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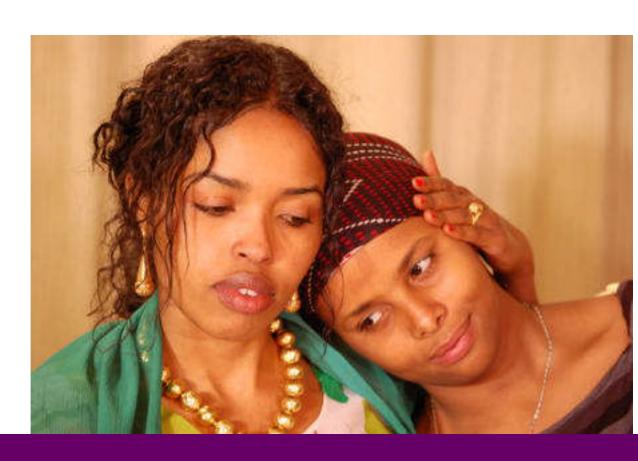
Family Matters: Intergenerational Conflict in the Somali Community

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1. Executive summary

This report describes exploratory research conducted by London Metropolitan University into intergenerational issues affecting the Somali community in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. The same research has provided the basis for the script 'Too Close for Comfort,' a theatre piece performed in October 2007 in Tower Hamlets.

The report reviews previous research on the Somali community in the UK and intergenerational conflict and then discusses interviews with eleven Somali parents and eleven Somali young people currently living in Tower Hamlets. The bulk of the report focuses on the 'voices' of Somali participants and the concerns they raise.

The interview content is discussed under the following headings: 'intergenerational conflict', 'family breakdown', 'reconstructions of motherhood', 'shared concerns', and 'what can be done'?

All interview participants spoke about changes in family structure and dynamics, and potential loss of culture, family values, language and religion, as a result of enforced migration. Most described shifts in male/ female and parent/child relations, and reconstructions of 'motherhood' and 'fatherhood' in London. There was a strong focus on the circumstances of family breakdown and the issues facing single parent families headed by women. Along with talk of preserving and protecting Somali cultural values, there was a current of concern about young people's emotional needs.

All participants made suggestions about what might be done to support both Somali parents and young people. Suggestions included: provision by the local authority of training programmes for parents, summer schools and other activities for youth, language classes, support and education for mothers regarding their children's educational and emotional needs, and counselling for fathers. Several felt that the Somali community should come together to find collective solutions and help themselves, although they may need support in this.

2. Introduction

The starting point for the *Family Matters* project began with a conference at Oxford House, in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets in Somali Week (October 2006). The conference debated a range of issues facing Somali young people – in particular, possible barriers to participation in mainstream UK society and intergenerational conflict. Many concerns expressed by young people focused on cultural tensions between them, their parents and community leaders. Somali young people reported difficulties in accommodating their parents' views with their own desires to become active and independent participants in mainstream UK society.

Family Matters developed in two stages over the next 12 months through a collaboration between four main partners: London Borough of Tower Hamlets Tower Hamlets, Oxford House, London Metropolitan University and Arts Aimhigher.

The first stage involved exploration of intergenerational issues through qualitative research supervised by staff from London Metropolitan University.
A series of interviews were conducted with Somali parents and young people. These were tape recorded, transcribed and then analysed for the purpose of writing this report.

The second stage used the interview transcripts as the basis for a new play called *Too Close For Comfort*. Two Somali writers and an English director have created the play, which was first performed during this year's Somali week at the end of October 2007. A film version is currently in production, to be used as a learning resource.

The purpose of this present report is to:

a) provide a context for the research element of *Family Matters* in relation to previous research on intergenerational issues and conflicts;
b) describe the research methodology used;
c) identify themes emerging from the research;
d) discuss possible directions for further research.

3. Context

In order to put our findings into context it is first necessary to look at previous research in this area and to identify the main issues that have helped shape the Somali community in the UK. There has been a Somali presence in the UK for a hundred years, when sailors from British Somaliland first settled in the port cities of London, Liverpool and Cardiff. However, the majority of Somalis now resident in this country arrived post 1988 when an escalation in the civil conflict provoked a mass exodus from the country. Subsequent migrations have occurred periodically from that time to the present depending on the political situation in Somalia (Sporton et al, 2006)

Although accurate statistics are hard to come by, Somalis represent the largest refugee community in the UK with 54,420 asylum applications between 1988 and 2003 (Rutter, 2004) With the addition of dependents and other groups not recorded this figure would increase substantially. In schools, 22 percent of refugee children are from a Somali background (Rutter, 2004). As a group they are ethnically homogeneous but there are distinct differences in class, clan, region and language. Those who came over in the first instance were predominantly from Somaliland in the north and from an educated, middle class and sometimes English-speaking background. More recent arrivals have come from the south and are more likely to speak only Somali and have lower educational attainment. Clan allegiance is the strongest bond in Somali communities and different clans have settled in different areas of London – for example, those in Tower Hamlets are predominantly Issaq from the north while neighbouring Islington has a mostly Darood population from the south. It has been suggested that these divisions have led to a 'clan particularism' as opposed to a truly national identity that has hampered efforts at developing a politically unified voice (Griffiths 2002). Diriye also points to the fact that many Somalis may see their stay here as temporary and therefore have not committed themselves to establishing permanent community centres. Many send money back to Somalia rather than invest in support networks or their families here (Diriye, 2006). It is also worth noting at the outset that Somalis have a tradition of self-reliance and communal solidarity that often conflicts with their exiled status as passive recipients of welfare benefits. This is reflected in a majority of the research data on Somalis which tends to focus on problems and solutions rather than on their lived experiences (Harris, 2004).

The focus of this report is an examination of areas of conflict between youth and older people in the Somali Community in Tower Hamlets, London. Research into intergenerational relations is a relatively new area but a recent briefing on this field highlights some issues that provide context for these findings and may be of benefit in informing future research into the Somali community (Pain, 2005). First, intergenerationality is an aspect of social identity – that is, how we see ourselves is based partly on generational sameness or difference. These relationships are not natural but are socially constituted by certain groups, at certain times and in certain places. Second, definitions of child, youth and adult and the behaviours expected from each group differ from culture to culture. Finally, ageist stereotyping affects both young and older people. For example, the first group can be characterised as having *potential, being in need of protection, unruly or out of control* while the second can be seen as *suffering mental and physical decline, being a financial and social burden and*

withdrawing from public and social life. Recent media reports and political discourse has focused on this polarisation, heightening the sense of intergenerational differences (Pain, 2005)

In contrast to the conflicts and differences experienced by Somali families in enforced exile, the traditional Somali family is characterised by a sense of unity based on traditional values (Heitritter, 1999). In Somalia, family roles are well –defined with the father as the top of a hierarchy and responsible for providing financial security. Mothers are responsible for all work in the home including cooking, cleaning and raising the children. These responsibilities are often undertaken communally and this is reflected in the pooling of resources. In education, boys are encouraged to attain at least a secondary education whereas girls often stay at home and learn to be good mothers and wives. Many Children are expected to show unquestioning respect to their elders and a certain degree of corporal punishment is an acceptable form of discipline. The moral framework governing behaviour and rules within the family is derived from a strong belief in Islamic teachings (Degni et al, 2006). However, these practices are not as strictly enforced as they may at first appear. Women sometimes force out male partners who they think are not providing for the family and within the home decisions are often made by women. There can also be differences in opinion about the use of corporal punishment, with women being more lenient in their practices. The communal aspect of Somali culture also means that children will be regarded as the responsibility of the whole community with any adult having the right to speak to any child about their behaviour (Harris, 2004).

Being forced into exile exposes individuals and families to an array of dangers, abuses and other prejudicial treatment that impact greatly on their health and mental well-being. Once settled, there are numerous barriers to integration including lack of language skills, poor housing and local racism. In focusing on the Somali community we can see how these and other forces act upon the family unit and what the results are. First and foremost is the change in gender roles. Many Somali families are headed by single mothers[1]. (Heitritter,1999, Rutter, 2004) This could be because the father had to stay in Somalia or another country or was killed in the fighting or because they have separated in the UK. Whatever the circumstances, welfare benefits usually become the sole income for the family with the state replacing the husband/father as the family provider. Even when families do stay together, Somalis (and refugees in general) suffer from very high levels of unemployment and are therefore receiving benefits. This obviously impacts on individuals' self esteem and confidence and deprives them of the status they once had as father, worker and provider (Harris, 2004).

Another important outcome following the loss of a father is a lack of role models for many Somali boys. While many Somali women are enjoying a new sense of freedom and Somali girls are exploiting new opportunities in education, boys can experience a sense of alienation from the system and struggle for a sense of identity. Both Rutter and Griffiths speak about boys acculturation into 'laddish' street culture and the prevalence of gang membership. Rutter suggests this may be a way of coping with racism and developing a sense of identity that they cannot find elsewhere.   Rejected by mainstream black culture and lacking any real connection to Somalia, young

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[1] It is interesting to note that in Somali there is no word for 'single' meaning 'not married' Heitritter, 1999

Somalis may find that Islam provides the strongest determinant for their own identity (Sporton et al, 2005). Poor housing conditions and overcrowding can lead to aggressive behaviour and this combined with the above factors often leads to educational underachievement and exclusion from school (Diriye, 2006). In addition, many Somali parents may have little or no understanding of the English school system and therefore are unable to participate actively in their child's education. In some cases, their own lack of education and illiteracy can also affect the child's ability to integrate into school life. (Demie et al, 2007)

However, due to a lack of reliable data in the area of achievement it would be wrong to make sweeping generalisations. There is 'underachievement' in schools by both boys and girls but the figures do not take into consideration their progress. Because school intake is determined by age rather than educational level (as in the Somali system) a 14 year old with little or no English can be placed in a class of English speaking 14 year olds. As Rutter states: *A young person who secures three good GCSE passes after just eight months in the UK, and having previously missed two years of education is a child whose real educational achievement may be greater than their peers* (Rutter, 2004). There are also differences in achievement between those who have spent most of their education within the UK system and those with little previous education or with experience of another system.

As can be seen from this short review of available literature the impact of forced migration has had major repercussions for exiled Somali families and three key areas of conflict emerge:

- First, there is the generational conflict, common in many cultures but exacerbated and distorted by the experience of exile. There has been a polarising of attitudes with many adults still looking towards Somalia as home and attempting to enforce traditional values in a totally new situation. This is countered by a sometimes 'obsessive assimilationism' by young people striving to adapt to a new culture and 'fit in'.

- Second there is the wider conflict between Somali and British cultural values. Raising a family, educating children, gender roles and the role of religion are all areas where attitudes are culturally defined. In its most simplified form this conflict may be characterised as rural, communal, hierarchical and Islamic versus urban, individual, equitable and secular. This is not meant to describe all relationships between the two communities but highlights some key areas where there can be major differences.

- Finally there is conflict between the family and the state. With the lack of a functioning government in Somalia for over 30 years and the importance of clan affiliation, the role of the state is traditionally limited in family affairs. In contrast in the UK there is a national welfare system that provides benefits for those in need and laws that give citizens rights in a range of areas. Benefit dependency is a source of deep shame for many refugees including Somalis. Men want to provide for their family and without the ability to earn money their role is usurped by the state. While this has allowed women more freedom it has put a strain on male/female relationships, which can lead to marital breakdown. Somali parents have also raised concerns about children's rights and the

conflict with the use of discipline in the home. There is some anecdotal evidence that suggests that some children may use the threat of telling the authorities about abuse in the home against their parents. Consequently, this is seen by parents as unnecessary interference in family matters.

4. Research Design and Methodology

The project was designed to explore intergenerational conflicts and identify other key concerns in Somali families. The methodology involved focus group and one to one interviews with separate cohorts of Somali parents and young people. Two Somali speaking fieldworkers were appointed to conduct the interviews and interviewees were able to choose to be interviewed in Somali or English.

The two fieldworkers attended project-briefing sessions at Oxford House and training in focus group interviewing and one to one interviews at London Metropolitan University.

Interview training involved identifying themes to be explored and how to frame and pose questions; listening skills; establishing rapport; the interview relationship; ethical considerations (including informed consent, confidentiality, protection); transcription.

The project outline and procedures were submitted to and approved by the ethics panel in the Department of Applied Social Science at London Metropolitan University. We produced an information sheet about the project for interview participants, a consent and release form to be signed by participants, a confidentiality form to be signed by interviewers, and guidance for interviewers regarding safety issues and risk.

The two fieldworkers jointly facilitated one focus group consisting of 11 young people, and another consisting of 8 parents. Focus group interviews focused on family values and relations, friendships and living in Tower Hamlets. Focus group interviews were followed by one to one interviews with 5 young people and 4 parents. Individual interviews followed up on issues raised in focus group interviews. Overall, 11 parents and 11 young people took part in interviews.

Focus group and individual interview participants were recruited by staff at Oxford House. These staff scheduled interviews and arranged travel to interviews, which all took place at Oxford House. Trained youth workers were present at all times. Parents were identified to reflect different situations: two men and two women; single mother, single father, two-parent family. All but one of those approached agreed to take part. Young people were aged between 12 and 20 years. Interviewers tape recorded and transcribed interviews.

The research was restricted in scope owing to limited resources. The number of participants interviewed was relatively small and the interviews shorter and less detailed than we might have liked. However, the interviews did provide an opportunity for participants to voice their concerns clearly and compellingly. The rest of the report focused on what they said.

5. Intergenerational Conflicts

The research was designed primarily to explore intergenerational conflicts, following informal discussion of this within the Somali community and lack of published research on this (Pain, 2005). The interviews provided some insight into possible sources of conflict. The one most frequently mentioned by the young people interviewed was 'staying out late' and 'dating'. The one most mentioned by parents was loss of respect from and authority over children.

At first, young people appeared to feel constrained in reflecting on intergenerational relations. One said 'It's difficult as Somalis don't speak out against parents to express good or bad experiences'. Others emphasised the importance of family, saying 'your family is everything' and 'family is always there'. However, they went on to say that their parents did not understand and accept their desire to go out clubbing and see their friends, and style of dress – they described it as a source of conflict and a 'clash between parents' culture and the kids culture'. It also represented a clash between traditional Somali cultural values and contemporary urban British values.

> *If your parents have been raised in a similar way as yourself then it is easier to have a good relationship, because they know how it is to be young, going out and having friends, but if your parents are raised in a more conservative environment back home they don't understand why you need to go out and meet friends and they won't allow you* (young person 4)

They also said that parents restrict their children more in the UK than in Somalia. Interviews highlighted a gendered aspect of this conflict as young people felt that mothers have different standards for sons and daughters. They let sons do what ever they want and 'let their boys loose in town and run wild'. Girls complained that they were expected to help with housework, whereas boys were excused. Several said that that girls and boys should be treated equally reflecting a shift away from the patriarchal expectations within traditional Somali family structure that girls are primarily concerned with domestic life while boys pursue education as far as possible (Heitritter, 1999).

> *Parents should not make the girls clean the house every single day, why just because they are girls- boys can do it as well. In my family chores are distributed equally* (young person 5)

Girls pointed out that their experience and expectations of life – with regard to education and employment - were very different form those of their mothers, who were taught to raise a family and run a home, and were uneducated. Daughters felt that mothers were not equipped to support them, as they could not understand them and did not have enough time to spend with them and that, consequently, their emotional needs were unmet.

Young people in the focus group picked up on discussion of emotion and emotional expression. They discussed cultural differences in emotional engagement and demonstration of affection and expressed different views on this. One said that 'just because love and affection is not demonstrated, it does not mean they don't care'.

This was followed by the comment 'you have to show love and care for your children otherwise they will be out on the street'.

Both boys and girls felt that, growing up in London, they needed different things from their mothers. In particular, they needed emotional support and help with education. They felt that mothers were insufficiently aware of their educational needs and levels and insufficiently proficient in English to adequately support them, an issue highlighted in other recent research (Demie at al, 2007). Some said that parents do not check that children do their homework.

Some young people identified conflict between the sort of mothering their mothers offered, based on traditional family values, and the sort of mothering they thought they needed in their current cultural context. They expressed different views on what constitutes 'being a mother'.

> *Some mums don't know how to be a mother they just think making "bariis" (rice dish) is being a mother* (young person, focus group)

> *But if I come home late and I am hungry and my mum has made bariis I am happy and love my mum, food is important* (young person, focus group)

> *Being a mum is to know the deen (religion) and culture and raise your children according to your deen and culture* (young person, focus group)

> *Ninety percent of them don't speak English, they can't speak to their kids about any issues/ problems e.g. the police comes to the house and the kid says that the police is recruiting that is why that they are coming to the home* (young person, focus group)

Another source of conflict identified by young people concerned discipline and corporal punishment. Young people felt that parents should be respected and recognised that some young people, Somali and British, did not respect their parents. They also felt that parents should respect children and exercise their authority in non-violent ways.

> *Parents should also not shout or hit their kids, because they will be more scared in life, they should just tell them right from wrong. The children should respect their parents* (young person 5)

Young people and parents acknowledged that children have more 'freedom' and rights in British culture and that this is perceived as a source of conflict.

Parents in particular see this conflict as stemming from and exacerbated by state intervention in family life. As mentioned earlier, in the traditional Somali family, unity is based on well-defined roles within a clear hierarchy with the father at the top providing financial security (Heitritter, 1999). Children are expected to show unquestioned respect to elders and a degree of corporal punishment is acceptable. Laws against corporal punishment and protecting children's rights are seen to undermine the

authority of parents and respect of children. Some of those interviewed supplied further anecdotal evidence of children using the threat of reporting physical abuse to authorities as a way of getting their way and undermining parents.

> *Kids listened to their parents but here kids do not listen to their parents and since they are taught they are independent, have rights, etc, they cannot be punished by their parents* (parent, focus group)

> *The social workers break up the bonds between families as the kids are asked in school about the treatment they get from their parents. That's interfering with family business!* (parent, focus group)

> *Back home, the family was in charge of the upbringing but here it's the schools and social services and parents have little control* (parent, focus group)

> *The kids use this against the parents saying they will go to the social services if the parents threaten them* (parent, focus group)

Further, parents pointed out that children are treated as independent subjects and mediate between school and home.

> *The problem is, schools operate through the children, e.g. they give letters to the kids but the kids just throw it away* (parent, focus group)

Parents felt that this situation is exacerbated when refugee parents have not learned English. One parent said that children 'will not feel a sense of pride of their parents if they cannot speak the language' and that parents need language classes. Parents may have to depend on their children to translate information about themselves – from school or the police – possibly about bad behaviour, not knowing whether this has been modified.

> *A letter is sent home telling the parents of their kids' misbehaviour and since the parents don't speak English the kid translates and obviously twists the words* (parent, focus group)

> *The kids have learned the language and the parents haven't and as a result of this the kids end up translating for their parents. The respect we used to have for our parents back home was that "mother knows better" or "father knows better", but now it's "the child knows better"! This causes a major conflict as the respect for the parents is gone, the family break. The role of the parents has disappeared and the roles of the children have dramatically changed* (parent 2)

Comparing bringing up children in Tower Hamlets with doing so in Somalia, one parent pointed out that it is difficult here because 'Your kids' identity, values and culture will also be very different from yours. It's difficult to connect and communicate with your children here because of this' (parent 3). Young people tend to adopt the values of their British friends (staying out late and dating), which go against the values of Somali culture and religion. One participant argued that parents should befriend their children, treat them like adults and try to understand what they need and want.

Another replied 'how can you do that if you yourself was not taught how to?' (parent, focus group).

Indeed, many recognised that conflict arises from difficulty in negotiating intergenerational differences in circumstances and experience of growing up and parenting.

A shift in a relation of power - the relationship between parent and child – is clearly perceived as a major source of conflict. This conflict is seen as exacerbated by the isolation of the parent/child relationship in the nuclear family household, family breakdown and state provision of welfare benefits.

6. Family Breakdown

All participants talked about the effects of family break up as a result of enforced exile. All talked at length about absent fathers and single mothers.

Consistent with previous research (Heitritter, 1999), interviewees emphasised the traditional highly segregated roles of mothers and fathers in Somalia and how these cannot be sustained in London. Men used to 'bring money to the wife and was not involved in the running of the household in any other way' and the wife had the support of family and community. Problems arise because men are not able to find employment – their qualifications are not recognised, their skills are not needed and/ or they are too old. Men are not able to provide financially for their families and income support has enabled women to be independent from men (parent 2).

> *This has caused a major change in roles…it is almost as if the men have been castrated! …. The role of the fathers as financial providers has been replaced by the DSS. Once I heard a story of a woman who dropped her benefit book on the ground and a Somali man behind her shouted "Oi! You dropped your husband!" This change in roles has made men feel useless, not wanted by their families and consequently get very depressed* (parent 2).

At the same time, women have more to cope with and may feel isolated as they lack the supportive networks they had back home. They alone have 'to take the kids to school, do the shopping, make sure the bills are all paid for and the kids have a decent living standard' (parent 2).

Previous research highlights the loss of self-esteem and confidence experienced by Somali men when they are replaced by the State as providers (Harris, 2004). Those interviewed affirmed this and emphasised the harsh consequences of loss of identity and failure to adapt to this.

> *They [men] are suffering from an identity crisis, now. To make themselves forget the fact that their families are in shatters and their failures as husbands and fathers, they busy themselves with the politics back home, always talking about the new battles breaking out on the streets of Mogadishu, while he is not realising the crisis that is taken place within their own families…* (parent 3)

In this project, parents expressed different views about whether and how absent fathers affect young people. Some thought that absent fathers are part of the reason why young Somali boys in particular get into criminal activity and drug use because a man was needed to exercise authority and discipline. Mothers are seen as unable to control boys. Others said that not all young people are affected by the absence of fathers and gave examples of children being successful in education and work.

One parent said that Somali youth are 'suffering from an inability and frustration to connect and understand their parents whom themselves are under a lot of pressure and stress'. Consequently, they seek 'other places to find belonging' and may end up in criminal activity and become exploited.

Similarly, another suggested that problems faced by parents and family breakdown meant that young people 'cannot find peace and support at home' and so turned to friends for advice and support. This was seen as a source of 'trouble', leading to loss of culture, religion, values and language, and hanging around on the streets. Friends were seen as having access to 'the latest toys, games, clothes and shoes', which Somali children also desired but lacked because their parents cannot afford them. Affected by materialism, it was suggested, Somali young people get into stealing in order to participate with others and keep up with their UK born peers. This starts a cycle of criminal activity (parent 3).

Young people interviewed acknowledged some of the points made by parents. They said that, in Somalia, family values are strong, whereas in the UK families break down. They also identified absent fathers as a problem for boys. Some said that families were falling apart because Somali women have different expectations of husbands (for example, being actively involved in the everyday life of the family) when they live in the UK.

> The reason families/ marriages are failing apart is that women will demand men do house chores and Somali men don't do house work. They are busy with chewing[2] or if he is very religious he won't allow her to go out a lot, so when she asks him he will get upset smack and she will call the police, who will put him… I will never marry a Somali guy the reason being that either he will just lie around and do nothing, or he is wadad (religious man) and he will control you or he will hurt you the way your mum was hurt…. (young person 2)

This reference to domestic violence was not explored further, nor did any of the other interviewees broach this topic. Other young people explicitly blamed unemployment, 'khat' and husbands 'not supporting their family or taking part in family life'. Some also identified state intervention as exacerbating the breakdown of Somali families, by giving children rights and freedom and restricting parents' means of control.

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[2] Chewing khat (or qat). Khat is a leaf with narcotic effects, popular with some male Somalis.

7. Reconstructions of Motherhood

As already discussed, young people felt that their mothers may not understand and feel equipped to meet their needs. Parents, who were generally reflective and self-critical, also shared these concerns. Some disagreed.

Parents also described how a shift to single motherhood in exile also entails a shift in perceptions and expectations of what it means to be a mother. Some said that traditionally mothers related to children through cooking for them, whereas they now need to change and understand them and connect with them emotionally. This is very different from their own experience of parent/child relations.

> *Parents need to try to connect with their kids emotionally and not just assume they have to obey them simply because they are parents* (parent, focus group)

> *Mothers assume the kids do not like her if they do not eat the food she cooks but prefer take away instead, for instance. Kids then are ignored since the mother feel she has to ignore them so to punish them for not eating her food* (parent, focus group).

> *The parents need to connect with their kids, spend time and money on them and forget about building houses and mansions back home (parent, focus group).*

Again, it was felt that mothers are limited in their ability to communicate with their by inability to speak English and lack of understanding of school procedures and what their children are studying. Mothers need support in this but it is not available. The issue of investing in a life 'back home' was perceived as detrimental to the well being of children (this is discussed further below).

Some said that parents do not allow enough time for children to play and participate in sport and activities with friends, implying that parents might put too much pressure on their children.

> *The mothers need to offer them time to play, participate in sport activities, etc. Kids need time to be kids and not only be taken to school during the day, Islamic school in the afternoon and then tuition classes in the evenings and weekends! When they reach teenage and you can no longer control them, they will get out of hand as suddenly they find themselves with too much time and freedom on their hand. Consequently, they will get up to much trouble to make up for 'lost childhood'* (parent, focus group)

Some parents argued, on the other hand, that their children do not understand the sacrifices parents have made for them and the anguish and difficulty of always being refugees. Some thought that children needed to understand more of their suffering and that this would engender respect. Some parents said that they themselves had been adult by the time they were twelve years old, whereas children growing up in London were less mature, more spoilt and lacked a sense of responsibility. In

contrast, others argued that children are different from, and cannot be expected to think, like the adults and parents.

In brief, parents voiced different ideas about motherhood and attitudes to conflict between traditional ways of life and life in the UK. They also differed in their expectations of children.

8. Shared concerns

Whilst this research has identified key areas of conflict between Somali young people and parents, it has also found a number of concerns shared across generations. In particular, all participants emphasised the importance of preserving Somali values, culture, religion and language and concern about a perceived loss of these. Young people saw it as parents' responsibility to teach these and were critical of parents who do not speak Somali to their children. Young and old were also concerned about that Somali young people might not be reaching their potential in education and employment. There was cross-generational concern about the physical safety of young people and a shared view that they would safer in Somalia.

Several young participants pointed out that, despite the political situation in Somalia, children are held in check by culture, religion and family. Parents have to pay for schooling and so check that children have done their homework. Children in London are not well controlled and pick up bad habits from watching television (young person 1). Somali youth in London were seen as potentially contaminated by the values of British youth, perceived as less mature, respectful of parents and appreciative of the opportunities available. Several felt that youth in Somalia 'are more motivated, mature, they know their religion' (young person 3). One young man said that in Somalia he saw 'a lot of bad things such as people dying', but here he is hearing about things he is not used to such as 'homosexuality' and 'people who have abandoned their culture and religion' (young person 1).

Parents were concerned about risk to their children from street violence in London.

> *back home the children were free to go out and play and do so safely, while here you can't let them out because you'd be in constant fear for their safety and will be thinking maybe he will be killed or shot today. You didn't have those worries back home* (parent 3)

This is interesting, given the fact that most of those interviewed are refugees from a civil war and their children may well have witnessed brutality. Possibly, danger is seen as coming from a known situation – war – and, beyond this, Somalis feel safe in a well-regulated culture with collective responsibility for children and discipline (Harris, 2004), which they know and understand. In London, danger may come from anywhere and everywhere and rules are less well adhered to and enforced.

Interestingly, the difference between investing in life 'here' as opposed to investing in a future 'back home', is not identical with the difference between young and old. Most of the young participants said that they would not raise their own children in London but send them home to Somalia to learn culture, values, religion and language. On the

other hand, some parents argued that it is not right to suggest that raising children in Somalia is necessarily better. Children in Somalia lack opportunities they have here - 'free education, a functioning government/state, health care' – whilst in Somalia there is still civil war and movement of refugees and many parents have difficulty feeding their children.

It has been reported elsewhere that Somalis often see their stay in Britain as temporary and send money back to Somalia rather than invest in a life for their families here (Diriye, 2006). However, some parents argued that Somalis need to accept and work for a future in London rather than dreaming about going home.

> *Some Somalis have been here several decades but still dream about going back home. They need to change this mentality. There needs to be a change, a drive that leads the community! If the Somali community could lead and help themselves we need to realise we are here in Britain and we will be here for some time. Now we are here, how do we best live here is what we should ask ourselves. No-body is interfering with your life or culture. We need to understand the culture and laws of this land and follow it to the best of our ability and not try to transfer your culture and laws from Somalia to the UK!* (parent 2)

Another parent offered urged young Somalis to invest in making a life in the UK instead of 'dreaming of one day going back home'.

> *Don't think of buying or investing money back home. If you have the money, then buy a house here and not back home. I would like to say to the young Somalis here in Britain: let's integrate!* (parent 4).

9. What can be done?

Those who focused on a future in the UK, were also concerned to point out that Somalis had not done as well – in establishing themselves economically and socially - as other migrant communities. There was concern about lack of opportunity, motivation, role models and community cohesion and self-promotion. However, some acknowledged that Tower Hamlets local authority were more aware of the needs of the Somali community than other London boroughs.

There was discussion of the sort of support Somali families need and how this might be provided.

Parents said that there is a need for education, extended training programmes and jobs for parents, and to raise awareness among adults of their rights in relations to housing, education, elderly and other services, in particular, youth services. They also said that service providers need to be aware of Somali cultures and values – 'How can you help me if you don't know/understand my specific needs?' (parent, focus group).

Some parents suggested that the local authorities should target young people at risk of criminal activity and help them secure accommodation, training and jobs (parent 4).

Parents said that they would like to see the study of Somali culture and history as part of the school curriculum, as is the case with other cultures. Some wanted more Somali teaching assistants in schools, where there is a high proportion of Somali children, to bridge the gap between Somali children, their parents and teachers – especially, one interviewee said, since children may confide in teaching staff more readily than in parents if they are in trouble. This parent also suggested that more investment – in the form of summer schools and playgrounds - is needed to make sure that young Somalis reach their potential and that greater parental involvement in children's development will lead to improvements.

Some suggested that the local authority could help and support mothers, especially in relation to language and understanding the educational needs and levels of their children.

An appeal for more service provision appears to be at odds with critiques of state provision of benefits and services. It should be pointed out that most realised that single mother and children could not do without welfare provision. And, consistent with the tradition of self-reliance and communal solidarity among Somalis (Harris, 2004), many said that they would like to see the Somali community help themselves by coming together to 'discuss, debate and deal with the issues collectively' and also preserve their culture and values (parent 3). They also said that the Somali community needs to support and develop itself more, like other communities and that this might be difficult to achieve.

> *The Somali communities need to come together and tackle these problems together by doing many activities for these kids collectively. But the main question is, who will bring together all of these communities who all have their own agenda?* (parent 2)

Some young people were critical of the notion of 'community' when applied to Somalis and felt that the older generation could be doing more to help young people by coming together as a community to organise activities for youth and support for parents. One suggested that the older generation cannot work together and cannot trust each other.

> *Somalis can sort out Somalis, other people can't sort the problems of the Somalis, the Somali people need to wake up* (young person 1)

> *They should come together to discuss how they can initiate educational projects and other activities – they are not paying for it out of their pocket they only have to ask for help from local authorities, but the problem is that they don't think like that- they don't trust each other* (young person 1)

Young people thought about what can be done within the community to deal with family breakdown and, in particular, absent fathers. It was suggested that 'Somali fathers need to be educated; there should be counselling and other support available to them as well as the rest of the families' (young person 4).

Several young people felt that, although life is not bad for Somali youth in LB Tower Hamlets, there are not enough opportunities (for employment and education) and activities. Some said that Somalis are not doing well and not reaching their full potential in education and other areas, and need role models.

> *There is a need for more organisations helping people into employment/ education, youth activities to keep children off the street, community events that encourage Somali language and culture. Somalis need to get their act together- they are failing themselves* (young person 3)

Overall, it was felt that LB Tower Hamlets could help by working together with Somali communities and helping them to help themselves.

10. Future research

This report has presented the findings of small-scale research into intergenerational conflict in Somali families who have mainly experienced enforced exile and consequent family breakdown. We have highlighted key areas of conflict – stemming from young people's participation in education and social activities, and parent's perceived loss of control and respect – but have been especially struck by what participants have had to say about the changing pressures on the parent/child relationship, and the emotional needs of children.

Along with talk of preserving and protecting Somali cultural values, there was a current of concern about young people's emotional needs. This was a major issue. All young people, and some parents, felt that single mothers were struggling to support their children and meet their emotional needs, which are different for boys and girls growing up in London. Parents and young people felt that single mothers also need particular support in understanding their children's educational and emotional needs and in learning English.

As pointed out earlier, a focus on the issue of conflict, picked up in the media and political discourse, tends towards seeing issues only in terms of problems and solutions and does not lead to a detailed understanding of lived experience. The research discussed here was limited in scope but could be followed by a more in depth exploration of changing family life and values and the emotional needs of children.

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