

Post-Conflict Identities: Practices and Affiliations of Somali Refugee Children - Briefing Notes

No. 2B



Somali migration to the UK

Key points

- The Somali community has been in the UK since the turn of the 20th century
- The community consists of labour migrants, refugees, family migrants and migrants from other EU countries
- Movement is a vital part of Somali identity but it is important to understand the political and social context of this movement
- The majority of Somalis in the UK live in London, Birmingham, Manchester, Sheffield, Liverpool, Leicester and Cardiff.
- Numbers are uncertain, but it is estimated that around 75,000 Somalis live in the UK

This briefing provides an overview of Somali migration to the UK. Young Somalis currently living in the UK originate from diverse backgrounds that reflect different waves of migration. Mobility is a vital part of Somali identity. However, at the same time it is necessary to understand the context of Somali movement which takes place as a result of complex social and political contexts in Somalia and Europe.

The Colonial legacy and Somali seamen in the UK

Britain has historically been closely connected to Somalia, through the colonization of Somaliland situated in the Northwest of Somalia in 1897 (See BN2a). This colonial link has given rise to a long tradition of Somali migration to the UK. In the early 20th century, seamen from the cities and rural areas of Somaliland migrated to the UK to work and live in the dockland areas of London, Cardiff and Liverpool. These Somali seamen constituted a rather settled community in these main port cities. Most of the seamen considered working in the UK as temporary and many had left their families in Somalia. In 1953, about 600 Somalis lived in the UK. The migration of Somali seamen to the UK stopped in the 1960s due to a shortage in jobs within this sector and because of changes in immigration policies.

Seamen become steel workers and are joined by their wives

With the run-down of the Merchant Navy in the 1960s, many Somali seamen moved to cities further north, such as Sheffield, Manchester and Birmingham, where the steel industry had expanded and labour was in great demand. These years were also characterised by the migration to the UK of their families. Somali families settled in these industrial cities, and Somali women began to set up community organisations in the cities where they lived. Some of these organisations still exist



and it is also notable that many Somali community organisations are now run by Somali women.

Further, during the 1960s and 1970s, Somali students from the former British Protectorate came to study in the UK. Some of these students decided to settle in the UK, others returned to Somalia after finishing their studies.

Flight from civil war

The majority of Somalis currently living in the UK however arrived during the 1980s and the 1990s seeking asylum from the civil war in Somalia (see briefing note 2A for background information on the civil war in Somalia). Many of these Somali asylum seekers had fled from Somalia to a neighbouring country, e.g. Kenya or Ethiopia, before migrating to the UK. For others, migration has been more complicated, moving between different East African and sometimes Gulf countries before finally migrating to the UK to apply for asylum. These migration channels have often proved hazardous sometimes involving smuggling. Those fleeing have had to make difficult choices e.g. leaving behind family members who could not travel and who stayed in refugee camps in Kenya and Ethiopia where most Somali refugees are still living. Somali asylum seekers arriving in the UK have thus often had to take desperate decisions in order to survive.

In line with other asylum seekers, on arrival, many Somali asylum seekers moved to be with their relatives and friends already living in the UK while awaiting a decision on their asylum claim. For those who applied for asylum in the UK after 2000, the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) has taken over responsibility for their social support arrangements. To remove pressure off the southeast of the country, NASS aims to disperse asylum seekers in the UK to the regions. Somali asylum seekers supported by NASS have been accommodated in cities and towns away from London while they wait for their claim to be decided upon. All put together, Somalis who applied for asylum in the UK live in cities where they already had relatives, i.e. London, Manchester, Sheffield, Cardiff, Birmingham, and those recently arrived live in other cities and towns around the UK while awaiting their case decisions.

In the late 1980s, the tendency was to grant refugee status to Somalis claiming asylum, while those arriving in the 1990s have more frequently obtained temporary status. Since the late 1990s, a refusal of an asylum claim has often been the

case for Somalis. Some Somalis with refugee status in the UK have successfully applied for family reunion with their spouse or children.

Migration from other EU countries

Over the last few years, many Somalis with citizenship of The Netherlands or a Scandinavian country have migrated to the UK. The main reasons for this migration are to reunite with family members and friends from whom they were separated during the civil war and to avoid difficult situations of unemployment and discrimination in their country of asylum. Somalis who have obtained citizenship of an EU country can move and work freely within the EU just as other EU citizens.

Diverse histories and numbers

The Somali community in the UK consists of diverse histories and contexts of migration. These are important to take into account to understand the lives of young Somalis currently living in the UK.

The Somalis are not categorised as a separate group in the British Census, and their numbers are therefore uncertain. It is estimated that about 75,000 Somalis live in the UK but the above discussion indicates that the number is continually changing. New Somalis arrive in the UK and others decide to return to Somalia or to their country of asylum. Just as other communities, Somalis living in the UK constitute a dynamic group of people with diverse life trajectories. Mobility is an important part of many Somalis' identities but as this briefing has shown, the social and political contexts of Somali migration are complex.

Post-Conflict Identities: Practices and Affiliations of Somali Refugee Children is part of the Identities and Social Action Programme funded by the ESRC. The project runs from February 2005 until July 2007.

Project website: www.identities.group.shef.ac.uk

The research team can be contacted by email:
Dr. Deborah Sporton: d.sporton@shef.ac.uk
Prof. Gill Valentine: g.valentine@leeds.ac.uk
Katrine Bang Nielsen: k.nielsen@shef.ac.uk

Briefing note 2B, August 2005.