

1. Reasons for Somalis' Migration

Immigration scholars debate the main causal reasons that force individuals and groups to leave their homeland to establish new lives in foreign and unfamiliar places. Alejandro Portes and Jozsef Borocz (1996) criticize the “orthodox” theories of “push-pull” factors that provide a simplistic approach for interpreting international migration. For Portes and Borocz (1996), these conventional theories explain migration as individuals or groups “pushed” from “poor backward” countries to more “advanced” countries where they are attracted by “pull” factors, mainly economic prosperity. By examining both micro factors, such as individual optional decisions to migrate, and macro structural factors such as international relations’ determinants, a more comprehensive analysis explains migration as a result of economic, but, more significantly, political dynamics. While conventional theories offer shallow portrayals of “push-pull” factors, such economic and political realities are not simply “natural” conditions in either the sending or the receiving countries. Rather, one should focus on a larger context of global relationships between the countries of the South, or what are called “Third World” countries, such as Somalia, and those of the North, such as the United States (Portes and Borocz 1996). Relationships within a global context have generated the conditions of both the sending and the receiving societies.

Several macro-structural push and pull factors underlie Somalis’ mostly compulsory immigration throughout the world. The most important pull factor in the United States is the passage of the Immigration Act of 1965 and the Refugee Act of 1980.¹ These two Acts, combined with the Family Reunification law, which allows for the reunification of the family, children, spouse and parent(s) of American citizens to join them in the United States, helped the growth of the Somali immigrant population in Columbus.

Push factors are the unstable and catastrophic political, humanitarian and economic conditions in Somalia which not only persist but have negatively increased. Arising from the calamities Somalis have suffered in their country, many first migrated as an immediate act of survival to

¹ The Immigration Act of 1965 abolished the national-origins quota system, which placed restrictions on non-European immigrants to the USA and stated the preference for “*natives of Western Hemisphere countries*.” The Refugee Act of 1980 “*provided the first permanent and systematic procedure for the admission and effective resettlement of refugees of special humanitarian concern to the United States*” (Waters and Ueda 2007: 695).

neighboring countries. From these temporary destinations most of the immigrants take the second journey to what is perceived to be more desirable places, especially to North America and Europe. As a result of the instability, and, in particular, the devastating wars from 1990 onward, large numbers of Somalis have migrated to different countries over recent decades. Somali immigrant communities are now found in the diaspora all around the world.

Micro-analysis pays more attention to individual differences in encouraging migration flow over time. Individual differences explain why all people in one poor country do not migrate and why those who are most impoverished do not migrate. Individual differences also explain why ethnic groups concentrate in specific areas in a receiving country. The most important micro factor in Somalis' immigration, which mostly holds true for the first-wave migration before the civil wars, were individuals motivated "*by a personal sense of curiosity and adventure*" seeking educational and work opportunities (Kapteijns and Arman 2004: 20). Chain migration, or familial and social networks, is another micro factor behind Somalis' growing numbers in Columbus. Through these networks individuals are often supported in their emigration bid to join relatives who preceded them in settling down in a new land (Portes and Borocz 1996).

2. In the New Host Society

Minneapolis and Columbus are, respectively, the first- and second-most popular destinations for Somali immigrants and refugees in the United States. Somali communities in these two cities are growing not just from new refugees but from Somalis who primarily settled elsewhere then moved in search of work, or to join family or friends (Edward 2001). The Ohio Department of Job and Family Services estimated the number of Somali population in Franklin County to be only 15,000, while a Somali community organization has reported a number as high as 80,000 (Ferenchik 2009). Although it is difficult to determine the exact number of Somalis living in each city, it is estimated, from informants' accounts, that Columbus has 30,000 to 40,000 Somalis.

The Somali community in Columbus is composed of "first-wave" immigrants who started arriving to the United States in the late 1960s when "*many young men came to the U.S. for work, study, or both*" and the "second-wave" whose numbers are vastly larger than those of the first wave and who have arrived as refugees and asylum seekers, since 1990, to escape civil wars and political oppression (Kapteijns and Arman 2004). The second-wave includes those who experienced the greatest terrors and suffered the biggest losses. "*Many fled with no more than*

the clothes on their backs, and often suffered great hardship in the refugee camps or in the overcrowded homes of relatives already living abroad” (Kapteijns and Arman 2004: 20).

Most first-wave immigrants hold good educational and professional qualifications, and work in academic and governmental institutions, or run successful private businesses. Integration conditions are more challenging for the second-wave of the Somali community in Columbus. Many of these refugees would not have left their homeland had the civil war not forced them out. Difficulties of adjusting to the new environment make their compulsory immigration even harsher to live with. Even those who are highly educated and professionals have had to sacrifice their professional standing *“Once doctors, lawyers and engineers, they are now driving taxis, working on factory assembly lines or packing meat”* (Pyle 2004: A8).

Somali immigrants and refugees, in particular, are struggling to overcome multiple obstacles for safe and decent lives for themselves and their families. These impediments can be classified into those related to racism, housing, transportation, jobs, lack of fluency in English language, unreceptive educational environment for their children, religious discrimination in the workplace, and the necessity of women’s work outside the house in the absence of extended family support.

Somali immigrants are shocked by mainstream American racial discrimination and racist stereotypes. Somalis *“do not regard their black skin as the liability or handicap that mainstream society often insists it is...[and they struggle to reject] the negative social categories and straightjackets United States mainstream society has readied for them”* (Kapteijns and Arman 2004: 28). Back home, Somalis’ understanding of “blackness” is totally different to that defined in the United States. In their homeland, the system of differentiation is a cultural and social one that is based on tribalism, with some tribes or clans seen as higher than others due to their occupations or social behavior, which does not have anything to do with physical features, like skin color (Kusow 2006).

Although many refugee Somali families have low housing costs in Columbus, it is still not very beneficial for them. Low cost houses are too small for many of these families who can have as many as six children. Moreover, families cannot rent apartments without a job or credit history (Pyle 2004).

Most of the refugees, in contrast to the first-wave of Somali immigrants, arrived in their new country “*with skills and wisdom for which the new environment had no use*” (Kapteijns and Arman 2004: 20). With their weak English, finding work has been one of the most difficult processes faced by Somali refugees. Despite the many pitfalls Somali refugees face in starting new lives, being group-oriented, and entrepreneurial and merchants by “nature,” as many Somalis believe, they have established as many as 300 businesses during the few years they have lived in Columbus (Rutledge 2007). The local Somali community’s strong sense of solidarity and the small businesses have lessened, to a great degree, the intensity of this problem by employing Somali individuals who would otherwise remain unemployed in mainstream work opportunities. However, the need for the larger society to train and accommodate these refugees □ special conditions is urgent for Somalis to integrate and for the larger society to benefit from their potential.

Children of Somali refugees face many obstacles to succeed and integrate smoothly into the American educational system. Although there are large numbers of Somalis, “*especially among those who came before 1990, who are well educated and reasonably well-off, many second-wave refugees live in economically challenged, minority dominated neighborhoods, with children attending large public schools that were not adequately prepared to receive them*” (Kapteijns and Arman 2004: 22). Before reaching the United States, many of these children had stayed in refugees □ camps in neighboring countries where they missed several years of education. Interrupted schooling, lack of English proficiency and basic learning skills, and a hostile mainstream environment toward black minorities have all contributed to these children’s educational deficit. Just like most children of minority groups, who live close to other American minorities, Somali refugees □ children are often discriminated against and attend sub-standard schools (Kapteijns and Arman 2004). A concern is that the majority of these children will be pushed to follow what immigration scholars call the “*downward mobility*”² of second generation immigrants (Portes and Rumbaut 2001).

Due to some employers’ failure to understand and accommodate Muslim culture, some Somalis have experienced difficult times while trying to practice their religion during work hours. Observing prayer times and covering for women are the most prominent examples in this

² “Downward mobility,” “second-generation decline,” and “segmented assimilation” are all terms in the immigration literature that indicate that children of immigrants who are poor and “visible” or “*concentrate in clustering areas*” are at the greatest risk of doing worse than their parents did, and to assimilate into the American underclass, and permanent poverty (Zhou and Bankston 1998; Portes and Rumbaut 2001).

regard. A Muslim must perform the act of worship, *salah*, five times a day at fixed times. Although prayer time does not exceed five minutes, some employers, especially in warehouse or assembly jobs, are not flexible in allowing their Somali workers to perform their prayers while at work, and some Somali workers were fired after asking for time to pray. Muslim women with *hijab* have even tougher times than men, to the extent of considering it a “victory” when some Somali women obtained permission to retain their *hijab* while at work at Ohio State University Medical Center (Pyle 2004).

Women who never worked outside the home in Somalia do not speak English, do not have transport to get to work nor relatives to care for their children, but are striving to meet the welfare-reform rules that require all adults to work or go to school. This difficult situation can be particularly distressing for women whose husbands have died or could not come to the United States (Pyle 2004).

The historical and cultural landmarks in the Somali history and culture are critical in understanding Somali immigrants’ ways of utilizing the Islamic gender concepts when negotiating cultural differences and relating to the larger non-Muslim society in the United States.