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of Somali refugee women in a West London  
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# Coping with environmental change: the experience of Somali refugee women in a West London housing estate

Mildred R. Atubo and Simon P.J. Batterbury<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This paper examines the process by which East African refugee women from Somalia have adapted to an unfamiliar, urban environment on the South Acton Estate, West London, UK. The paper considers various aspects of the 'material' urban environment including housing, pollution, and health, alongside its effects on social relations, culture, and women's access to urban space. Women have found settling in and adapting to the Estate environment to be difficult. A language barrier has proved a fundamental deterrent to women's independence, and restricts their access to public facilities and other services provided by the local public authority. Somali women are wary of trusting people who are not from their clan or sub-clans, which also affects their access to available services. The process of adapting to the British urban environment and to housing conditions for Somali refugee women can be eased by understanding and working around cultural and language barriers.

## Abbreviations

BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
DoE	Department of Environment
EPBC	Ealing Planning and Building Control
GPs	General Practitioners
LBE	London Borough of Ealing
NSCA	National Society for Clean Air and Environmental Protection
RAP	Refugee Arrivals Project
RCEP	Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
QUARG	Quality of Urban Air Group

## 1.1 Introduction

Somalia continues to face economic, social and political problems that have led to disintegration in the political system and to civil war (Issa-Saluse, 1996). Social and political breakdown in the 1980s and early 1990s was accompanied by human rights abuses, including hundreds of deliberate killings of civilians, torture, and the forced displacement of defeated clans or vulnerable minority communities (Amnesty International 1995). The most recent influx for refugees fleeing the crisis dates to the

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period of warfare and upheaval following the fall of the Siyad Barre regime in 1991. Some of those who were able to flee Somalia have sought safety and refuge in the UK, and London now hosts a significant Somali population. The London Borough of Tower Hamlets is thought to host at least 10,000 Somalis, many of whom arrived in earlier decades (certainly not all as refugees - Cameron & Anderson 1998). This paper examines one overlooked aspect of the refugee question; the adaptation by female immigrants who left Somalia as refugees, to a new physical and human environment in West London.<sup>2</sup>

Having left their familiar cultural and traditional way of life to live in an urban area in a developed Western country, Somali women have arguably experienced dramatic environmental change in terms of climate, foods, and the physical space and local environment. Fieldwork was conducted on the South Acton Estate in West London, focussing the impact of this change in physical environment on Somali refugees' health, culture and tradition, and social and physical welfare.

## **1.2 Definitions of key terms**

For the purpose of this paper, the word 'environment' refers to both the built environment (that is the physical environment, constructed or modified for human habitation) and the natural environment in which all human settlements are located. We will adopt the definition of urban environment as set out by the UK Department of Environment (DoE).

(A)n urban environment is the relationship between buildings and the streets, squares, parks, waterways and other spaces which make up the public domain; the nature of the public domain itself; the relationship of one part of a village, town or city with other parts, and the patterns of movement and activity which are thereby established: in short, the complex relationships between all the elements of built and unbuilt space (DoE 1996 p12).

This describes and recognises the multi-layered nature of an urban environment in terms of its spatial, functional, visual, morphological and social dimensions.

At a 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, a refugee was defined as:

(S)omeone who owing to a well founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such

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<sup>2</sup> The first author is a Ugandan refugee, having moved to the UK with her children to seek political asylum. Her anxiety was enormous at leaving relatives, friends and source of income, but her experiences in the UK and living in West London have progressively helped to increase her confidence and self esteem. Although her personal experience is not necessarily directly aligned to the experience of the Somali women reported in this paper, conducting an earlier study on Ugandan refugees (Atubo, 1997) provided a strong incentive to wish to evaluate the predicament of the Somali womens' community in London.

fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable, or owing to such fear is unwilling to return to it. (in WLTEC 1996 p 27).

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, up to 75% of all refugees are estimated to be women or girls (UNHCR, 1995, Bandrage, 1997). Yet, although women form a large proportion of refugees since the UN was created in 1951, there has been no change in the definition of refugees to include women and children.

## 2.1 The refugee question

The literature on refugee lives and adaptation in the UK tends to focus on racial discrimination in employment and community relations, and refugee *vulnerability*, for example to racially triggered violence (Bandrage, 1997; see also Zetter 1988, Black, 1994). But the repertoires developed (or not) by refugees for *coping* with new urban environments are a significant part of settling in, and of forming new community links (Berns McGown 1999, Farrah 2000). In the UK, there has been an increase in the number of refugees seeking asylum from the late 1980s. In 1991, 22% of the UK population had overseas origins, and three births in every nine were to a mother born outside the UK. In London, a major destination for refugee resettlement, the total immigrant population comes from thirty-seven countries (Hebbert 1998).

Refugees have frequently had to abandon their jobs, land, homes and income (Zetter 1988). They see fleeing, and gaining refugee status elsewhere, as one way to obtain safety. Families rarely flee together, but may re-unite later, even after a few years. In some cases, women or men whose husbands or wives have fled are themselves persecuted. Most women who flee alone or with their children find it hard to obtain recognition as refugees under the UN 1951 Refugee Convention (Refugee Women's Legal Group, 1998).<sup>3</sup>

Zetter (1988) and Black (1994) argue, quite sensibly, that refugees as a whole tend to be economically disadvantaged. This justifies the special responsibility that some nation states feel to intervene on their behalf and to provide refuge, protection and assistance. But, barely concealed by humanitarian sentiments, ethnically based violence is on the rise in both the United States and Europe (Bandrage 1997). Anti-immigration movements in both Europe and the US are demanding measures to restrict immigration and curtail welfare facilities to immigrants and refugees. It is

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<sup>3</sup> Procedural and evidential barriers prevent women's access to the asylum determination process (RWLG 1998). The interpretation of the Refugee Convention is unclear:

(F)or example, whilst overt expression of a political opinion through conventional means such as involvement in political parties may be considered as a basis for political asylum, less conventional forms of political resistance, such as refusal to abide by discriminatory laws or to follow prescribed rules of conduct, are often wrongly categorised as personal conduct (RWLG, 1998, p 2).

against this context that a steady flow of Somali refugees began to arrive in Britain in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Who were they, and why did they come?

## **2.2 Somali society and culture**

About 98% of Somalia's population are described as Somali (Kurian, 1992) but there are deep divisions based not only on citizens' pastoral/agricultural and rural/urban backgrounds, but also more importantly along genealogical lines (UN, 1996). These divisions have contributed to political conflicts that have culminated in civil warfare.

Pastoral nomadism constitutes the economic base of the majority of the Somali population. About 70% of the Somalis are nomadic or semi-nomadic pastoralists (Lewis, 1993). The remaining thirty percent are either farmers who are settled in the north of the country, fishermen who live along the Genale and Shabelle rivers, or inhabitants of the few urban centres (Lewis, 1993). Somali nomads are not cut off from the life of urban centres, nor culturally and socially separated from the majority of urban residents, civil servants and other government employees. Urban-based workers retain and foster their rural nomadic lives:

(F)rom the President downwards at all levels of government and administration, those living with a modern life style in urban conditions have brothers and cousins living as nomads in the interior and regularly have shares in joint livestock herds. Civil servants regularly invest in livestock including camels that are herded by their nomadic kinsmen (Lewis 1993 p 50).

To the Somali, this is a strong and natural connection. Land is (or was) a place of harmony and peace, in spite of the conditions that prevailed (and continue to prevail) in times where water shortage and armed skirmishes with neighbouring clans for grazing land are more common.

In a harsh physical environment, it could be argued that Somalis are justifiably untrusting of outsiders from other clans, and extend this to foreigners:

(I)f Somalis are appreciative of the efforts of foreigners to master their language, their pleasure is tinged with deep ingrained suspicion. Despite their strong sentiments of national self-esteem, they wish to guard the secrets of their culture, and only to share them on their own terms and as they choose (Lewis, 1993 p 20).

Gender-specific behaviour and women's use of space are proscribed in Somali rural life. Rural girls remain with their mothers at the domestic unit looking after sheep and goats, helping their mothers care for the young siblings, and performing other domestic tasks, while camel herds are grazed by men and boys. A woman's status is enhanced by bearing children. Male offspring are favoured, while girls start their female chores very early and are often married soon after their first menstrual cycle (Deholt, 1988).

The Somalis are traditionally polygamous, marrying according to the Islamic code, a maximum of four wives. The number of wives a man has varies generally with age, seniority being associated with more spouses (Lewis, 1993). In a country such as the UK that recognises by law that a man can be married to only one woman at a time, there is a dilemma for refugees whose family is composed of more than one wife and their children.

The cornerstone of Somali social, political and economic structure is genealogy, and the lineage group (Bader, 1999). Kinship is traced patrilineally in the male line. The major Somali clans are divided between two lines: the northern Samaal, comprising four clan families who were traditionally mainly pastoral camel-raisers, and the southern Saab, grouping two mainly sedentary, agriculture clan families (Lewis, 1993). Although every Somali belongs to one of the six clan families, Somalis identify themselves more immediately with those clans and sub-clans into which each clan family is divided (Samatar, 1988). This classification of Somalis by clans and sub-clans (genealogically) is very complex. Power and politics are exercised through temporary coalitions and ephemeral alliances of lineage. The clan/sub-clan lineage account for the delicate nature of political balance or imbalance as a result of struggle for political representation and power between the groups (UNHCR, 1996). This has led to the civil war that continues to create refugees from Somalia, and accounts for some of the complex tensions that emerge in newly settled refugee communities (Griffiths, 1997).

### **3.1 Women's experience of living in urban space**

In the UK between 1990 and 1997, a total of 17,180 applications for asylum were made by asylum seekers from Somalia and a total of 720 were granted refugee status under the UN Convention (UN, 1996). However, within the same period, 13,960 Somalis were granted, on humanitarian grounds, leave to remain in the UK. This means that although they did not qualify as refugees under the UN Convention, the civil war in their country prompted the UK to give them refuge and therefore to qualify for welfare benefits. We cannot categorise these refugees by gender, so it is not easy to estimate the number of women refugees who were rejected entry. The point, however, is that several thousand refugee Somali women from rural backgrounds did settle in the UK, and they have had to survive in a new environment. They have lost many aspects of control over domestic decisionmaking associated with life in the semi-nomadic camps. Alongside this, urban Somali residents have also settled in the UK, but we do not know their numbers.

Women build their lives urban areas in Britain in different ways, depending on their social and economic circumstances (Cavanagh, 1998). More generally, women use the built environment differently from men; engaging in different jobs, and generally taking greater responsibility for caring for children, older people, and household tasks. Some feminist writers have emphasised how the development of gender roles through the nineteenth century was embedded within an emergent spatial division of labour. The male 'bread winner' role was then integral to notions of waged employment beyond the home and the female 'homemaker' role become important to the development of ideas about the home as 'haven' and as a private space (Rose *et al.*, 1997). Home was seen as a woman's place to carry out chores which included

cooking for the whole family, shopping and cleaning, as well as looking after young children. The man was the wage earner who provided financial support and security for the whole family.

These roles have altered over time due to changing economic patterns, and the political and social changes that have resulted as more women have become wage earners (Massey, 1994). Some women have significantly broken away from traditional gender roles, and may now find that they have more common experiences with their male colleagues (Cavanagh, 1998). As McDowell (1997) notes, in urban environments, residential areas may be a source of security and the basis of a supportive network for many people whose lives are relatively restricted in an everyday sense to a small area, although they might equally be a source of irritation, danger and even despair, depending on their location and social characteristics.

It is well established in the sociology and criminology literature that women are generally more fearful of crime than men, and this is related to women's sense of physical vulnerability to men. This influences their use of space (Valentine, 1989). Women in Western societies are often forced to negotiate public space alone, but their choices of routes and destinations are the product of 'coping strategies' that they adopt to stay safe. This can lead to women spending more time at home or in their local communities;

(W)omen may also have different travel patterns from men involving more short trips to take children to school or to go shopping, using cross-town, rather than into-centre routes. The built environment does not affect all women identically. Women's experiences of inequality are varied and changes in social circumstances can alter women's experiences through time. While it may be true that in general women's lifestyles mean that they experience the built environment differently from men, certain groups of women, women from black and minority ethnic communities, older women, lesbians, women with disabilities and women with children, experience and use the environment in ways that require a more individual analysis (Cavanagh, 1998 p 171).

Studies have also shown that changes in climate and diet can have a great impact on the health of immigrant groups. The physical health of immigrants are generally poorer than that of the general population and this can possibly be attributed to contextual and cultural factors including dietary deficiencies (Littlewood and Lipsedge 1989). For any urban dweller, allergies such as hayfever and asthma can be triggered by changes in natural environment (Holford 1993, Brady 1995). The Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution (RCEP, 1994) states that at present pollutants from vehicles are the prime cause of poor air quality that damages health, plants and the fabric of buildings. Also noise from vehicles and aircraft is a major source of stress and dissatisfaction, notable in towns and cities (RCEP, 1994; Passchier-Vermeer 1999). Vehicles produce a mixture of pollutants, and these may exert significant effects on health. Walters, working in Birmingham, found a link between traffic flow and respiratory symptoms, showing that children admitted to hospital for asthma were more likely to live close to busy roads than children admitted for other reasons (Walters, 1991).

The epidemiological evidence for adverse health effects of airborne particles has also strengthened greatly since 1993 (QUARG,1996). Studies have been conducted in different cities in the US in which mortality rates have been shown to relate to higher levels of air pollution. For example, The Harvard Six Cities Study (Dockery *et al.*, 1993) examined mortality amongst 8,000 individuals over a period of fifteen years. After controlling factors such as smoking, excess body weight and socio-economic class, the study showed a strong relationship between mortality and the concentration of fine particulate matter in the atmosphere. Pollution from road traffic in London is high, while pollution from other sources is falling.<sup>4</sup> In the home, unflued cooking or heating appliances running on gas or kerosene are liable to disperse oxides of nitrogen into the indoor environment, leading to concentrations that can at least intermittently be as high or in some circumstances higher than those encountered outdoors (Department of Health, 1993). Mites and dust in the domestic arena are known contributors to respiratory problems (McCarthy & Ferguson, 1999).

Of the 33 London Boroughs, in 1997 there were between 48 to 52 people per 1,000 admitted to hospital with respiratory complaints. Several were in the London Borough of Ealing (LBE) where the Somali women interviewed for this research live.

Bowlby (1989) notes that women bear the brunt of air pollution in urban areas because fewer women own cars and so use mainly public transport or walk to local shops. Women travel to town centres more frequently than men do because they are mainly responsible for household tasks, such as shopping for food and clothes (Bowlby, 1989). A typical shopping trip for women, possibly laden with heavy bags or pushing children in pushchairs, can include passing dark and dirty subways, foot-bridges, air-polluted, narrow pavements cluttered with street furniture and obstructed by goods and advertising boards overspilling from shops (Bowlby, 1989; Butler & Patterson, 1994). Refugees, especially from the less developed urban areas will not be used to this type of environment or these activities.

### **3.2 Local authority housing conditions**

Women tend to spend more time in and around their homes because of caring and domestic responsibilities, lack of transport, and work patterns that are often part-time or home based (Cavanagh 1998). The quality of housing and local neighbourhood is therefore of particular importance to women. Good areas for women are residential neighbourhoods which 'provide appropriate spatial arrangements in individual units, and are compatible with availability of adequate local amenities such as public transport, schools, health and leisure facilities, shops and convenient employment opportunities' (Cavanagh, 1998 p 172).

In Britain, a majority of refugee families have been allocated housing by local authorities. Local authority (or 'Council') housing was developed as a means of providing affordable shelter for those deemed to be in greatest need, and public provision has been a major plank of housing policy for over fifty years. The key

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<sup>4</sup> In London air is becoming less polluted over time with smoke and sulphur dioxide. McCarthy and Ferguson (1999) suggest that this is because of the change in the domestic heating from coal to oil, gas and electricity; and through the loss of manufacturing industries.



'gatekeepers' are local authority housing managers. Refugees are allocated local authority housing, depending on availability of stock and their needs. Generally they are housed by the local authorities to which they are allocated from their points of entry in the UK. The Refugee Arrivals Project (RAP) a voluntary organisation that meets in-coming refugees and provides them with temporary accommodation at Heathrow and Gatwick airports, places them with London Boroughs on a rota basis. Some London Boroughs house refugees in bed and breakfast accommodation in the suburbs, and once established in a council tenancy, there are mechanisms for transfer from Borough to Borough. A recent refugee group such as the Somalis is distributed to every Borough in London, but, of course, does not just live in Council property. Hebbert notes that:

(W)here people end up in London depends partly on housing vacancies, partly on established patterns of chain migration - new arrivals following pioneers and community facilities following in turn. Some communities gravitate to the privately rented accommodation sector, others to the difficult-to-let stock of council flats. Diverse areas attract diverse populations; Southall where 60 languages are spoken in the primary schools has 5,000 of the 8,000 refugees in the borough of Ealing (1998, p175).

With new developments in local authority financing and the partial privatisation of council services, fewer Council properties may be available to be let to new arrivals such as refugees. This means that these new arrivals may be placed in low quality housing, for example while renovations are made. In London, a city with an ongoing housing crisis, refugees have little choice in where they are housed.

Single women refugees who have recently migrated often have no secure means of raising money for essentials, so they depend on local authorities to provide accommodation and allowances for them. The combination of roles, such as caring for their families alongside being in paid jobs; living in areas which are inaccessible due to lack of transport; living in houses of low quality and high levels of pollution all combine to make living in urban areas difficult for refugee women. The psychological effect and traumas to adaptation of refugees in new locations need to be considered carefully by those voluntary organisations and government bodies that try to help refugees as this may enable them to cope with the changes they encounter in their new locations.

### **3.3 Somali Refugees in West London**

(T)he sociological inquirer herself [is] a member of the same world she explores, active in the same relations for whom she writes. Like Jonah, she is in the whale (Smith 1987, p 142).

The study was conducted in the London Borough of Ealing, West London.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Initial contacts with the Somali community were made through local community organisations, on the suggestion of the Council. A series of semi-structured interviews were conducted with Somali women in their houses or flats, in most cases with aid of an interpreter. By starting with one respondent, by a process of 'snowballing', the first author was able to access the seventeen who subsequently

South Acton Estate is in the London Borough of Ealing (LBE), and was a redevelopment of land and housing built in the early part of the 19th century following the arrival of commuter railways to Acton (Plates 1, 2). Following Hebbert (above), the Estate could be classified as 'difficult to let Council property' with sometimes severe problems of build quality, urban design, crime, and unemployment. Council officers and local residents regard it as a 'difficult' housing project, albeit one that has been subject to some improvement and regeneration efforts over the last ten years.<sup>6</sup> The South Acton estate comprises many high rise and other types of housing including warden monitored and sheltered accommodation. There are 51 blocks of flats and 26 houses. These house approximately 5,000 residents, in varied domestic arrangements: single parents, married couples, single men and women. There is also a sheltered unit for the elderly, and 220 properties are privately owned. According to the housing co-ordinator (20th June 1999), South Acton Estate provides residence for people from varied ethnic backgrounds including the Caribbean, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Ireland, the UK and Somalia. The Somalis constitute the largest minority group on the Estate. The refugees interviewed for this research arrived in the UK between 1989 and 1995, with the majority arriving in 1993 when the civil strife in Somalia was at its peak (Lewis, 1993).

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participated in the interviews. The respondents directed her to other Somali women living in neighbouring blocks of flats within the South Acton Estate. The ten page questionnaire completed in each of the respondents homes took no less than forty-five minutes. The interpreter re-worded or advised that some questions would be intrusive so had to be left out. The respondents were guaranteed anonymity, hence no names were used, and no phone numbers kept. The respondents were however made aware that some of the information they gave would be used by the LBE to create opportunities for adult education and provision for child care while they studied. The LBE has followed this up and a successful adult education project has been initiated.

Two officers working for the LBE were also interviewed about the criteria for accessing housing in the Borough, and another on access to buildings (June 1999). An environmental audit of the South Acton Estate area based on Manley's (1998) 'design for movement' in environmental auditing was undertaken. This was used as a basis from which to examine the accessibility of the Estate for parents with babies, children, people without cars; and to assess the overall safety of the study area especially for women and Somali women refugees.

<sup>6</sup> Under the British government's former urban regeneration scheme, the SRB (Single Regeneration Budget), 'Challenge' funds to provide new jobs and community facilities in South and Central Acton were agreed by the Government Office for London in July 1999, totalling almost £12 million. 'Action Acton' projects are now being designed and implemented. Skills training will be supported, particularly for "People described as being more "excluded" including lone parents, refugees and disadvantaged young people" alongside more support for community groups and local businesses. (see [www.ealing.gov.uk/salsa](http://www.ealing.gov.uk/salsa)).

Plate 1. South Acton Estate sign board.

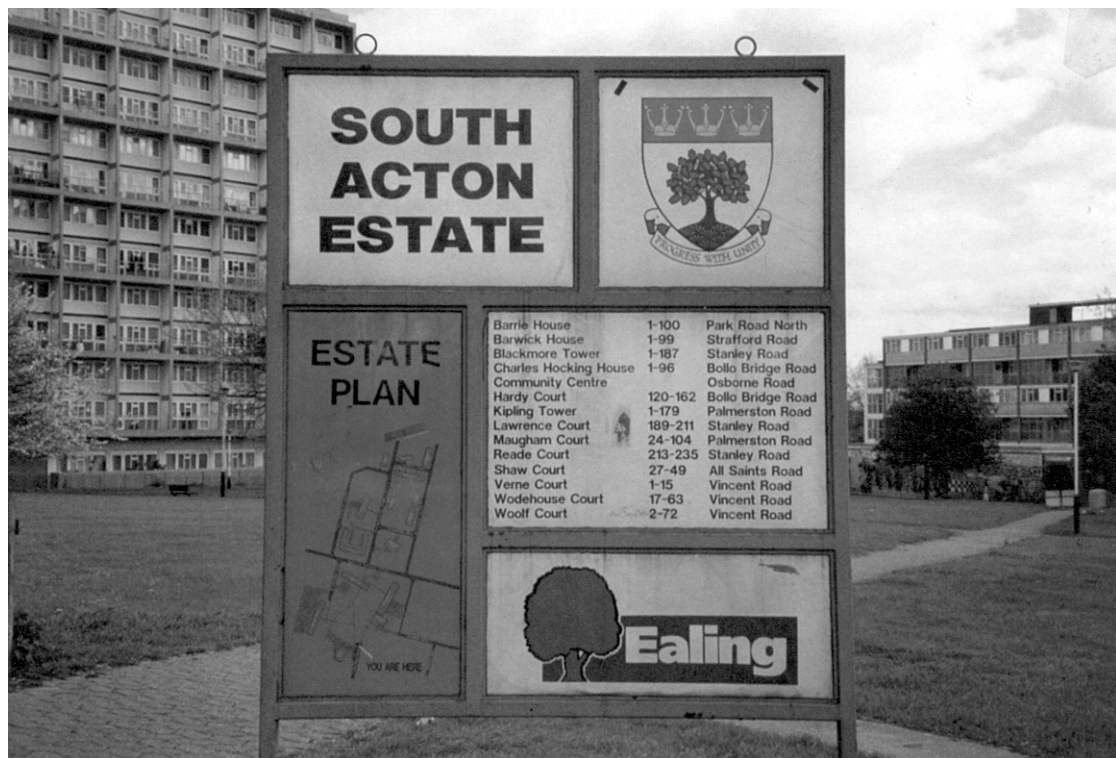


Plate 2. Typical Estate tower block undergoing external renovation, 1999.



#### 4.1 Analysis

A questionnaire was administered. For each question asked, a set of answers were given from which the respondent ticked those that she thought best described her situation. (No names were given for confidentiality, instead, they were numbered from 1 to 17). From these answers, data was grouped and tabulated. The analysis of data for this research is therefore made in form of tables, simple bar graphs and pie charts, and calculations of percentages.

Of the seventeen respondents who participated, six are married; two are divorced; four are separated and four said that they are single (although there are reasons to doubt this - certain women may have been registered as single while in reality they are living with their spouses in the same way as they would have done in Somalia, as part of polygamous families). The respondents in the survey had between 1 and 5

children, their ages ranging a few months to teenagers. The sample contained a mix of women from urban and rural settings.

The questionnaire asked if the respondents had received formal education in Somalia in attempt to assess whether these refugees had been able to benefit from their qualifications to settle in more quickly in the UK, thus giving them more opportunities to adapt in the new environment. Recognised qualification and employment opportunities could reduce refugee vulnerability and institutionalised dependency on the state. As table 4.1 below shows, ten respondents said that they had received formal education but only three of these had gained formal qualifications in Somalia.

Table 4.1 Education and employment in Somalia (number of responses, and % of total)

<b>Received education in Somalia?</b>	Yes	10
	No	7
<b>Former occupation?</b>	student	5, (31.3%)
	shopkeeper	4, (25%)
	accountant	1, (6.3%)
	businesswoman	1, (6.3%)
	trader in skin and hides	1, (6.3%)
	housewife/domestic duties	5 (25%)

Source: interviews 1999, n=17

Of the three, only two were now employed while the other was a full time housewife. Nonetheless, seven of the whole group said that they had been in paid employment ranging from working in a skin and hides firm, to being employed as an accountant. Some 44 % of the respondents were involved in trade, including selling skins and hides; but also owning shops, and working in business and accountancy.

All the respondents explained that they are keen to acquire new skills including spoken and written English and qualifications in child-care, nursing, and business while in the UK. Those who had worked in business were keen to learn computing skills and mathematics. However, the issue of providing child-care during the courses was seen as problematic. The Somalis adhere to their traditional and cultural ways in which children are cared for by young girls or older women within the community. The respondents stated that their children should be cared for by another Somali woman. In their new environment this is difficult, because children under the age of thirteen are prohibited by law from caring for younger siblings in the UK.

Respondents were asked how much they value the consumption of traditional foodstuffs, and whether they have continued to buy Somali traditional foods here in the UK. All the respondents said they buy and eat Somali foods whenever they can afford the prices, which are high because there are few outlets. They were asked if they buy the foods locally or have to go further afield to buy them. Only one respondent said that she sometimes buys her food from outside Acton; the others buy food locally in Acton, either from Somali run shops or from the supermarkets. There is a noticeable local trade developing in Somali foodstuffs in Acton and the popular

immigrant destination of Southall. Women seem to be adapting to the unfamiliar diet, although there are unknown risks here; health impacts for instance eating less fibre and more fatty foods. Certainly, a change in one's diet coupled to relocation can trigger health problems (Holford 1993, Brady 1995).

While tradition and culture are ways of identifying a group of people, language reinforces this. When asked how many languages they spoke fluently, all the respondents said that they are fluent in Somali. Two said that they spoke Arabic well and four of them said they spoke a little English, learned within the duration of their stay here in the UK (Table 4.2). The importance of language cannot be stressed enough. Table 4.2 shows the language that women speak in their homes with their families and friends. It also shows the language they speak with their doctors (GPs) when they or their dependants are ill. They have ensured that all their children including those born in the UK have been taught the Somali language.<sup>7</sup>

Only four women speak some English with their children and two speak Arabic as well in their homes. Seven women said that they try to use the little English that they have learnt to speak to their doctors; four did not speak directly to their GPs. Two of these women said they have to use signs as a means of communicating with their doctors. These findings show why language is an essential part of adaptation in a new environment. Lacking fluency in a common language when visiting the doctors' surgeries suggest that misunderstanding may lead to less than adequate medical help.

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<sup>7</sup> This contrasts with the earlier study carried out amongst Ugandans (Atubo, 1997) in which the majority of parents interviewed did not think it important that their children learnt and spoke their vernacular or indeed eat traditional Ugandan foods which are available in many parts of London.

Table 4.2 Language(s) spoken in the home and with GP (number of responses)

<b>Language spoken at home in UK</b>	
Somali	11
Somali/Arabic	2
Somali/English	4
<b>Language spoken with doctor</b>	
None	4
Arabic	1
I use signs	2
a little English	7
English	3
<b>Who translates for you at the doctor?</b>	
my friend	4
my husband	1
my GP speaks Arabic	1
my child	2
nobody	9

Source: interviews 1999, n=17

Dress is another aspect of personal and cultural identity. In Somalia, women traditionally cover their heads and half of their faces, and wear layers of long free-flowing gowns. Colourful robes printed with traditional designs are draped over the women's heads and shoulders. Islam forbids women to bare their heads in public, and veils are therefore worn by some Somali women in London (Brandt 1998, Ahmed 1999:71).

Dress was evidently important to this group of women, since fifteen of the respondents said that they have maintained their ways of dressing as they used to while in Somalia. The remaining two said that they varied their dressing to make an effort or sometimes they wore jeans to enjoy being like the 'locals'. Asked about how they felt wearing the Somali dresses in an area where other people dressed differently, a range of answers were given. One respondent (no.14) said, 'I don't mind wearing it because it is my traditional dress'. Some admitted that they are scared to wear traditional dress because it seemed to attract the attention of 'bad' boys who attacked them. One respondent said that she felt uncomfortable wearing her traditional dress because she felt that people stared at her all the time. Younger women were more willing to vary their dress to match what is usually worn by the local population, while the older women felt happier wearing their traditional dresses all the time. Women are faced with a dilemma of holding onto their traditional dress and remaining confident in this while others are concerned about the reaction their traditional garments invite from some members of the public, especially potentially aggressive youths.

Womens' use of neighbouring community facilities was mixed. The respondents were all aware that there was a nearby Somali community centre that offered help on all issues ranging from personal issues to housing, and language translations of any letters they received. But some women had sought assistance, and become



discouraged, because they felt that the people who were supposed to help them (from the Somali community) were biased and gave help according to their place of origin in Somalia. This suspicion alone reveals the continuance of some form of clan rivalry in this new environment.

From this brief survey, clearly Somalis value their tradition and culture highly. This is evident in their fundamental commitment to teach their children Somali, and the way in which they have maintained traditional dress. Furthermore, the home visits revealed settings reminiscent of the tent interiors of their homeland, with beautiful seats made from hides, full length curtains, and maps of Somalia adorning the walls in the living rooms. There are visible links maintained with Somalia, which are not witnessed to the same degree among Ugandan refugees in London (Atubo, 1997). While those in the Ugandan study seemed quite settled and integrated with local communities, the Somalis retain their cultural distance. This has perhaps slowed down their chances learning new skills and, we argue, suggests that they may be resisting integration because of lack of a common language. In the next section, the quality of the built environment in which the respondents live is explored.

## **4.2 Housing quality**

In Somalia, each family is responsible for its own housing arrangements. Deciding where a family settles has been the responsibility the family elders for centuries. These arrangements reflect adaptation to climate and prevailing local conditions. But because of the war, many Somalis arrived in the UK with minimal personal belongings, and have relied on local authorities in the UK for housing in accordance with the United Nations agreement. They have not had freedom of choice in their locational or housing decisions. It is important to note here that we did not attempt to compare or contrast the housing types and quality that the refugees lived in while in Somalia. Rather, we discuss the quality of some of the accommodation on the South Acton Estate, as an exemplar of the conditions facing refugee populations.

All but two of the respondents live in high rise flats. These are all local authority flats, allocated by the Borough Housing Department. There is widespread overcrowding. Respondents have indicated that they do not have enough room for their families, most of who share bedrooms. Some of the respondents have been forced to move beds to their living rooms to avoid making their children sleep in damp bedrooms, or have moved them into the rooms with central heating. Table 4.3 shows the types of heating systems in the homes of the respondents. It also shows the homes that have double glazed windows and the rooms in the flats that suffer damp.

From Table 4.3 it can be seen that fourteen of the respondents use central heating to warm their homes in winter. In two homes air cupboard-heating systems are used and one uses a cupboard fan heater.



Table 4.3 Heating systems and damp in flats (number of responses)

Type of Heating	Double glazing	Damp Rooms in Flat?
central heating (14)	Yes (9)	none (10)
air cupboard heating (3)	No (8)	Living room and bedrooms (1)
		whole flat (4)
		[of which so bad that all sleep in living room, (1).]
		kitchen and toilet (1)
		childrens' bedroom (1)

Source: interviews 1999, n=17

These heating systems are centrally controlled by the local authority, which decides when it can be turned on or off. The respondents who use a cupboard fan system of heating were not happy with the lack of control they have over this. This lack of heating control can be problematic for health, particularly in winter. Having come from a consistently warmer climate in Somalia, the seasonal and weather related inconsistencies in the UK, with the heating problems, can cause discomfort and illness.

Half of the respondents experience damp in some rooms in their flats (see Table 4.3), in the living rooms, children's bedrooms; main bedrooms; in the kitchen and in some cases the whole flat. The housing co-ordinator for the Estate explained that whenever the occupants of council flats inform the local authority about repairs that are needed, these are carried without further consultation (interview, 20th June 1999). In one flat, new walls had been constructed in the bedrooms. Although this has proved an effective way of keeping out the damp, it has drastically reduced the space available. Many families, however, proved to be unaware of the protocol for informing the Council about domestic repairs.

In a high rise estate plagued with damp problems, there was confusion about whether to close windows in winter (as the Council suggests) to minimise damp, or to leave them open, in an effort to expel it. Pearson (1994) argues that the one form of ventilation that is often overlooked is the natural diffusion of air through porous building materials such as brick and plaster. The 'breathing' effect of the whole outer shell of the structure can add significantly to the air exchange with the outside. Ventilation by diffusion also has advantage because porous materials can absorb and release excess moisture thereby helping to regulate indoor humidity and expel pollutants. These are measures which should be taken to reduce damp, but because of the climatic conditions and the trend by individuals in conserving energy by keeping airtight homes, the Somali women keep their windows and doors shut to preserve the heat, aggravating damp problems.

Pictures taken from inside the flats show that some tenants have tried on their own to get rid of the damp by replacing wallpaper which fails to adhere. The women interviewed were not in paid jobs and therefore cannot afford to get proper repair work done. If the damp is generated because they leave the windows open in winter, then the problem is more fundamental in terms of the poor materials and standards used in construction.

### 4.3 Pollutants in the environment

A pollutant is a general term for any material released into the environment as a by-product of human activity (Pearson, 1994). Air and noise pollutants generated by motor vehicles and industries are some of the negative consequences of living in urban areas. In the interviews, the respondents were asked about their perceptions of air and noise pollution on South Acton Estate. Their responses are set out in Table 4.4.

Half of the respondents agree that the air is polluted, while the other half said they did not know what pollution meant. The respondents may not be aware of public concern in the UK, and particularly in London, where air pollution is widely publicised through the media and by local authorities.

The London Borough of Ealing (LBE), like most London authorities, has an active environmental agenda and acknowledges in their local agenda 21 consultative document (LBE, 1996) that at times the air quality in the Borough contains levels of pollutants above the UK and international health standards:

(A) complex cocktail of pollutants including microscopic particles, oxides of nitrogen, sulphur dioxide, ozone, carbon monoxide and volatile organic compounds can exacerbate health problems, particularly breathing disorders. Within Ealing they come principally from transport and industrial sources (1996 p 19).

Table 4.4 Pollution on South Acton Estate (numbers of respondents)

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**Is the air polluted?**

Yes 8, Don't know 9

---

**Is the area noisy?**

Always 6

Sometimes 4

Never 6

At night 1

**Source of Noise?**

People 12

traffic and trains 1

n/a 4

---

Source: interviews, n=17

The Council makes available information on air pollution levels in the Borough through many initiatives including: a free telephone message on real-time air quality; real-time air quality information on the Internet; producing a quarterly air bulletin; and encouraging the public to take part in reporting "dirty diesel" (LBE, 1996 p 19) on the roads. Yet a form of social exclusion operates for non English-speakers. Although there is written translation of Council information into Somali, few of the respondents are aware of it and none of them has used it.

South Acton Estate is an inner city area. Six respondents said that the area is always noisy, especially at night. One respondent said the noise is made by road traffic and trains. The Council's environmental health department stresses residential noise, however;

(N)oisny neighbours are the chief cause of many domestic noise complaints. The most frequent complaints include selfish or inconsiderate behaviour such as loud music late at night or early morning, shouting or arguing, animal noises and burglar alarms (LBE 1996 p 21).

A survey conducted by Ealing Environmental Health Department identified noise generation from a lack of respect for neighbours; increase in unemployment; overcrowding and lack of discipline in children and young people. Complaints from neighbours have increased by some fifty per cent during the last two years and existing legislation to combat noise pollution is still ineffective (LBE, 1996). In particular, there is a lack of effective deterrents for the police and the Environmental Health Department to use against disruptive and noise offenders.

Five of the respondents said that they have no complaint about noise in the area. However, two of the five contradicted themselves, finally agreeing that neighbourhood noise was disruptive. The respondents who said that they never heard any noise have double glazed windows (which provides soundproofing) while the majority who complained of it, do not. LBE (1996) notes that inadequate or defective soundproofing offers little protection from the everyday living sounds generated by neighbours. Only one respondent, living close to the railway station, complained of noise generated by road traffic and trains. The evidence suggests LBE's commitment to reduce noise or mitigate its impacts has not yet it been successful on the South Acton Estate.

As discussed in Section 4.4, poor quality housing may be the root of the many health problems being experienced by the Somali refugee families. Air pollution and noise pollution also combine to create health problems for people living in urban areas. The next section discusses some of the general problems to which the respondents attributed the ill health suffered by them and families.

#### **4.4 Health related problems**

Many people tend to treat their health details as confidential between them and their doctors. The questions we asked on health lacked specificity, as the pilot study showed that the women would not talk about intimate health related issues. In most cases, the respondents claimed that their ill health coincided with their coming to live in the UK.

The research established that all the respondents are registered with GPs. However as Table 4.2 above indicates, some are not able to communicate verbally with them and either use signs in some cases to try and overcome the language barrier or do not speak at all. Some take their friends or young children to translate for them at the doctors (see Table 4.5). While children may be the only available translators they are

an inadequate means of obtaining satisfactory medical help. Verbal communication is a vital skill that is essential to promote adaptation to new environments. It creates and encourages a sense of independence and confidence in the lives of people who have migrated. Speaking a common language could prepare them to meet some of the many obstacles to resettlement.

The respondents were given a list of general medical conditions which are commonly associated with polluted environments and poor quality housing, and were asked if any members of their families suffered from these conditions. All the respondents' families suffered from three or more of the following health problems: sore throat; nasal problems; itchy skin (eczema); asthma; stomach problems; mouth-sores; anemia; itchy eyes; backache and chest infection. Table 4.5 below shows that many children suffer from these. These illnesses were attributed by respondents to the change from arid to temperate environments because these were new complaints suffered since relocation.

While the Department of Health (1993) suggests that overall levels of traffic pollution are of concern in urban areas, recent studies Pearson (1994) and McCarthy and Ferguson (1999) suggest that in-door pollution caused by dust-mites and moulds are partially to blame for health problems such as asthma. Pearson (1994) explains that indoor pollution problem has arisen because of widespread introduction of synthetic building materials and finishes, furnishings, fabrics and chemicals all which combine into dust, bacteria and fungi to create unhealthy indoor environment.

McCarthy and Ferguson (1999) also suggest that variations between the London boroughs in hospital admissions for respiratory illnesses may be due to differences in smoking, housing conditions, or social circumstances. LBE is ranked third worst among the London boroughs for hospital admissions for respiratory illness, with at least 46 to 47 persons per 1,000 admitted in 1997. This is reflected in the number of people from the seventeen households who were interviewed with problems (Table 4.5). However it is hard to confirm whether the source of air pollution is indoor or outdoor. As noted earlier, LBE (1996) acknowledges that the cocktail of pollutants in Ealing can accumulate enough to cause health problems for the residents in the Borough.

The ill health in the group that participated in this study are due to three possible causes. It could be as a result of general outdoor urban air pollution; it could also be due to housing quality; or to social circumstances, as suggested by McCarthy and Ferguson (1999), or indeed a combination of the three. Further, the suggestion that dietary deficiencies (Littlewood and Lipsedge, 1989) and allergies being triggered by changes in the natural environment through migration (Holford 1993, Brady 1995) cannot be ruled out as possible causes.

It is however difficult to include smoking as a possible cause of ill health among the group which was interviewed, for two reasons: first, the majority of those affected are children whose ages are between six months and twelve years. Exposure to passive smoking may not apply because the group are Muslims, therefore smoking is forbidden if they adhere very closely their religious teachings. In conclusion, the refugees are experiencing some ill health due to a change in the environment from a

combination of factors that impact on their social, physical and psychological health; and this may underlie their general perceptions of poor wellbeing.

Table 4.5 General health complaints by respondents (number of responses)

<b>what are your illnesses?</b>	<b>what are your children's illnesses?</b>
throat, nose, eczema (1)	throat, nose, asthma (1)
stomach problems, asthma, eczema, hayfever (1)	throat, nose, eczema (1)
stomach complaint, chest complaint (1)	stomach problems, asthma, eczema, hayfever (2)
skin problems with mouth sores and sore throat (1)	stomach complaint, chest complaint (1)
chest problems, eczema and asthma (1)	chest problems & eczema (1)
chest problems, anaemia, and hayfever (1)	eczema only (1)
chest problems, itchy eyes, hayfever (1)	skin problems with mouth sores and sore throat (1)
skin problems, eye problems, hayfever (1)	chest problems, eczema and asthma (1)
backache, chest problems, eczema (1)	stomach problems, skin problems, chest problems, hayfever (1)
none (2)	chest problems, eczema, hayfever (1)
	none (0)

Source: interviews 1999, n=17

#### **4.5 The general experience of living on the South Acton Estate**

We sought respondents' opinions on various aspects of living on the South Acton Estate. The respondents were asked to list the positive and negative aspects of living on the Estate in any order and these are shown in Table 4.6 below. Much as the refugee women seem content living in an area where there are other Somali families and with schools and shops nearby, they do not feel very free and safe living on the Estate. Their younger children cannot be left in the care of older sisters because the girls have to go to school. Furthermore, UK laws do not permit children under the age of thirteen to care for younger children. They fear for their and their children's safety because of the attacks they and other Somali families have experienced. On the positive side, they are able to continue with some of their traditional and cultural activities such as wearing traditional clothing. They are able to buy Somali food in the local shops and they also have other Somalis on the Estate with whom they can socialise.

A general observation from the findings show that the Somali women are not fully utilising the facilities provided by the local authority. Some of the respondents seem

unwilling to go to the Somali Community Centre for help. Letters from the local authority which some of the respondents were unable to read (until they asked an interpreter to read for them) could have been taken to the Community Centre for translation, but the respondents chose to leave these unattended. It is not known how many of the Somali refugees decide to ignore such official letters and to what extent the effects of ignored official letters are affecting their welfare.

Table 4.6 General experience of South Acton Estate (number of responses)

Positive comments	Negative comments
schools, nursery and shops are nearby (7)	unfriendly people, especially kids (5)
shops are nearby; has a Somali neighbourhood (2)	white children/teenagers throw stones at us (4)
public transport and swimming pool nearby (1)	bad neighbourhood/unsafe (4)
near family who live on the Estate (1)	unfriendly neighbourhood (1)
peaceful area (1)	damp flats, ant swarms in summer (1)
home since coming to the UK (1)	noise (2)
	dirty lifts and unsafe at night (1)
	fighting and swearing (1)
	police forced to visit estate almost every night (1)
	birds are a nuisance in summer (1)
	nothing in particular (1)
no response (3)	no response (1)

Source: interviews 1999, n=17. NB multiple replies; does not total to 17

#### 4.6 Auditing the Estate

Manley (1998) notes that all local planning authorities have a statutory duty to prepare a development plan for their areas to act as a general statement of their policies and provide a basis for consideration of applications for planning permission. The London Borough of Ealing (LBE) is trying to improve the appearance of the physical environment and accessibility of the Estate, which has consistently been identified as a problematic development in terms of housing quality, community infrastructure, crime and unemployment. The Borough is now promoting a 'barrier - free' environment for all residents of the Borough, although this will be easier to achieve in some of the less densely populated and more affluent areas. The Borough's document, 'Ealing Planning and Building Control' (EPBC, 1994) provides a comprehensive set of guidelines which aim to allow full access for everyone in the Borough of Ealing to buildings and outdoor spaces. These are cited as areas such as car parks, pedestrian areas, homes, shops, libraries, banks and building societies, schools, factories, cinemas, community or leisure centres, hospitals and surgeries and all places of work. An environmental audit for the South Acton Estate examines these under two general aspects: the visual outdoor appearance and the provision of services and amenities in accordance with the EPBC (1994) policy.

Based on the Borough's guidelines, a two day survey of the South Acton Estate was conducted to assess the level of the Estates' accessibility to the residents and to the general public who use it. The survey also focused on access to all facilities by

different groups of people who live on the Estate including parents with babies in push-chairs, young children, adolescents, elderly people, and people with disabilities (Table 4.8). The fundamental purpose of this environmental audit was to discover if the research subjects are beginning to settle and ‘feel at home’ in their new environment.

Elements of urban design such as road widths, gradients and curbs have important access and safety implications and they also affect the visual appearance of the environment (Barton 1998). People prefer to walk in places where the pedestrian environment is clean, attractive and feels safe, such as parks and open spaces. Pedestrian access in urban areas needs to be kept clean and accessible for the public, to encourage them to walk.

Table 4.7      The Elements Examined for Accessibility on South Acton Estate

<b>Main entrance to blocks</b>
Wheelchair access, locks at main doors, quality of lifts
<b>Access to pavements</b>
Width and slope, pedestrian routes and crossings, signposts, markings and coloured surfaces
<b>Transport</b>
Accessibility to public transport
<b>Leisure facilities etc</b>
Nursery and primary schools, playgrounds, bike play areas, other services (laundrette, dry cleaners, etc)
<b>Visual appearance</b>
Graffiti, parking spaces and garages, allotments, general appearance

#### *Flats: entry area assessment*

Entrances to flats have been modified to meet the needs of residents, and those making deliveries. Gentle ramps with unobstructed platforms are in place at entrance level, except on one block of flats, which is yet to be fitted. Modification of access to buildings in the Borough as a whole is an on going process (interview, the Environment and Planning Unit Officer, 24th June 1999). This means that when major renovations are made to old buildings, these are made with the LBE planners’ consent to incorporate the required access elements such as wheel-chair ramps. Furthermore, planners are required to include these provisions when they design new buildings.

There are main doors in all the entrances to the blocks of flats, but these doors are not always locked. There are no wardens to increase security, as in neighbouring developments in West London. We raised the issue of security with the housing officer and suggested the need for better security measures in the blocks of flats (interview 20th June 1999). The officer explained that some of the blocks have centrally linked video monitors and others have intercom systems that enable residents to identify the caller to their flat before they open the door. Generally, the respondents said that they felt afraid to use the lifts because they think they are unsafe, and are

afraid of technical faults occurring. Lifts on two blocks were very shaky when in use. However, the main concern of respondents was their personal security. Some felt afraid of sharing the lift with a 'man', worse still an inebriated one, particularly if going up ten or more floors. None of them reported any attacks made on them in lifts, but, as Cavanagh (1998) notes, such fears are rarely groundless, and they are usually based on women's previous experiences of violence, harassment and abuse either of themselves or of people they know. Cavanagh explains that many incidents are not reported to the police, and so remain hidden from the authorities. Underlying fear of public spaces may also result from media sources or gossip.

Thus, the design and structure of urban dwellings and access to lifts for multi-story flats can significantly impact on the use of space by women. A further aspect is pedestrian security and facilities on the Estate.

### *Pedestrian facilities*

There are a number of positive aspects of using the pedestrian areas on the South Acton Estate. The pavements are wide and well maintained, with well-defined edges. This makes walking on the pavement easy, especially when there are other users on the same path. There are many pedestrian walkways, all of which are well supplied with seating and play equipment. South Acton Estate is large, and the pedestrian routes are all well sign-posted with names of individual blocks of flats. Clear signage reinforces the feeling of security for visitors and residents alike, reducing anxiety of one's whereabouts among the otherwise indistinguishable blocks.

Money has clearly been spent on traffic measures and pedestrian facilities. There are many roads and through-roads, which provide access. The survey confirmed that, with the exception of one short road, all are well labelled and sign-posted. At all points of pedestrian crossings; there are gentle gradients to allow easy movement onto and from the road. These gradients are deliberately given different colours to draw a contrast and announce a drop in the kerb. The same area has also got a different textured surface that can be 'easily identified by blind and partially sighted people' (EPBC, 1994 p 6). These enable ease of movement.

### *Access to public transport*

Travelling from one point to another is an essential part of any family's daily life in terms of taking children to school, shopping and going to work. The respondents were asked how often and how far they travelled on public transport. All the respondents (except two) used public transport to some extent although their journeys were fairly local.

The Estate is well served by public transport which includes two buses with a 'hail and ride' system whereby there are no marked bus stops, and the vehicle stops when a passenger wants to alight at any point within the designated 'hail and ride' area. There are also two railway stations within five minutes walking distance. Most respondents do not own cars. The respondents confirmed that mothers always walked with their children to school and play places.



### *Leisure and other activities*

Within the boundary of the Estate there are two primary schools and two nurseries for pre-school age children. These are the schools which the respondents' younger children attend. The older children go to Acton High School which is within walking distance, outside the Estate boundary. With schools near to their flats, the Somali refugee women feel they are able to ensure the safety of their younger children by walking them to and from school every day. Fear of attack by bigger boys and girls is the major reason why these mothers do not let their children walk to school alone. This is unlikely to have been a problem in Somalia because of the extended family groups where kin shared a dwelling place with older members overseeing the security of the group.

### *Children's play areas*

It is local authority policy to provide play spaces and equipment for children, and as table 4.8 reveals, there are children of a variety of ages requiring access to play facilities.

Apart from the local schools, there are four children's playgrounds on the Estate which are well equipped with play equipment such as climbing frames, slides and swings. Near these play areas and in other places on the Estate, there are public seats, where the parents of these children can sit and watch as the children play.

The older children have a cycle ramp recently constructed by the LBE. They also have a basketball court which they can use, within the Estate. Some children, especially teenage boys, are blamed by the respondents for offensive attitudes and anti-social behaviour on the Estate. About 60 % of the respondents reported that they have been attacked by these youths; some more than once, even in the daytime (table 4.6). The result has been that many Somali families have been scared away from using many of the public space facilities, thus restricting their use of the immediate outdoor environment.

The adult members of the South Acton Estate community have recourse to a range of services. These include a launderette and a dry cleaner, pubs, an off-licence/grocers, fish and chip shop, electronics shop for television and Hifi repairs, a dental practice, photographic studio and a holistic care centre for the elderly. There is an established Anglo-Caribbean society and other clubs which offer services to the residents and are particularly good for the refugee families because these provide meeting places where they can socialise with their friends and members of other communities who live on the estate. The women's Monday sewing group welcomes women from all backgrounds and for some of the respondents this has proved a popular meeting place. Somali women are beginning to socialise and mix with other members of South Acton Estate which is helping in the acquisition of neighbourhood friends and acquaintances. Here they will be learning English, and mixing with women from other backgrounds.

Almost no Somali women lived in the few Estate houses that have gardens. However, there are allotments which individual residents from the Estate can rent from the LBE when they want to grow their own vegetables. None of the respondents seemed to realise that they are entitled to apply for allotments. The allotments on one side of the

Estate have not been used, and those interviewed assumed that there is no chance of acquiring a plot of land.

Table 4.8 Number of children belonging to the Somali women whom participated in the interviews (number of responses).

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**Number of children  
(in number of  
households):**

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1 child (1)  
2 children (6)  
3 children (5)  
4 children (4)  
5 children (1)

**Ages:**

Under 1 (10)  
1-3 (11)  
4-6 (9)  
7-9 (7)  
10-12 (4)  
13-15 (4)  
15+ (2)

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Source: interviews 1999, n=17

*Summary*

The findings of this audit show that the local Council is working towards the improvement of the general appearance of South Acton Estate. The on-going repairs of the outside of the blocks, the well maintained grass and trees on the Estate, the provision of services such as rubbish collection and the provision of play areas and allotments are all examples of environmental maintenance resulting from block grants for regeneration and improvement of what has consistently been seen as a 'blighted' tract of local authority housing. Further improvements are planned. However, more needs to be done to ensure that all the residents are benefiting from these services. For example, incidents of attacks on Somali refugee families need to be investigated and dealt with by the responsible authorities.

It is also important that Somali families are made aware that they can rent allotment space. While they might not be able to communicate directly with the officers from the local authority because of language barriers, collaboration with interpreters on their behalf means that the Somali women refugees are able to voice what they believe to be essential to their welfare in the community. This opens ways for their local authority, as managers of public amenities and facilities for all their residents, to address the needs of these refugees and thus help them to settle in their new environment.

## **5. Conclusions and Recommendations**

Adapting to new environments can be difficult for those who migrate involuntarily as refugees.

Zetter's (1988) observation that the label, 'refugee' creates and imposes an institutionalised dependency, needs reiteration. It is apparent that Somali women are finding it hard to adapt to their urban environment for various reasons, including ill health, poor quality housing, and environmental pollution. Those refugees who may be part of a polygamous family, cannot openly and freely live as a family because of legal restrictions on claiming welfare benefits that relate to cohabiting in the UK.

Perhaps because of its very high immigrant population, the London Borough of Ealing has developed a good system of providing help for refugees who are settling in the Borough. Like other ethnic minority groups, Somalis can utilise a local Somali Community Centre for a range of services, but the facilities themselves are underutilised. There are three main reasons for this. Primarily there exists a delay in the establishment of trust and confidence in those who are trying to help. Some of them are unwilling to go for help at the Somali Women's Group at the Community Centre due to allegations or hearsay that the people who run it are discriminating on behalf of those who come from the same area as they do in Somalia. Such feelings of mistrust have deterred some of the respondents from seeking help.

Secondly, there is also a lack of awareness of services available to them. There is a service provided by the local authority to help remove draughts and damp from flats, but this has remained unused by Somali women because they are unaware of their responsibility to first report shortcomings in their homes. But, anyway, adequate ventilation and draught exclusion may not solve all the Somali families' health problems. Children of the respondents were suffering from respiratory problems, suggesting that there could be other causes combining to exacerbate this. Somali families need to be encouraged to integrate more with other members of the local community, and learn by example how other members of the community deal with their daily living conditions.

The third reason for the limitations in the provision of services to the Somali families results from a lack of a common language for communication. The research found that central to the problems of adaptation of Somali women refugees in South Acton Estate has been their inability to speak or read English. When documents or information are sent to Somali women, some remain unanswered because the recipients neither read them nor find anyone to read these for them. At the one place which offers this translation service free (the Somali Community Centre) they do not trust the staff, resulting in the delay in the provision of assistance and benefits.

The physical environment has also hindered the process of adaptation to a new or unfamiliar environment. Women's fear of being attacked by young people in the open spaces of the Estate has restricted their use of outdoor space. This has a number of negative impacts. The Somali refugees may stay indoors for longer periods, which is unhealthy because they lack vital sunlight and exercise. Further, as Cavanagh (1998) argues, the chances of these refugees gaining confidence and integrating with other people within the local community are diminished because of fear of attacks in the urban environment, so this reinforces their isolation (Somali Relief Association 1992).

In addition, spending time indoors increases the chances of being affected by indoor air pollution, especially with damp living conditions (Pearson 1994). Socialising in an open space, part of daily life in Somalia, has been curtailed in London. More than half the families of the refugee women suffer ill health especially associated with respiratory diseases. The data suggests that these illnesses could be associated with indoor and outdoor air pollution, as well as other living conditions.

The label 'refugee' creates diverse forms of vulnerability for individuals (Zetter 1988). This study points to some of the specific vulnerabilities and needs of this group of refugee women. Culturally, the Somalis are distinct. While other refugees who seek asylum in the UK are able to speak and communicate in the English language, the majority of Somalis cannot yet do so. Refugees need to be considered as differentiated when they are given asylum, to minimise exposing them to further stress in settling in new locations.

There are several areas of concern for future fate of the Somali refugee population in West London. As Corrindon observes, Somalia has continued to be the only country in the world to have no central government system (Corrindon, 1999). Somalis in the UK may have difficulties in relating to the British administrative system; certainly it is new and different. Better communication with the local authority, charges with providing public goods and services, is a priority for the future. An overwhelming sense of loss and upheaval may cause the process of adapting to a new environment to be slow (Somali Relief Association, 1992). With the continued attempts at encouraging the Somali refugees to participate in local communities through adult education and other social activities such as the Monday Sewing Group, a much more gradual adaptation to the new environment could be achieved by the refugees.

Specific areas where policy changes could be of benefit include encouragement to individuals to report incidences of racial attacks and taunting. Secondly, encouraging the Somali and other refugees to participate more in training and education, which has now been agreed under the SRB, will help improve self-esteem, self-motivation and independence. This would assist integration with the wider community, and could help overcome a feeling of social isolation.

Another approach to help the Somali refugees integrate and mix would be to find a way of introducing them to refugee groups from other countries both from Africa and Europe. This may help to show the Somalis that they have much to gain by being open minded about different aspects of life in the UK. Meeting with such groups may prove an inspiration and motivation for the Somali refugees, although of course these have their limitations.

Adapting to a new environment is extremely challenging when there are language barriers and culture difference, indeed when there is lack of trust among the migrants themselves and towards local communities. Therefore the planning of long-term strategies by local authorities to enable such multi-ethnic resettlement could be of a great benefit to host communities, as these minorities bring with them some of their culture and traditions, thus enriching both ethnic and host cultures.

We have concentrated on some of the factors that act as barriers to the adaptation of Somali women refugees in their new location in West London. Not all of these are environmental or health-related; they are also social and cultural. The major environmental problems faced by Somali refugee were identified as health problems due to change in climate, diet, and damp, poor-quality housing. But secondly, there is a suspicion and lack of trust (partly a cultural response) of local society, and even of those trying to help them. To some extent, this is a mutual feeling, and there is clear evidence of racial and cultural mistrust of Somalis. Unfortunately, some Somalis lacked awareness of the services available to them, exacerbated by language difficulties. All these factors make it difficult for Somali women of different backgrounds to settle into a an initially alien, sometimes hostile, and fundamentally 'different' urban environment.

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