



**A Qualitative Study of Problems and Parental Challenges of Resettled African Refugee Parents**

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# A Qualitative Study of Problems and Parental Challenges of Resettled African Refugee Parents

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*Marie-Antoinette Sossou and Christson A. Adedoyin*

## Introduction

The Federal Refugee Act of 1980 defines a refugee as anyone who submits to a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion (Refugee Act, 1980). The resettlement of refugees occurs through the movement of individuals from less developed countries to more developed countries. The United States is one of the developed countries that have been receiving refugees for resettlement since the end of the Second World War. Resettlement of refugees is one of the permanent solutions to provide humanitarian relief and protection to individuals and families who have fled their countries of origin due to war and political persecution (UNHCR, 2005). The United States has resettled almost 2.4 million refugees and asylum seekers from at least 115 countries between 1980 and 2006 (Delgado, Jones, & Rohani, 2005). Despite declines in refugee admissions, the United States continues to resettle more refugees than any other country in the world (Delgado, Jones, & Rohani, 2005). The Refugee Act of 1980 gives the United States the legal backing for resettlement of refugees. The Act is significant for a number of reasons. First, it establishes a federal policy for continuous admissions of refugees. Secondly, the act defines the term "refugee" to incorporate the United Nations Convention's definition and third, the act delineates the principle of resettlement assistance for refugees.

The continent of Africa is one of the refugee-producing continents due to perennial civil wars, political unrest, and natural disasters. These man-made and natural disasters are responsible for the most horrific refugee crisis in recent memory. International mediations have resulted in a number of

signed peace agreements among warring groups in countries such as Angola, Sierra Leone, and Liberia. These mediations have enabled many refugees to return home with the attendant processes of reconciliation and development.

However, displacement of people in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, and Somalia continues to precipitate the migration of refugees across the borders into neighboring countries. For instance, between 1980 and 2004, at least 184,955 refugees from Africa were resettled in different states across the United States (Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, 2007). Consequently by fiscal year of 2005, refugees from Africa comprised 38 percent of total refugee arrivals in the United State (Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, 2007). Most of these refugees come from Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Angola, Eritrea, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Liberia (US Committee for Refugees, 2000). It is important to note that the state of Kentucky receives large numbers of refugees yearly. For instance, about 11,569 refugees, from 26 different African and Asian countries have been permanently resettled in the state of Kentucky (Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, 2007).

## Background of Study

As refugees immigrate to the United States, they bring their own cultures and belief systems with them. Berry (1980) defined acculturation as the process of cultural change that occurred as a result of contact between members of two or more cultural groups. On the other hand, resettlement means becoming acculturated to a new society and its customs and cultural values, which are

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significantly different from those of their original cultures. Literature provides evidence that children acculturate to new cultures at faster rates than their parents (Birman & Trickett, 2001). Birman & Trickett (year?) stated that children picked up new languages and participated in newer cultures faster than their parents. On the other hand, parents try to maintain major aspects of their culture of origin, and in the process find it difficult and slower to acculturate to the newer culture (Liebkind, 1996). As a result, there is an acculturation gap between refugee parents and their children. Consequently, refugee families struggled with the cultural differences of their native cultural collectivism and American individualism (Liebkind, 1996).

Culture plays an important role in raising children, and in most African cultures parents are the primary socializing agent for their children. Therefore, traditional African parenting styles are mostly influenced by the culture in which the family is immersed. Moreover, the belief systems and parenting practices are perpetuated as they are passed from one generation to the next. The traditional childrearing practices in most African societies are communal and are within the context of the extended family system or the lineage. In most African communities, the costs of raising children are not the responsibility of the biological parents alone. Other relatives such as uncles, aunts, grandparents, neighbors and whole villages provided supplementary financial and moral assistance when needed. These significant relatives usually participated in rearing children physically, socially, and emotionally.

Furthermore, parents are bequeathed with community assets in terms of time, finance, and other material support, since all children are collectively considered the strength of the lineage. However, due to refugee flights and resettlement in a developed country like the United States, African refugee parents are compelled to suspend their African family and child rearing practices in response to laws and practices of the new culture of their host communities. The methods of socialization in most African countries are characterized by the child-rearing practices that manifested acts of terrorizing, inducing fear, and the use of corporal or

physical punishment. Hence, in most African family settings, the general patterns of behavior between children and parents are mostly based on dominance, submission, and fear. These styles of parenting are classified as forms of psychological maltreatment when judged on the basis of a combination of western standards and professional child welfare assessment (Weil & Lee, 2004).

In addition, children in refugee families may be at greater risk of abuse due to issues related to the acculturation, stressful effects of migration, and traditional gender role reversal (Fontes, 2005, Park, 2001, Weil & Lee, 2004). Fontes (2005) stated that some immigrant families have the tendency to discipline their children in public when they see them acting disobediently or disrespectfully. Furthermore, Duncan and Brooks-Gunn (1997) stated that children experienced societal harm related to poverty, inadequate housing, poor health care, inadequate nutrition, and unemployment of parents as refugee families are not immune from these socio-economic experiences. Duncan and Brooks-Gunn (1997) found that parents living in poverty are more likely than middle-class parents to have unhealthy lifestyles which impaired their ability to care for their children. Furthermore, poverty affects the ways parents monitor and respond to their children's needs (Duncan and Brooks-Gunn 1997). Refugee parents and their children are also susceptible to these parental challenges as well. McLeod and Shanahan (1993) asserted that economic stress reduces parents' responsiveness, warmth, and supervision while increasing the use of inconsistent disciplinary practices and harsh punishment. Refugee parents and their children also faced these realities as they tried to settle and acculturate into their new culture. However, little is known about the lived experiences of African refugees as parents in the United States.

While the scholarship on refugees in the USA is growing, there is a dearth of literature on the issues of African refugees in general. It is evident that the acculturation and socio-economic challenges that African refugees faced have placed them among one of the vulnerable population groups in the USA. Several studies have been carried out to examine specific challenges that are peculiar to refugees and immigrants in the USA. Some of these

challenges according to Hitch and Rack (1980) and Silove (1999) can be broadly classified as: adjustment, education, language, socio-economic, and psychological well-being. However most of the extant studies in literature focused on refugees of Asian, Hispanics, and Eastern European origins (Hitch & Rack, 1980; Silove, 1999). As a consequence, there is little research that examined issues of African refugees and immigrants (Kamya, 1997; Obeng, 2007).

### **The Purpose of this Study**

The main goal of this study was to investigate the cultural perceptions and challenges of African refugee parents' child rearing and nurturing practices in the United States. Secondly, the study sought to understand the emerging parenting practices that these African refugee parents adopted to manage their adolescent children in view of the new culture into which they are acculturating. Additionally, the study intended to culturally inform and create awareness to educators and social workers about the impact the African and American cultures have on the educational and psychosocial development of African refugee children.

### **Methodology**

This is a qualitative study that uses phenomenology as its research design. This research design provides an epistemological framework, understanding, and the perceptions of African refugee parents who are trying to raise their children in the USA. Phenomenological research is concerned with people's experience in regard to a phenomenon and how they interpret their experiences. Becker (1992) asserts that phenomenological research is based on two premises. First, experience is a valid, rich, and rewarding source of knowledge. Without human experience there would be no human world (Becker, 1992). The second premise is that the everyday world is a valuable and productive source of knowledge. Therefore, we can learn much about ourselves and reap key insights into the nature of an event by analyzing how it occurs in our daily lives (Becker,

1992). The intention of using this design was to understand the phenomena of African refugee parents' challenges, problems, and overall perceptions of their experience of raising their children in the USA.

### **Selection of Participants**

After approval was sought from the Institutional Review Board of the researchers' University, a purposive sample of twenty-two African refugee parents who have children and have lived as refugees in the study area for at least two years participated in the study. The participants were recruited through flyers sent out to the refugee center and the refugee community. Participation in the study was voluntary. The flyer highlighted the need to understand and investigate the challenges African refugee parents faced in raising their children in the USA. The flyer therefore, encouraged African refugee parents interested in the research to contact the researchers through a telephone contact listed on the flyer. At least 100 copies of the flyers were distributed. However, only 24 individual parents contacted the researchers. Hence, two focus group discussions were held with the participants.

The two groups consisted of 11 participants each, made up of nine women and two men in each group. The participants' ages ranged from 25 to 45 years and all had lived Lexington, Kentucky for at least two years. A majority of the participants were refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo and Burundi, which are French speaking countries; therefore, the English language was a foreign language for them. The study participants have children aged between six and 18 years. It was observed that all the study participants' children were in elementary, middle, and high schools respectively. The focus group discussions were conducted with an interview guide that consisted of general questions that explored issues concerning parental challenges and general problems faced by the refugees. Two refugees who spoke English fluently were recruited and trained to serve as interpreters and cultural consultants during the group discussions. All the group discus-

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sions were tape-recorded and later transcribed verbatim.

### Data Collection

The two focus group discussions were used as the primary data collection technique for this study. The following broad questions from the interview guide were posed: (a) description of some the general problems they experienced/faced as African refugees in the United States, (b) their perceptions and challenges of parenting their children in the new culture, and (c) some of the useful parenting practices in the new culture that they found appropriate for raising their children. The tape-recorded discussions lasted about two hours and each participant signed an informed consent form after it was read and interpreted to them by the cultural consultant before the commencement of the group discussions. Refreshments and a token fee were provided for their participation.

### Credibility and Trustworthiness

Consistent with the qualitative study, triangulation and members' checks were used to ensure credibility and dependability. Credibility of this research was achieved by using the field notes and paying attention to bracketing by putting aside researchers' own beliefs. We concentrated on participants' experiences to construct and give meaning to their realities. Bracketing means that the researchers presented faithful descriptions of the participants' experiences. It also requires staying faithful to the words of participants by presenting descriptive information through the development of themes (Creswell, 1998). Another technique utilized was peer debriefing. This process involved the two researchers' discussion of the themes and the findings to weed out misconceptions and misunderstandings. This peer review provided the opportunity to agree on the emerging themes and to maintain credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Also, credibility was achieved with member-checking of the result of the study with a cross-section of the participants to verify their responses as the true representation of their experiences.

### Data Analysis

Phenomenological methods are particularly effective at elucidating the experiences and perceptions of individuals from their own perspectives. Therefore, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) by Smith, Jarman & Osborn (1999) was adopted as a guideline for this analysis. The aim of interpretative phenomenological analysis is to explore in detail the participant's views of the topic under investigation. Thus, the approach is phenomenological in that it is concerned with an individual's personal perceptions or accounts of an object or event as opposed to an attempt to produce an objective statement of the object or event itself (Smith et al, 1999). The interpretation of the phenomena in this study is to provide insight into challenges faced by African refugee parents in raising their children in a new and different culture.

The actual data analysis included listening to the interview tapes multiple times by doing verbatim transcription of the data. Each transcript was then read thoroughly for identification and examination of potential themes, patterns, and meanings. The common patterns were arranged into coherent clusters to identify emergent themes and meanings. The decision regarding the selection of the themes was guided by the rule of two confirmations and no contradiction (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This rule means that at least two responses from research participants confirmed the themes as essential lived experiences. The themes were supported with some direct quotations from the participants' narratives. Patton (2002) believes that direct quotations reveal participants depth of emotions, how they organized their world, their thoughts about what was happening, their experiences, and their basic perceptions.

### Findings

Two major categories of findings have been identified in this study. The first category dealt with the question requesting the African refugee parents to describe their general problems and impressions of the new American culture. Three

major themes were identified in response to this question. These themes were a) unemployment and lack of recognition of professional credentials from countries of origin, b) gratitude for resettlement opportunities and other services in the USA, and c) limited English language, health and financial benefits and dealing with social services.

The second category explored the challenges and perceptions of parenting their children in the American culture. Four major themes were identified in response to this issue and these themes were a) inability of parents to help their children with school work due to language barriers, b) cultural conflict between teachers and parents, c) inability to discipline children due to cultural misunderstanding and rules and regulations, and d) disrespectfulness of children, freedom and imitation of western lifestyles.

This section of the findings discusses the general problems faced by the participants and covers the first three main themes as outlined below with direct quotes.

#### ***Unemployment and Lack of Recognition of Professional Credentials from Countries of Origin***

The research participants encountered many employment difficulties linked to various employment barriers such as limited language skills, discrimination of employers, and lack of work experience. Other challenges the participants identified were difficulty in understanding the system and the reluctance of employers to recognize their foreign professional credentials. These barriers contributed to their downward occupational mobility for those who were professionals or trained technicians from their countries of origin. The participants described their situations as dire because a number of them claimed they were qualified professionals in their countries of origin but they found it very difficult to find jobs in their professional job categories and were forced to end up doing low-paying jobs that had nothing to do with their professional training. Additionally, they faced job discrimination due to their limited English language. One participant summarized their experience as follows:

If you go to look for work and you don't speak the language you are not going to get the job. The employers told us "no English, no job."

#### ***Gratitude for Resettlement and Educational and Other Opportunities in the US***

Most of the participants expressed their gratitude to the United States Government for its kindness in extending resettlement opportunities to them and their children. This gratitude was characterized by their enjoyment of freedom, safety, education for children, and access to food, housing, and social services in this country as compared to insecurity, hunger, malnutrition, and gender-based violence they experienced as in crowded refugee camps in Africa. Three participants expressed their opinions as:

I want to thank God for coming into this peaceful country where I can lay down without worrying about what is going to happen to my family. Words are not enough to express what has been done for me and my family.

Another thing I really loves about this country is they take good care of the children at the school. They pick them up at home on a bus, and bring them back home they do not have to travel five miles to school and I really appreciate that.

There is food and good food and even at school, even at home, and another thing is the kids have an opportunity to dress better and eat better. One good thing is, sometimes back at home in Africa, you wake up in the morning, the child may not have water the night before to bath. A child goes to school without bathing. Here, water is plentiful. You learn to appreciate the simple things in life.

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### *Limited Language, Health, Financial Benefits and Dealing with Social Services*

Majority of the participants complained about the provision of limited services ranging from inadequate English language classes, inadequate medical coverage and lack of health insurance. Also, most refugees encountered lack of sustained sponsorship from the refugee agencies that were responsible for their resettlement in the United States. The refugees also identified some cultural misunderstandings between parents and social services. For example, they complained about threats and warnings from child protective services without culturally understanding their issues. Financially, participants complained about inadequate resources to meet their daily or monthly responsibilities of paying rents, other bills, and doing grocery for their families. Furthermore, they complained about the limitation placed on food stamps, in terms of what to buy and not to buy with the food stamp voucher. A number of participants lamented about the termination of their children's Medicaid insurances due to misunderstanding of the application process and their inability to keep up with eligibility mandates. A number of them expressed their frustrations as follows:

One of my problems is that they gave me \$300 assistance a month to pay for the bills, and the rent and the food stamp card. After I paid for the phone and the gas bill, I have no money. With the food stamps I cannot buy lotion or feminine or hygienic items. All the same, I thanked God I am alive, but I still do not know what to do sometimes. I go to look for work and but because I do not speak the language I could not get the job. I have diabetics, but I do not even have Medicaid. I have a huge bill because I do not have Medicaid because I do not have any children.

We have bills right now when our son's appendix blew up; it was literally a matter of life and death. Thank God we got to the University hospital. It is miracle

he is alive. We learnt that his Medicaid was canceled. We have a bill for \$30,000 and we do not even know how we are going to begin to pay that.

Dealing with the social services is another challenge for the participants as they lacked comprehensive understanding of the rules and regulations concerning child protection and safety of children and issues related to child abuse. Most of them felt confused, helpless, and angry at the system for treating them as ignorant parents. Rather, they believed that the child protective workers did not understand their cultural backgrounds and belief systems and therefore treated them unfairly. Some of the participants expressed their frustrations as:

I was inside cooking and cleaning and my child was outside playing and he bruised himself. I took him to the hospital and then social services came and said that I am not a good parent, and that I am not taking good care of my kid. They want to blame me but I didn't do anything wrong.

There was a case on Monday, and a refugee woman's children were taken away. She was a nurse back home in Africa, but she could not practice here because she has to go back to school now. She said back home, if a child came to her like that, the important thing is to take care of the child. But here the parents have to suffer. Why do they think that we do not love our children as much as other parents?

One morning, the children were going to school and the school bus was late and the kids got on another bus. Their father learned about what happened and he tried to discipline them and it was turned around that he did wrong. He tried to do the best thing and it backfired on him. How can you discipline your kids if they are going to find someone bigger than the parents? It destroyed our authority over the kids.

Someone came from the government to tell us how to care for our children, and he says if it happens again they take us to court.

The second section of the findings deals with the challenges faced by the parents, and the main themes identified are a) inability of parents to help their children with school work due to language difficulties, b) cultural conflict between teachers and parents c) inability to discipline children due to cultural misunderstanding and rules and regulations, and d) disrespectfulness of children, freedom and imitation of western lifestyles.

#### ***Inability of Parents to Help their Children with School Work***

The study participants' major challenge was their lack of understanding of the United States public school system. The parents seemed incapable of using the resources and opportunities available to advance their children's educational goals. Most of the participants felt powerless and helpless due to their limited English language skills. As a result, parents were unable to help their children with school homework and other assignments. They also found it difficult to attend parent-teacher conferences and parents' meetings. Also, many of them claimed that they could not read or understand teachers' notes/letters sent to home to them from schools and found it difficult to communicate effectively with school authorities when their children had school related problems. Some of the comments were:

We are happy our children are in school and they are learning more. They send them home every day with a bunch of homework and as a parent, I could not speak English. They wanted me to help my child, how was I to help her? I just arrived here, they gave me a job and I did not understand any English.

If there is a problem at school, you can't go there to solve the problem as there is nobody there to interpret for

you. In Africa, you can go to school and ask questions about how your children are doing in school, but here you can't go because of the language. My wife and I could not speak English and our children come home with a bunch of papers and they would say papa, this is our homework help us do this.

How was I expected to teach and help my children with their homework? Myself I could not speak, how are my children going to be successful in school? How? How can I help them with their homework? When you arrived here, you are given one hour to learn English and in fifteen days you are told to find a job, when you start working where would I have the time to start learning in the English classes?

#### ***Cultural Conflict between Teachers and Parents***

Another challenge faced by the participants in this study was cultural conflict between teachers and parents. The study participants believed that teachers were supposed to teach, discipline, and control children when they were in school. It is evident that parental involvement and participation in the educational achievement of children is encouraged and supported in most schools in this country. This situation posed a challenge for the participants as this expectation resulted into a cultural conflict between these participants and their children's schools. The participants claimed the conflict was evident due to the overloaded work schedules, language barriers, communication barriers, and personal difficulties. Furthermore, it was evident that most of the participants did not see the benefits of their parental involvement in their children's education. A few participants expressed their situations as follows:

When we go the clinic or the school we don't know what is happening as there is nobody to interpret as there is nobody there who understands our problems and many of the staff there



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know these things. They know that parents don't speak English. They need to put our language into consideration.

The children will say that dad; you must be in school tomorrow, how I am going to get there? I just stay at home. That is why our children don't have good grades. They are smart but there is nobody to help them.

They give children letters to bring home for parents-teachers meeting, how I am going to attend when I don't understand English? I don't know, I will just sit there and watch them, because I don't understand anything.

Sometimes our children respect their teachers more than their parents. For example, the parents will say something, but the kid will say my teacher says something different. The parent is nothing, the teacher is everything. I want a relationship between what the teacher teaches and what the parent teaches.

### ***Inability to Discipline Children due to Cultural Misunderstanding, Rules and Regulation***

Discipline and punishment of children as deemed culturally appropriate and acceptable posed another challenge to the participants in their new culture. African parents believed in some form of physical punishment as a disciplinary tool to maintain control and order over their children. However, this mindset was challenged by child welfare and safety rules and regulations concerning child abuse and maltreatment of children in this country. Therefore, they complained about how difficult it has become for them to discipline their children as traditionally, spanking was their first option for disciplining their children. The dilemma expressed by some of these parents was due to their negative encounter with the social services and child protection workers with regards to violation of rules and regulations concerning child welfare and child protection services. Additionally,

some participants claimed they have been challenged and threatened by their own children to call 911 if spanked or physically punished. A few parents expressed their perplexity as follows.

The relationship has changed! Now the children lived differently, they do not read, they go outside, go somewhere far and when you want to beat them they say don't beat me or I will carry you to child protection, and parents don't want to be in trouble. In Africa, you can beat a child when they behaved badly, even in the market place, others who saw your child misbehaving could beat him/her. That is different here.

Our children wanted to be like American children and we do not want our children to be like these children and so we are praying that we don't want our children to behave in that way. It is like we have brought our children here to misbehave. We need to ask the government to let us bring up our children as good children and they should give us the chance to raise up our children in our own culture.

### ***Disrespectfulness of Children, and Imitation of Western Lifestyles***

The participants discussed another challenge they faced with their children's upbringing in the United States. A traditional African mantra believes that "children were supposed to be seen and not heard" and as a result, African children are not supposed to talk back or argue with parents and elderly family members. Contrary to this cultural belief, most participants expressed the fear of raising children who were becoming culturally disrespectful to parental authority due to their exposure to the new American cultural practices of self-expression and freedom of speech that seemed to be somehow incongruent to their African cultural values. Furthermore, they asserted that their children were more interested in

abandoning their African heritage and replacing it with their new American lifestyle. A number of parents discussed their fears concerning their children, especially their female children becoming victims of sexual predators or pedophiles through internet browsing without parent supervision. Furthermore, participants complained about the excessive freedom and the latitude of independence that their children now enjoyed in terms of their provocative dressing, talking about issues of boyfriends and girlfriends that their parents found to be very uncomfortable and an affront to their African belief systems. A number of participants described their fears and anxieties as such:

The fear we have here was that when our kids get to schools, they asked them if they have a boyfriend or girlfriend. But back home in Africa, a child could not have a boyfriend or a girlfriend until he/she was 18 years. So you are here and they are teaching them how to have a boyfriend or a girlfriend. We have a fear that one day our children will mess up and end up in a bad situation.

Children here have freedom and they can drink. But I don't want my children to behave in that way. Our children are learning more, because they go to school, they learn whatever, and do whatever they want, they watch the computer, they go to the TV with hundreds of channels. We are saying that children in Africa do not have this type of freedom.

Okay, as a parent, I am scared to take care of my own kids. One day, my 7 year old daughter came to me with a picture of boy and said, "Mom, here's my boyfriend." I wondered how she knew something about that. When I said something about the issue, my daughter said if I touched her, she was going to call 911. It made me afraid to teach my own child and I think maybe there is too much freedom.

The children, especially the girls, want to dress and wear something so short like Brittany Spears, Christina Aguilera and Shakira. They want to dress like they are swimming, but there is no pool outside. They weren't raised like that and we think it is just too much.

### **Discussion and Implications**

Resettlement means the beginning of a new life with new opportunities. This involves learning a new language, getting new education and becoming adapted to new cultures and different environments. Studies have shown that the challenges faced by refugees during their resettlement in any new country have implications for their eventual successful integration (Bhui et al., 2003; Steel, Silove, Phan, & Bauman, 2003). We found this to be true in this current study with the African refugee parents. Consistently, the study participants recounted the difficulties and challenges they faced in terms of limited English language skills, unemployment, and lack of recognition of their foreign professional credentials. They were most frustrated by the refusal of employers to recognize their professional qualifications as nurses, teachers and lawyers in the USA. This lack of recognition has forced most of them to end up in low wage jobs or being underemployed. This study revealed that for African refugees to survive and succeed in the USA, they need to be re-educated, in order to acculturate faster in the American culture, and also learn the English language and the appropriate work ethics, that citizens take for granted.

This situation is not only peculiar to the participants in this study. Several studies conducted among Bosnian, Cambodian, and Soviet refugees resettled in the United States have indicated similar challenges. Beiser and Hou (2001) asserted that access to work, underemployment, and lack of recognition of foreign professional credentials are some of the major barriers impeding the successful integration of refugees. Sossou, Craig, Ogren, and Schnak (2008) conducted a qualitative

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study with Bosnian refugees resettled in the USA for over a decade and found that one of the main barriers these refugees faced was learning the English language. According to these participants, becoming proficient in the English language was their biggest barrier to their integration. In addition, the study found it was more difficult for the elderly refugees to learn the English language. Furthermore, poor language skills have been one of the biggest barriers to good paying employment and accessing mental health services (Sossou et al., 2008).

Another major challenge faced by African refugee families in this study was parenting of children in the United States. This challenge is exacerbated by different cultural practices and disciplinary strategies that are different and contrary to the traditional African child training practices. Most of the study participants admitted feeling powerless as their traditional disciplinary strategies of corporal punishment are questioned and challenged by their own children. They also claimed that their children often threatened them with 911 calls and children threatening their parents with 911 calls have become a weapon of power and intimidation against parents. These parents were therefore challenged to devise other approaches to discipline their children as they often felt ill-equipped with non-corporal disciplinary strategies to control their children's misbehavior.

Furthermore, a majority of the parents complained about their children's demand of what they considered "too much freedom." African refugee parents are not comfortable with the new dressing styles of their children in the United States. They claimed the dressings of their female children were sensually provocative when compared to the conservative dressing styles they were used to in most African cultures. Additional concern was their children spending much time watching television, playing on the computers, and hanging out and spending time with their peers instead of their families. These complaints and concerns were consistent with the findings of Weine, Ware, & Lezic (2004) who reported that families from many foreign cultures in which traditionally there is no prolonged transitional period between childhood and adulthood, found the idea of a youth becoming

a "teenager" as a new cultural construct. Consequently, when children of refugees began to imitate the behavior of American teenagers, refugee parents often are unsure how to respond. The study indicated that parents are unfamiliar with the kind of parental monitoring and supervision that they need to provide to help their teenagers stay safe in urban America (Weine, Ware, & Lezic 2004).

Parental involvement and active participation of parents in the education of their children is another challenge faced by the African refugee parents. All the participants agreed that one of the advantages of coming to this country is to give their children the opportunity to have good education. However, they are challenged by a school system and educational policies of which they are ignorant. They have language difficulties and limited comprehension skills to participate or ask questions concerning their children's educational goals and plans. Moreover, the African refugee parents affirmed they could not help their children with their homework, nor participate in their children's school activities. They also faced major school-related constraints such as inability to attend parent/teacher meetings and participate in volunteer school programs. These situations regularly contributed to conflicts between teachers and refugee parents. All the same, these challenges are not peculiar to African refugee parents. Studies have indicated that Hmong refugee parents did not believe they should be involved in their children's education. They viewed the teachers as experts who knew what they were trained to do (Timm, 1994). Smith-Hefner (1990) also conducted a study of Khmer refugee parents and found parental involvement in their youths' education to be very low. The explanation given by these parents for their low involvement was that they did not see it as their role to motivate their children to achieve success in their education. Henderson and Mapp (2002) found that parental involvement in education of children was associated with improved outcomes for youths. These outcomes ranged from educational achievement and behavioral improvement to long term functioning. They also found that there was improvement in the attitudes, advocacy, community ties

of parents, improved teacher morale, and overall school performance.

### **Limitations**

The current study has a number of limitations. First, this is a qualitative study that used purposive and convenience sample of only refugee parents from few African countries. As a result, this study cannot be regarded as the true representation of refugee parents from other countries. Second, the study data were collected through focus group discussions, self-reported personal experiences, and opinions. Therefore, based on the study's limited sample size, selection bias, and subjectivity, precautions should be taken in generalizing the findings of this study to other refugee groups. Despite these limitations, the study provided the opportunity for this group of African refugee parents to lend their voices in describing their perceptions and opinions concerning their lived experiences as refugee parents in the United States.

### **Implications for Social Work Practice and Refugee Policy**

It is evident that once refugees are resettled in the United States, they enjoyed several advantages compared to other documented and undocumented immigrants. Most prominently, they are entitled to permanent residency and are on the path to naturalized citizenship. Secondly, they have access to refugee cash assistance and some social welfare assistance. In addition, refugees have access to medical assistance, short-term language and job training opportunities, educational opportunities for their children, and homeownership prospects.

Despite these advantages, most refugees have much higher rate of unemployment and underemployment than residents do. Even when they worked, they faced some disadvantages. These included but not limited to discrimination, loss of occupational status, and isolation from mainstream communities. It is also evident that a con-

siderable number of refugees with professional credentials and higher educational qualifications faced downward employment mobility and underemployment because their credentials were not recognized. Therefore, most refugees worked in jobs that they were overqualified for. The first author's personal experience of working with refugees in the study area of a southeastern state of the United States confirmed this challenge of underemployment of refugees who came to this country with their foreign professional qualifications as college professors, medical doctors, lawyers, teachers, and nurses. A majority of these foreign qualified refugee professionals worked as warehouse and factory workers, store clerks, and low wage workers at different organizations in the country.

A way forward should be a change in refugee resettlement policy that should address the long-term successful integration of refugees in the United States. This suggestion proposes that refugees should be given the opportunity to be re-educated in the USA for a year or two to master the English language proficiently before seeking full-time employment. In addition, retraining and credential equivalency assistance should be provided to refugees with foreign professional qualifications to enable them to compete effectively in the labor market. The retraining and credentialing services will significantly help foreign qualified immigrants to contribute their quota the United States economy. Therefore, greater emphasis should be on mandatory long-term language skills, job training, and education opportunities for refugees instead forcing them into low wage and dead-end jobs with long working hours within the first 90 days of their arrival into the country. Special educational grants, apprenticeship programs and technical trade schools, and low-interest loans could be made available during this critical transitional period.

Keles (2008) asserted that the resettlement's emphasis on rapid employment in the short term leads to disregard for the skills and qualifications of refugees. Non-recognition of foreign qualifications negatively affects the self-esteem, psychosocial adjustment, and loss of personal and professional identity of most refugees (Keles, 2008). He

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suggested that refugees' chances of long-term success in the United States are higher with increased English language fluency. Therefore, policies must be put in place to underscore the importance of learning the English language. Keles affirmed that English language proficiency should take precedence over the urgency of getting a menial job (Keles, 2008).

Another policy implication is the provision of extensive social and mental health support services. These social welfare services will reduce stressors, maintain the health status, and assist in achieving overall self-sufficiency and well-being of refugees. It is evident that family, social, and community support helped individuals to cope with stress during crises. This support system reinforced the self-confidence needed to manage ongoing challenges critical to the adaptation process. The provision of adequate social welfare and community support services should go beyond the first six-month period. For example, Canada and Norway, two other refugee-receiving countries, provide universal health care to all its citizens including refugees. Despite these services, resettled refugees were still confronted with mental health issues long after their integration in these countries. The absence of universal health care in the United States implied that refugees must be responsible for requesting their own mental health assessment and treatment. Social services should also be provided to address the stigma, cultural misconception, and negative beliefs about mental health services experienced by most refugees.

Providing access to culturally competent social work practice is another area of policy implication. There is the need for the development of culturally competent social work services to assist refugees address their multiple social and parental issues. These services should include organized social support services that are meaningful, comprehensive and must satisfy the needs of refugee families. For example, an additional benefit of this study was the realization that most of the African refugees need information and education about the availability of social welfare services which could be accessed to address some of their challenges. To this end, the authors started once-a-month Sunday meetings that brought the refugees and local social

service providers together to discuss available social welfare services available in the city. Some of the topical issues discussed in previous meetings included information on issues of job training, parental involvement in refugee children's education, housing problems, and child welfare issues.

### Conclusion

The major challenges faced by most African refugees are inadequate English language proficiency, underemployment, and parenting challenges. As a result, they struggled to overcome the multiple socio-economic and psychosocial barriers that impede their successful integration. The goal of providing social services in terms of safety, protection, and an enabling community for refugees should be a shared responsibility and investment by the federal government, state governments, city governments, and the refugee communities. On the whole, refugees are potential and future naturalized citizens of the United States. Therefore, well-planned transitional programs are required for their successful integration to assist them to become useful and contributing members of the American society. According to Berry (1997), refugees need to adapt to the basic values of the larger society, and likewise, dominant groups must be prepared to ensure national institutions such as education, health, and employers of labor to be culturally sensitive to meet the needs of all groups in a pluralistic society. Furthermore, the resettlement policies should be reviewed to address retraining, education, and foreign credential equivalent services for refugees resettled in the country. This should be a proactive approach from the current emphasis on the urgency of getting employment within the first ninety days of their arrival in the United States.

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