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FEATURES

# living in limbo

## A profile of Djibouti's Somali refugee women

*C'est une vie incroyablement précaire ...  
la vie d'un africain.*

*(Farah, 2000)*

Somali author Nuruddin Farah reminds us that the lives of many Africans is highly precarious. For the refugee living in a country other than his/her own, this is even more the case. Indeed, Farah's comment is a direct quotation from a Somali refugee living in a Kenyan refugee camp at the beginning of the 1990s. The man had fled Somalia in 1991 after ethnic and clan conflict broke out in the country as a result of the fall of Mohamed Siad Barre's regime in January of that year. Ironically, the man had headed up a refugee camp for Ethiopians in Somalia from 1981 to 1989. At one time, Somalia

was host to a constant stream of immigrants, with Ethiopians forming more than a quarter of the national population (Farah, 2000). After dispensing care to refugees for many years, the man found himself a refugee.

This example illustrates that the life of the refugee is indeed precarious: refugees are largely dependent on external assistance from the international community, the host government and locally based non-governmental organisations. It is also indicative of the close human and geo-spatial relationships that exist among the peoples of the Horn of Africa. If there are refugees in Djibouti, it is because of inter-regional and national conflicts, in addition to natural disasters, in the neighbouring countries of Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan.

UNHCR



Somali refugee women are of Muslim faith, and camps are locations of conservative observance to Islamic and cultural practices. Women are outside of decision-making circles and age, gender and clan relations determine the social hierarchy

### Community reconnaissance

Under different circumstances, women refugees in Djibouti would be journalists, architects and dentists, and they would have increased chances for formal learning and working in non-traditional disciplines. Yet, overcoming these obstacles, female refugees in Africa have successfully taken measures to reduce their dependency on external agencies, thereby increasing their self-sufficiency and improving local capacity. Through creative community planning and programming, refugee self-confidence, safety and long-term prospects have been enhanced (UNHCR, 1995).

In spite of scattered success stories, however, the lives of female refugees can be particularly precarious: along with children, they are most often victims of violence and social exclusion (UNHCR, 2003b; 1996). In Djibouti’s refugee camps, for example, Somali women lament that they have not enjoyed full access to education, and their lives have been characterised by monotony and repetition in the thirteen years that the camps have existed. What is more, women are not included in the major decisions with which the camps are faced. Their share of family responsibilities outweighs those of their mates, and women find it difficult to create sources of income. Boredom and depression are the two most persistent conditions, causing distinct health problems according to camp physicians (Dhaka, 2003).

It can be argued, therefore, that women and

children are the most vulnerable sectors of society in post-conflict situations, and are most in need of critical and sustained care tailored to their particular needs. In accordance with international law, repatriation happens strictly on a voluntary basis, and Somali women in Djibouti camps ask themselves:

*“What happens to us should we stay in Djibouti? Where is home? What awaits us on our return to our native country?”*

### Complexion of a community

Women outnumber men in Djibouti’s two refugee camps. Djibouti hosts approximately 24 000 Somali refugees, as well as a small group of Ethiopian refugees,<sup>1</sup> in two camps at Ali Adde and Holl Holl, south of Djibouti City, the capital of the country. The demographic complexion of the two camps is different. In Holl Holl, the refugee population is homogenous: peoples of Somali extraction. In Ali Adde, by contrast, there are two distinct groups of refugees: Somalis and Ethiopians, with nine-tenths of these Somali. Exact and up to date numbers of refugees are not known because the last census of the refugee population dates from 1997.

The Ali Adde and Holl Holl camps are located 119 km and 50 km, respectively, from Djibouti City, and are located next to villages housing approximately 1 000 and 4 000 inhabitants. In addition to the population that resides in the camps, nomads from the surrounding volcanic mountain ranges populate the areas around the camps. An estimated 20 percent of the country’s population are nomadic pastoralists (Republic of Djibouti, 1998). Resident refugee populations in the two camps have been in the Djibouti hinterland for approximately thirteen years. Djibouti has also hosted Somali and Ethiopian refugees in the past at a number of locations throughout the country. The greatest influx of refugees was in 1977, when thousands of Ethiopians arrived in Djibouti fleeing Ogaden War (Lévêillé, 2004). In 1981, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) established a permanent presence in Djibouti. The country’s and the capital city’s population swelled and the demographic make-up of the country changed considerably.

### Absence of critical life skills

The tiny room that is host to twenty or so Somali

refugee women is breezy, though the arid wind sweeps up the dust and whips sand all around, obliging the women to hunch their backs and shield their eyes in protection. Their faces are already somewhat masked by the colourful and ample fabrics that conceal most of their upper and lower bodies; the *de rigueur* Muslim uniform for Somali women. The country's seasons are two: hot and slightly less hot. From May to October, winds called *Sabo* and *Khamsin*<sup>2</sup> howl, and temperatures hover around 45° Celsius. Such climatic conditions are challenging, as are the difficulties relating to water supply. Ali Adde refugee camp, unlike Holl Holl, is not naturally endowed with a plentiful underground water source. Women young and old, as a result, travel great distances to furnish their families with the fresh water supplies necessary for cooking and bathing.

While the climatic and weather conditions present thus burden women in particular, the most serious social and lifestyle handicap women face is the inability to read and write. Refugee women above the age of twenty in Djibouti's two refugee camps are generally illiterate. Women generally do not read or write in English or Somali.

Today, the group of women has assembled according to the committees into which they have divided themselves. The president of the young women's group is present, as is the representative of the mature women's group, along with the leader of the widow's group. Several women know how to write their names, and take a very long time to carefully write the six or so characters across the blackboard. During these moments, silence falls on the room as women observe each other with great interest (and possibly envy).

The Somali refugee women have come together at the request of the new UNHCR Community Services with the aim of collecting qualitative information about them, as recounted from their point of view. To be sure, gatherings of women engaging in activities other than those of a domestic order is an uncommon spectacle and arouses curiosity from some (especially the male members of the camps), and downright suspicion from others. Initially, the women are too timid to speak aloud, preferring to have one woman speak on their behalf. Gradually, though, the women refugees begin to speak about themselves, volunteering information and answering questions about their collective selves in an animated



and then vibrant, even boisterous, fashion.

*How do you come to be a refugee? How did you reach Djibouti? From which part of Somalia do you hail? How long have you resided in the camp? What are your skills, needs, ideas, and dreams? What is it like to be a refugee in this camp?*

## Mapping acts as springboard

Women congregate in tight and non-confidential quarters because there is no women's centre. With the men safely at bay, the women come alive! Babies swathed in voluminous layers of fabric are roused from slumber because of the dulcet tones and familiar traditional rhythms. This welcoming and friendly start is the form adopted for the commencement of all community meetings between the women and UNHCR Community Services.

When presented with a wall-sized, attractively coloured topographic map of the Horn of Africa, with Somalia at the far right bordered by the Gulf of Aden and Indian Ocean, the women's eyes widen. They cannot read the letters or interpret the map. When the map makes its appearance a short distance and within arms distance in front of them, the friendly women are hushed. The geographical



**Somali refugees were historically nomadic pastoralists in the Horn of Africa before adopting a sedentary lifestyle approximately thirteen years ago**

configuration of the Horn of Africa is explained, including the spatial relationships between the region's five countries. Curiosity is roused. The contours of the mountain range running east to west along the Gulf are what provide the women with some visual clues as to where their native villages are found. Guided by the quietly eloquent 22-year old bilingual interpreter, Zahra Mouhoumed Moussa, who gracefully interprets from Somali to English and vice versa, communication flows with an agreeable cadence.

Women refugees and their families fled Somalia on foot to find refuge in Djibouti in early 1991, when civil war broke out in north-western Somalia following the demise of the Siad Barre regime. Clan conflict characterised the fighting in this part of Somalia, from which the country has yet to recover. The vast majority of Somali refugees were nomads prior to sedentarisation about 13 years ago. Investigations relative to future aspirations and plans conducted with women from July to September 2003 reveal that returnees are apt to adopt a sedentary rather than a nomadic lifestyle in either Somaliland or Somalia.

The women's fingers glide tentatively across the map surface from the Djibouti border in the west to the north-eastern tip of Somaliland where the Gulf of Aden and Indian Ocean meet at Africa's eastern-most point. The women are in a concentrated and

concerted search for their community names, which include *Waqooyi Galbeed* in the north-west of Somaliland, *Seylac* and *Lughaya* along the Gulf of Aden, and *Boorame* and *Gabiley*, adjacent to the Ethiopian border. A minority of refugee women hail from Mogadishu, the capital of Somalia.

## Women's clearly articulated needs

For three months, from July to September 2003, UNHCR Community Services engaged in extensive fieldwork in Djibouti's camps. Efforts focused on analysing the situation, working with groups of women and vulnerable persons to collect qualitative data, and identifying needs and skills. The goal of these exploratory activities was to design a strategic plan for community development based on specific, realistic and mutually agreed upon actions. Djibouti's first *Community Services Action Plan* drew inspiration from examples of successful planning with Burundi refugees in Kibondo, Tanzania (Pitzner, 2002) and creative community programming in non-refugee settings (McKnight and Kretzman, 1996).

The Somali refugee women articulated their needs succinctly and clearly. They wish to live well and improve the lives of their children. They therefore seek basic literacy courses for illiterate adult women refugees; continuing education training, including 'self-awareness' (reproductive health and self-protection) for women refugees in their late teens and early twenties; and vocational skills training, specifically tailored to provide avenues for current and future income-generating activities. There is also an interest in continuing education training for camp teachers, who are often young refugees.

Articulating skill sets was more of a challenge. The refugee women were not under the impression that they possessed any skills of particular merit. However, preparing healthy food, rearing children successfully and birth spacing, and animal husbandry require skills such as planning, communication and organisation. Once it was demonstrated that women in other parts of Africa transform these seemingly ordinary skills and knowledge into income-generating activities (UNHCR, 1995), the women were prepared to speak of corollary skills such as singing, dancing, wood-working, sewing, leather work, handicraft

fabrication, and reading, to name a few.

The goal of the Action Plan is to increase refugee self-reliance through a comprehensive and sustainable initiative that puts refugees at the centre of their own development. In the process, girls, adolescent and mature women become educated and qualified, and gain self-confidence and leadership skills. Vulnerable persons also come to play a more central role in the refugee communities. The provision of new life skills, while focusing on the enhancement of refugee dignity and their sense of self-worth, is also an essential component. Decreasing refugee dependency on aid agencies is also a key outcome. The objectives of the Action Plan are to find durable solutions to observed problems; train women to be responsible actors in their development and growth; employ a participatory approach towards programming; and intervene swiftly and with concrete action based on solid preparation.

## Social fabric and considerations of culture

It is absolutely indispensable to consider gender, religious and clan roles and relationships when trying to understand the dynamics in the Djibouti refugee camps. UNHCR Community Services found it useful to consult excerpts of Somali (in particular the Issa Clan) law to examine societal organisation and codes pertaining to the status and role of women (Ali M. Iye, undated). Almost all refugees in the camps are of the Islamic faith and as such age, gender, and clan relations determine the social hierarchy. The male elders are said to have been traditional leaders in Somalia and remain the decision-makers in the camps. Historically, men have been the breadwinners, though currently in Somaliland, “women are the principal wage earners in 60 percent of Somaliland homes” (Life and Peace Institute, 2003). Women are responsible for domestic activities such as cooking and the collection of firewood and water, and there is little opportunity for women to engage in activities other than subsistence. However, a growing number of young women are interested in health training opportunities offered by the Association of Medical Doctors of Asia, UNHCR’s health partner (Zahra H. Elmi; Dhakal, 2003).

Women are largely excluded from the decision-making circles and do not enjoy rights or opportunities equal to those enjoyed by men. For



Women are generally illiterate but have an avid interest in learning languages, mathematics, sewing, business development and a range of other valuable life skills that will increase their knowledge base and facilitate their reintegration in Somaliland or Somalia. The recently painted façade of the elementary school at Ali Adde refugee camp is seen here

example, sexual violence against women is not followed up in a systematic fashion with the result that the immediate protection and long-term care of women is not guaranteed. Cases of rape may or may not be reported and resolution is often in the form of financial compensation negotiated by a traditional council composed of male relatives. In addition, young women are largely absent from community meetings because the social structure dictates that they be in their homes attending to domestic responsibilities. In general, adolescent girls leave school at fifteen because they are increasingly expensive to the family purse as they enter puberty and approach the age of wedlock (Zahra M. Moussa and Zahra H. Elmi, 2003). Lastly, until November 2003, women did not participate in the monthly distribution of food rations. This makes Djibouti’s refugee women different from any existing operation organised jointly by UNHCR and the UN World Food Programme.

There are thus potential limitations to what can be accomplished and these are influenced by cultural, temporal and historic factors at play in the two camps. Refugees at Holl Holl and Ali Adde have depended for a protracted period of time on allowances and the distribution of aid. Therefore, refugees in these camps have tended to learn dependence as a means of survival. What is more, they tend to be passive recipients of aid. Over the past thirteen years since the inception of the camps, refugees have benefited from sporadic community development efforts by implementing partners. A lack of consistency in

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**A Community Services Officer engages Zahra Mouhoumed Moussa, covered in turquoise, and other refugee women in a community-building exercise near the gardens at Holl Holl refugee camp**

community development services, however, has meant that refugees have little or no experience with concepts such as the participatory approach, active self-support, self-responsibility, income-generation activities, or collaboration and collective action.

### Relations between camps and capital city

The relationship between the refugee population and Djibouti's hinterland and capital city has been assured for some time. There is regular traffic between the camps and the capital as refugees travel over land to and from the camps for a variety of reasons. First, young female refugees are often employed as maids in neighbouring villages. Most women do not earn an income, though there are some who travel within the administrative district or to Djibouti City, to buy, sell and trade manufactured goods, foodstuffs and *khat*.<sup>3</sup> The sale of this latter product is a source of considerable income for some urban-based women (World Bank, 1997). The financial ramifications for refugee women as a result of *khat* sales are as yet uncharted.

Second, it is more common that men travel to Djibouti City for similar purposes, as well as for entertainment and/or for prolonged stays. It is not uncommon to find adolescent male refugees being sent to study in nearby Ethiopia, their studies being

funded by relatives in the camps or in Djibouti City. In addition, refugees periodically travel back and forth to north-west Somalia. In December 2003, a group of women and men was sent by UNHCR Somalia, in coordination with UNHCR Djibouti, to investigate lifestyle and infrastructure conditions in north-west Somalia. The purpose of the mission was to have the refugees view and assess the quality of the infrastructure and consider options for repatriation.

In Djibouti, there is also a significant (although unknown) number of 'floating' migrants, essentially from Somalia and Ethiopia. A unique characteristic of Djibouti City's population is that a good portion of the residents is non-national, and either of Somali or Ethiopian extract.<sup>4</sup> There are no exact figures on the presence of refugees living in the capital city, but it is suspected that significant numbers of men and women with official refugee status reside in Djibouti City.<sup>5</sup> Individuals in these cases travel to the camps for medical attention or at the time of monthly food distribution. The comparatively high wages earned by workers in Djibouti renders the country attractive to migrant Somalis and Ethiopians. Given that peace continues to elude Somalia, and Ethiopians of Oromo extraction still hesitate to return home in the post-Ogaden War and post-Mengistu eras, the population of the capital city continues to ebb and flow. But physical and social planning have not kept pace with demographic changes in Djibouti (Republic of Djibouti, 1987) and everywhere there are signs of stress: homelessness, squatting, unregulated growth, and densification and degradation of popular neighbourhoods. Meanwhile, migrants, refugees, and those whose status is undetermined continue to be used as scapegoats for crime and poor sanitary conditions in the capital city.

### Where is home?

Somalia's Nuruddin Farah commented on the precariousness that characterises the lives of refugees (2000). Though there is no specific reference to women refugees in his writing, it has been shown from examples in Djibouti's two refugee camps that female refugees are confronted with a host of challenges unique to their gender. They are often more vulnerable than their counterparts for a range of cultural and institutional reasons.

UNHCR Djibouti is in a repatriation phase,

*"women are largely excluded from the decision-making circles and do not enjoy rights or opportunities equal to those enjoyed by men"*

meaning that the two camps in Djibouti will progressively be dismantled, their populations dwindling through time. Beginning in February 2004, groups of Somali refugees will gradually be returning to Somaliland. UNHCR Djibouti aims to repatriate approximately 1 000 persons per month during the year 2004. This being the case, community service will focus on the challenges of reintegration. Community Services is currently preparing to collaborate in cross-border initiatives to ease the transition for women and their families. A number of successful UNHCR and community-based programmes in Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia provide encouragement and opportunities for cooperation in the area of community services.

For the women who will not immediately return to Somaliland, however, life in Djibouti's camps remains a challenge for the inter-connected reasons

elaborated upon above. Questions foremost on the minds of many women in Holl Holl and Ali Adde are as follows:

*Where is home and what does this mean?*

*What awaits us across the not-too-distant border? Should we be among the first to*

*voluntary repatriate to our homeland?*

Nuruddin Farah studied and surveyed the Somali people, summing up their concerns for the future of their country (and their families) with compelling insight and emotion. He illustrated that many Africans and African refugees live in limbo, a condition that is particularly applicable and of consequence to female refugees. ♣

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## Endnotes

- 1 The minority Ethiopian population in Ali Adde camp was essentially urban and educated before fleeing Ethiopia when Mengistu's regime fell in 1991. Ethiopian refugees tend to be more educated than Somalis. There is a certain reluctance for the communities to work together, mainly because there is no history of collaboration between the two groups, who are culturally and ethnically distinct. What is more, there is a physical separation of the two segments of the refugee population in Ali Adde that serves to reinforce and accentuate cleavages.
- 2 Translated from the Arabic, this word represents the figure fifty. This implies that, for fifty consecutive days, strong winds and sand blow with great force.
- 3 *Khat* or *Catha edulis forskalis* is a plant cultivated in the Middle East and Africa for its leaves and buds. It is a source of a habit-forming stimulant when chewed, and is commonly used as a mild stimulant in Djibouti and Somalia. *Khat* is routinely chewed on a daily basis from afternoon to evening (World Bank, 1997).
- 4 Precise figures relating to Djibouti and Djibouti City's populations are insufficient and imprecise in the absence of accurate and reliable national census data. Often, population figures are conflicting (Republic of Djibouti, 1998; United Nations System, 2002).
- 5 In August 2003, a transit centre called Aour Aoussa, located towards the south of the country, was inaugurated to house the undocumented urban populations residing in Djibouti City. An estimated 15 000 persons were transferred to this centre to await status determination as refugees, asylum seekers or neither. After an interview process, and for those who receive refugee status, refugees will be transferred to either Holl Holl or Ali Adde camps.

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