporary and seasonal migrants and undocumented migrants (Collinson, Kok and Garren 2006).

There have been four dominant migrant and refugee groups in South Africa in the post-apartheid period. These are: Somalis, Mozambicans, Zimbabweans, and Congolese (SACN 2004 and 2006; Landau and Gindrey 2008). In addition, there have been smaller numbers of migrants from South Asia, China, North Africa, and from Lesotho and Swaziland. The social and economic circumstances that migrants face differ as a result of several factors: the presence and strength of social networks, their ability to secure employment before or on arrival in South Africa, and their legal status (Crush and Williams 2001). Consequently, the impact of migration on families differs significantly from group to group and within each group.

This paper explores the impact of migration on Somali families in Johannesburg and places this experience within the broader context of low-skilled migration in post-apartheid South Africa. The structure of this paper is as follows: After a brief section on the legal and policy framework for migrants and refugees in South Africa, the bulk of this paper explores the ways in which Somali families experience migration and the effects it has on them. The content relies on original empirical evidence collected over 20 months between 2009-2011. Finally, some general recommendations are made in this paper on ways to improve family centered policy and practices.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Legal and Policy framework

Following the end of apartheid in 1994, South Africa adopted a progressive Constitution based on strong human rights principles, which entitled all who live in it, regardless of nationality or legal status, to enjoy basic rights and services. Furthermore, South Africa is a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, the 1976 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, and the 1969 Organization of African Unity Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of the Refugee Problem in Africa. These agreements outline the rights of forced migrants. Like many migrant receiving countries though, it has not signed the UN Convention on the Rights of Migrant Workers and their Families. Despite this comprehensive and inclusive legal framework, in practice, many refugees receive little state support to socially or economically integrate in South Africa. Indeed, many lower-skilled migrants, asylum seekers and refugees encounter numerous challenges to regularizing their stay in South Africa, which involves the ability to protect themselves from crime and xenophobia seek opportunities for livelihoods (Harris B. 2001; Crush 2008; Polzer 2007; Hunter and Skinner 2003).

One of the features of South Africa's historical labour migration pattern has been the lack of any policy provision for lower-skilled migrants to bring their families with them. As a result, many lower-skilled migrants live in single-sex hostels provided by their employers with little or no opportunity for social integration or family life (Crush 1985, 1986, 1995, 1997, 2001, 2007; Collinson, Kok, and Garenne. 2006). For migrants who are in South Africa with their families, the lack of any social security mechanisms and the structural and xenophobic constraints associated with public service delivery impedes their ability to access social services in the public (health, education) or private sphere (housing, employment). This means that most non nationals rely on social

networks for entry and access to markets for social goods and services (CoRMSA 2008; Greenburg and Polzer 2008; Hunter and Skinner 2003). Very little is known about the economic conditions and coping mechanisms of migrants and refugees in South Africa. What is produced and reproduced in the public domain is often based on rhetoric, myths and misconceptions rather than actual data.

Somalis

Somalis began arriving in South Africa in the early 1990's, following the collapse of Syed Barre's regime in Somalia and the prospect of new opportunities in South Africa. Initially, they settled in Mayfair, a suburb nestled close to the centre of Johannesburg, which had a significant local Muslim population and was established as a place for trade (Jinnah 2010). Gradually, Somalis began venturing further afield, and over the next two decades created economic opportunities for themselves through small-scale retail businesses in cities and in townships (former black areas located on the fringes of major cities and towns) in almost every major and secondary city in South Africa.

Most Somalis in South Africa hold refugee permits (UNHCR 2005, FMSP 2006). This allows them to live, work, trade, study and move freely within the country. However, despite this provision to ensure their protection, they face considerable risks from xenophobic related violence through public and state bodies (Misago 2009). Partly to counter this threat, and in part to preserve a sense of community, Somalis have established several community organizations in South Africa (Jinnah 2010; Polzer-Ngwato and Segatti 2011; Johnson 2010).

Migration has often been conceptualized as a socially-changing phenomenon which disrupts social environments, and weakens social control[1] . It also introduces an opportunity to redefine gender and cultural norms[2] . For many Somalis, migration has significantly changed the composition and roles of households and families. Traditionally, Somali households have consisted of intergenerational, extended, families led by a senior male member, in whom authority and allegiance was vested. Women played a minimal role in decision making even if they were economically active. Single women lived with their fathers or extended families until marriage and remained with their husband's family in the event of widowhood. Divorces were not common, and if these did take place women would return to their fathers' homes or remarry.

The Somali household was also considered part of a larger social structure, as it belonged to a group of families which made up the clan. The clan, which is usually dominated by senior male members, offers protection to its members but also demands loyalty and adherence to social norms (Lewis 1998; 2008).

Although some of these aspects of family and tribal life in Johannesburg remain, for the most part, the social fabric of Somalis is very different. Divorces are much more common amongst Somalis. Many women migrated alone or with their children, and many are in temporary relationships with men. These factors have changed the composition of the traditional Somali households. Many households, as a result, consist of single parent (mother) families with fragmented or weak ties to the wider clan. This change, together with the wider social and policy context in South Africa (which I turn to later), has simultaneously created opportunities and posed risks for Somali women. On the one hand, the weakening of social norms in the diaspora, which govern gender relations, has allowed many women to take a more active social and economic role; thereby changing their status amongst their families in Johannesburg and at home. On the other hand, it has also increased the social, physical, and economic risk that women face at home and in society due to the absence of an extended family network and a (male) protector.

Several factors contribute to the economic and social vulnerability that Somali women face in Johannesburg. Unlike many social welfare states in Europe, South Africa extends minimal social security to refugees[3] and none to migrants or asylum seekers. Consequently, non nationals rely on informal systems of support, such as social capital and private savings and loans, to alleviate economic risk and vulnerability. Without the safety net of the wider family and clan, Somali women often feel marginalized and destitute. Opportunities to work and trade in the formal sector are minimal and most Somalis end up working or trading informally with low wages and earnings. Women are discouraged from seeking work or business opportunities in the townships where earning could potentially be higher, but where risks associated with crime and xenophobic violence are greater. Socially too, women face numerous challenges—given the weakening of the wider family structure, divorce in the Diaspora is more commonplace. This often leaves women homeless and unable to support themselves and they are unlikely to claim maintenance—on their own, from their ex-husband or his family—without the support of their families. These factors have caused many women to engage in high-risk behavior such as drug usage or selling, or entry into short-term marriages.

FAMILY CONDITIONS AS A RESULT OF MIGRATION

The difficult social and economic conditions described above have several direct implications for the functioning of families and the constitution of family life.

Many Somalis live in multi-family households to alleviate the costs of high rentals and property shortages. As a result most homes are severely overcrowded and have poor sanitary conditions. In Mayfair, it is common to find at least 10 people sharing a three bedroom, one bathroom house. As such there is no distinction between living and sleeping areas, and one room has multiple functions. Some houses have been subdivided into one room 'apartments', with entire families, living, cooking, eating and sleeping in a single room and sharing a communal bathroom with other families in the household. Other houses are treated more as shared homes, with occupants cooking and eating in a shared kitchen, and bedrooms being used for leisure and sleeping.

Many Somalis have multiple sources of livelihoods including selling items from home, working at one or two jobs, and/or having a partnership in a business. This leaves little time for family life and causes tensions in the households as errands and chores are left undone. It also forces many couples to reevaluate gender roles in the house, as women work as long as—if not more than—men.

The precarious economic situation of most Somalis also means that they can't make decisions, or take action relating to family needs. Some of the challenges arising from limited availability of money or insecure livelihoods include not being able to get married, being unable to maintain contact, or not having sufficient regular contact with their spouses or families, who are living in another country, not remitting as frequently or as much as they would like, which is often seen as a way to cement family ties, and not being able to migrate to join family in another country or being unable to sponsor reunification for families who are based elsewhere.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FAMILY

Migration is a process which has significantly changed social structures and requires a (re) definition of family to reflect the different social and economic context within which families exists. Such as redefinition must take into account the changing nature of households, which in the case of Somalis means a transition from a patriarchal, extended family, located in spatially bound area, with close links to a clan, to a geographically- split transnational household, in which men and women have new roles inside and outside the house and in which the clan has lesser influence.

This different constitution of families places new obligations on family members. In Mayfair, remittances are seen as the most important way in which family bonds are maintained and loyalty to the family expressed. Through cash transfers family members are able to stake a claim in, and at times improve their position within, the new transnational household. This abstract notion of belonging to household that physically does not exist conditions the everyday life of many Somali women. They see their membership in a larger family as a way of reaffirming their identity as women and affirming their role as breadwinners. At the same time, the protection that the 'absent family' is unable to provide also presents a danger to these women who find that they cannot rely on social systems of support.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper makes four main recommendations. Firstly, in order to strengthen the legal framework for migrants and their families South Africa must sign and ratify the UN Convention on the Rights of Migrant Workers and their Families. Furthermore better efforts and realistic plans to implement existing policies relating to the rights of migrants and refugees must be undertaken by the respective state departments. Secondly, in order to improve understanding of and responses to the needs faced by migrants and their families, more research at survey and case study level is needed to inform policy processes and service provision for migrants. Thirdly, given the xenophobic climate in South Africa, any assistance to migrants must be framed with consideration of the broader contextual discourse which includes information on the ways in migrants contribute to the national and regional economy. Finally stronger regional cooperation on policy development to harmonize labour and migration policies within SADC is needed to address the long term causes and effects of migration.

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3. The monthly disability grant is the only source of state support that refugees are entitled to.

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