Journal of Interdisciplinary Feminist Thought

Volume 9
Issue 1 *Changing Families, Changing Women*

Article 4

3-2016

Transcontinental Parenting: The Refugee Crisis Has Resulted in a Situation in Which Children and Parents Are Forced to Live Apart, Often Living in Different Parts of the Globe [video]

Komlan Soe
Salve Regina University, komlan.soe@salve.edu

Aida Neary
Salve Regina University, aida.neary@salve.edu

Transcontinental Parenting: The Refugee Crisis Has Resulted in a Situation in Which Children and Parents Are Forced to Live Apart, Often Living in Different Parts of the Globe [video]

Erratum

Transcript

Transcontinental Parenting: The Refugee Crisis Has Resulted in a Situation in Which Children and Parents Are Forced to Live Apart, Often Living in Different Parts of the Globe [video]

Interview with Aida Neary and Komlan Soe:

AIDA NEARY:

I am Aida Neary and I work at Salve Regina as the international student adviser. I am here with refugee and international studies master's degree candidate Komlan Soe '17 (M). We will be discussing the role of women and how women and their families change with migration with respect to their refugee status or their migrant status and how women, in turn, change societies.

KOMLAN SOE:

My name is Komlan Soe and I was born in Liberia. I was three when I became a refugee. I lived on the Ivory Coast in Ghana and eventually emmigrated to the United States in 2005. I have been here ever since.

I work with the Refugee Dream Center in Providence, Rhode Island, a nonprofit, started by my friends and me as an alternative to the international institute. We work with the State Department to accept refugees into Rhode Island.

When refugees come here they have about three months to become independent. We find this is not sufficient for someone to become part of a society after only three months, especially with their circumstances – coming in from refugee camps and coming from a very different society and culture.

So we decided to take over after three months to help refugees find heath care, education and housing. We give the refugees a sense of community. We give them a chance to integrate into society. I experienced the same challenges when I first came to the United States. After three months we didn't have jobs. We were on our own, trying to figure out things. It was a problem a lot of the time.

I finished high school before I came to the United States, so it was very easy for me to find my way around, but for someone who has no education or experience, going from a refugee camp to here immediately, it becomes a different world. So we decided to start this organization to help people integrate smoothly.

The number of families that comes to us varies. Sometime we have refugees who come with only the father and children, and the wife gets left behind or the wife comes with the kids and the husband gets left behind, or the husband and the wife come and the children get left behind, and even the kids come alone and the parents get left behind. It's a mix of everything. It becomes a challenge for those who come here. When a wife comes over alone, she comes with the kids and she becomes the mother and father. The husband is back home and he wants to play his role as the father. That's part of being on the other side of the ocean. It becomes a challenge for the wife. She is not used to being the head of the family. She is not used to being the only person in

the house. And now she has to tell the boys to be men and, at the same time, she has to work. It becomes very hard. Not fitting into the role puts a burden on the wife.

AIDA NEARY:

Now it brings me to the question about what a typical family would be like at home [in Africa] and what does the family unit become once they come here as refugees?

KOMLAN SOE:

When you migrate you always bring whatever you have with you. Many refugees come over with their kids, sister, sons or daughters. A family back home (in Africa) is not a typical family. It is very hard to tell a refugee about a typical family because there is none. In Africa, the husband has a job, the wife is there and she is the housewife, and because the husband is working, her family sends two or three of their kids to live with her, and the husband will send his whole family and even his brother's kids, or her sister's kids will come over. It changes the meaning of a typical family.

If your sister passed away in war or your brother died, you take their kids and you are fortunate to bring the kids to live with you. It is not a typical family. A typical family does not necessarily look like a Western family that we see on TV. Here, the expectation is that in the house there is a mother, father and 2.3 children. That is not what a family looks like in West Africa. Family is all of the extended family, the aunts, the uncles, and the friends you call auntie and uncle. They are not blood, but you call them auntie and uncle. It is the same thing.

AIDA NEARY:

What are the relationships between a wife and a husband, a parent and a child, and how do they manifest at home and how do they manifest here? What happens? What is that transition like?

KOMLAN SOE:

Sometimes it can be very challenging for the family. I can speak for the refugees coming from a refugee camp. The husband is always the head of the household. The husband does not realize the change in culture and society here. He still wants to play the role of provider and breadwinner. America is a difference society, where one person cannot feed a family. It becomes very difficult. Now the wife has to work. She is not used to working; she is used to being the caretaker of the home. Now she goes to work and they may have different shifts. He does not see his wife anymore. He feels threatened that he is losing his status as caretaker for the house. His wife becomes independent [in order] to provide for the family. It becomes a push and pull in the family. And that can be very challenging for the family. He can feel threatened, and decision-making now becomes mutual, and they are not used to doing that. They are not used to negotiating and compromising. And the children are watching and you are living in a refugee camp before you come here, and because of economic necessity both parents are working and it changes the role of the child. They see the roles change and they watch and see the relationship with their mother and father change. I assume that for the daughters, watching their mothers changes their relationship with their fathers.

I have a story. One wife came alone with the kids and, after three years, the husband was allowed to come over. The kids were now teenagers. Their father had to now reassert himself as the head of the family. He wants to reassert himself, but he does not have a job and cannot support the family. He is not in control and he can't support the family, and the kids are used to seeing their mom go to work and providing. He is not capable of doing anything as of now. So it becomes extreme for the father. They don't have the closeness with him. Their mother is whom everyone is looking up to now, and the father feels vulnerable. He feels like he is not man enough to provide for his family. The relationship between the father and the child takes a turn and becomes something extremely different and the father now feels threatened. He is not in control. They do not talk back. Now if the police comes in it becomes a different thing. Now that is adjusting to a different culture because [in Africa] that same man can hit his wife and nothing will happen or nobody would say anything. They would probably say she deserves it. They can hit their children and nothing will happen. When refugees migrate they try to find a social network. They try to find their countrymen. They make a part of their country here. The wife is working and that can also reposition the family structure. He can still be in control because it is like a smaller country, but when they find themselves helping many of their people he feels threatened and that is when his role as a father becomes diluted. It has. That is when what you have learned [is challenged]. You were supposed to be the breadwinner and the wife is supposed to be the caregiver and when you came here that is not happening.

When they are at school, the children are watching the more American culture, but when they come home it is completely different. So how does that play out for the girls? You know the challenges I faced. I was 19 when I came over and I finished high school the same year I came over. It was hard when I started college. When I started to get out of the culture I found myself between two worlds. The broader American society and culture and the recreated Liberian society and culture still remained. When I went home, I was seen as American. I got caught between two worlds and it became a challenge, and many kids face that. They go to school and are seen as African, and when they come home their parents and relatives see them as American.

AIDA NEARY:

I am reading the book "Americana." I am just finishing it. It is fantastic. It is exactly right that being here long enough, your country of origin will think you are American and the same thing will happen here. Whether you are living in the migrant community or in your community, you still have to experience the rest of the world. Within the U.S., you are navigating as both a Liberian and an American. How do families cope then? Let's say the father came with the children and the wife is back home at the refugee camp. How do you parent? How does that work? How does parenting work when one parent is here in the U.S. with a child, and one is in the camp?

KOMLAN SOE:

This is what challenges many refugees. The mother is here or the mother and father are here and the child is back home. Now the mother wants to play her role as a mother or the parents want to play the role of the parents. Now the information she gets will be from the relatives who are

taking care of her child. When the child is misbehaving, she gets a call and has to tell the child how he or she should be behaving. Then a few days later the child is misbehaving again. It puts a lot of pressure on the mother. The mother still has to be in the role of the mother. It becomes a huge burden on her, the challenge of being both here and there.

AIDA NEARY:

It would be a double burden because here she also does not have her traditional life. Here she is working, which is not necessarily a role she had before. She is working, which is an uncomfortable role and she can't have the comfortable role she is used to having, which is parenting. So how do the families cope? Do you offer services?

KOMLAN SOE:

We don't offer services for that but it's very hard. Last year we had a domestic violence training program. One challenge that came up is that my child is not listening to me. Now when something like this happens the police comes in. They will arrest the father or whoever did it [hit the child]. Now they are understanding how it works. The child is struggling to find his identity. He comes home, he becomes Liberian or Congolese, when he goes out, and when he is home he is seen as American. He is trying to find his identity. I myself am still trying to find my identity. It becomes a challenge for the child. There are things you do with your American friends, and when you come home they are not acceptable. You try to do it and you get spanked it. So we have a lot of stories about children. We try to tell [police officers about] the cultural differences, when you come in, don't just come in and arrest someone. We have to sit with them to help them understand what is going on. It was a training that went very well, talking to the police that were there. These are things nobody is talking about in the open. We meet with them and sit with them and try to get to understand them as well. It went well. We see a lot of these things. If the husband is feeling threatened because his role is diluted, the wife feels like she does not need to work all the time. She does not have to cook all the time. He wants her to be cooking all the time. She says if she cooks then he should wash the dishes. She is now challenging him. It becomes very difficult for the kids as well. Both parents are not home and maybe the oldest is taking care of the youngest. So the whole family is not a typical family anymore. Now all the roles have shifted based on being here.

AIDA NEARY:

One of the questions I had related to the influences of economic circumstances. You answered it by saying the women work. It is not really possible to live on one income. So now you have two parents working as opposed to just one, which I assume could be empowering to the women, but at the same time it is an initial stressor.

But how do the women, and I guess it depends on where they are coming from, how do the women feel when they come and they realize they are going to have to work? How does that happen and do you see a change over time for a woman after she's been working for a year or two?

KOMLAN SOE:

Some see it as a way out of so much trouble. For some, they see it as helping their husband. Being unmarried is unacceptable in Africa. It's a shame not just to you in the U.S., but to your family back home. You know your brother went over there, he left, that's our son, and the family starts to feel the shame back in Africa, not just here, but back where ever your family comes from. So yes, her role will change, for some the role will change, but she's going to remain the wife. She's working, so she has the role. She's a provider, and she's still a wife. She's working, supporting her husband, but she's still a wife. And her husband, he starts to feel comfortable when he's working, but he'll still remain a husband. He's not just a provider but he will remain a husband, the head of a family. For those who try to break themselves out of that, now they say, 'Oh I'm working; I don't need a husband as a provider. I don't need a husband because I'm working now. I have a job now. You know, a husband provided for me for a time, now I'm providing for myself.' So she becomes unmarried, and now the news goes back home: "Oh, you know your daughter lives over there now; she left our son." And the family starts to feel the shame. But she says, "No I don't need him. I apologize, but I'm providing for myself." So it depends, in different ways.

AIDA NEARY:

The women who decide I don't need him, now I'm providing for myself, I'm providing for my children, I don't need him, which says a lot about the reason they married in the first place, right? But that's because, except for in the Western world, people don't get married for love, they get married because they get a provider. Those women who make that decision, do they then stay within the immigrant community, or do you find that they end up separating themselves from the immigrant community?

KOMLAN SOE:

For some of them, they get rejected within the Nepalese community, they'll be out of the community. For the Burmese, you will be out of the community. For the Liberians, it's typical, it's not a big deal. For some communities it's acceptable but for others who are very traditional, you have to leave. Nobody wants to talk to you, nobody wants to be with you because you are unmarried. You can't be a wife. For some communities, in that case, if you are not acceptable to a community, you go live somewhere else. You're out of that network. So now it becomes a struggle for a woman to try because it's very difficult when you don't have that network.

AIDA NEARY:

So it makes me wonder how many women stay married. So let's say they've been in the U.S. for three or four years, and they've been working, so they have that new role, and they're now dissatisfied with the marriage, but I wonder how many of them stay within the marriage because they know they will be shunned and you need the support of the community to survive. So I don't know if you have any sense of women if they are unhappy in the marriage, and how many of them stay just because they know they need the community's support and they will lose it.

KOMLAN SOE:

Again, for the refugees, a good number of them don't have any formal education. So you still need that network. But for those who got some education coming over, you still need the network. But when you start to look outside the network, and start to really see within the larger American society, your confidence starts to grow. If your husband is not doing you a service, is not helping you, if you're very much uncomfortable, it takes time to really get the confidence to say, "Okay, I'm moving out." But then you have to build a new network somewhere, a social network outside the community. So having that you have the flexibility. You say, "Okay, I'm divorcing you, I'm leaving." But for many refugees who don't have the education, they're very much used to being young and married. It's a crime, it's insane, you have to remain [married]. And so it's very difficult to look into that community, because it's very reserved, so it's very hard for a wife to come and tell you that her husband isn't working.

AIDA NEARY:

Since you get families from the institute after three months and you're helping them, what do you think would help future refugee families to know about living in the U.S.? In terms of transitions, what do you think would be helpful for those families when they land in the U.S. or when they're in the camp and they finally get the refugee papers...what do you think would be helpful to prepare them for what will happen with the changes you've talked about? What do you think?

KOMLAN SOE:

We at the refugee center have different programs. We have a job-readiness program, we have a case-management program, we have the health-care program, and we have the youth mentorship program as well. So these programs help refugees. With the health program, because many refugees don't have any English skills, so going to the hospital becomes a challenge, because a doctor can't understand what a person is saying, or a patient is not comfortable, maybe she wants her husband to be there and it's not possible. So we found a way to create an interpreter service program, which is basically someone we select who's trusted within the community. The community selects one person, we don't select but they select a person and say, "Oh this person can be our interpreter." He's in charge of taking the person who has an appointment to the doctor to translate what the doctor is saying and what the person is saying, because he is trusted. And it's been very helpful. And we also try to find the needs of refugees. Many of them don't have access to social services, to health care services, so we provide these resources, we bring them to them, we provide these things for the community. And in terms of taking medications, in Africa if you're not sick you can't take any medicine, why should you take it if you're not sick? We have interpreters to tell them, "You have to make sure you finish this medicine, make sure it's finished even if you feel well, and make sure you finish it in the time you are given." And for the job-readiness program we provide training, ESL classes, resume building, and all these different things for refugees to be ready to participate. Now, getting out of the international institute, after 6 months, they're on their own, without anything to help them transition. So, what we've decided to do is make sure that refugees...when we step in, they get to know each other. Not just from

their community, but from different communities. So we bring them together, for Thanksgiving dinner, for example, and that is bringing all the different communities together. In the Nepalese community, for example, the wife is always behind the husband, and when they see the Congolese community having a very smooth conversation between wife and husband, they start to learn things like maybe we need to be flexible a little bit. So we always try to bring them together so they get to learn from each other within the communities.

AIDA NEARY:

Within the groups, do you have any women-only groups? Are they informal, are they formal, or are there any?

KOMLAN SOE:

No, for the Thanksgiving dinner we'll be having, everyone will be together. So you come with your family, husband, wife, kids, everybody comes. So kids get to play with kids, and everybody gets together. You know it's natural; women all on this side, men always [on the other side], but at least they get to eat together and see each other. When couples are together, there is a tendency to be observant, you will see things. So through that they get to learn how each other relates, even if it's within the refugee community. And you will have some friends from different communities, the American community would like to come in and join us...so you get to see how these couples relate. It's very challenging but, to some extent, we find these things to be helpful in terms of understanding.

AIDA NEARY:

But there aren't, so far, any formal women's groups so the refugee women can be together and provide a support system for each other? Or within each group, the Congolese women's group, or the Liberians' women's group? Do those things exist as well? I think again about the women and their transition to all of these additional roles, at least the providing role. If there were other women talking to them and welcoming them and saying, "Okay, here's what's going to happen." So far, you don't have those?

KOMLAN SOE:

We don't have those, but within the Congolese society/community, there is a women's organization. There is a women's organization, and there is a man's organization. They're doing very well in terms of helping each other. So last week one of them, one the presidents came to our office and she ... well, the leader for the men's organization, the men's group, and a leader from the women's group came to the office to tell us that they purchased a mini-van. Now the mini-van will be used to transport a Congolese to a job interview, and all that, you know. So we had a conversation and I asked and she said, "Oh, you know we put money together and got this mini-van for our community. But this was all the women, we forced the men to do it! We forced the men to do it, we made sure the money was spent well!" So these things are happening, the women play the roles in the community, because I'm sure the men have realized that they need

to change, too, within these communities. So they've started to be somewhat flexible in terms of relating to their spouses.

AIDA NEARY:

Do you have any advice for refugees when they come? Families, for instance? What would your advice be?

KOMLAN SOE:

What I think it is very important is that you dip your toes into different cultures. It's good to see things outside of your network. And our task is that, and one of our objectives is to try and help the smooth transition of refugees. That's one of our main objectives. It is purposely to try to assist refugees integrate into the larger community. We don't want them to be just by themselves and don't know what is going on. They have to understand that this is their new home. They need to know what is going on, they need to understand. So we encourage them all the time to help see what is going on out there, so they at least they can help their kids. Because their kids, again, just like myself, are struggling between two worlds. You come home, you are considered an American, but when you go out [in America, people say] "Oh you know, you're a Liberian, so you won't fit in like that." But the parents get to understand how the lifestyle works. You know you can't lose your cultural identity, you can't lose it as a Congolese, as an Ugandan, as a Liberian ... but you get to understand how things work and you get to see things from a different perspective. And it gives you a sense of how you can be a parent within your new home. Because being a parent in America is extremely different from being a parent in Liberia or Ghana, or any other place, depending on where you come from. Because when you are in Africa, it's a different thing. It's very little in comparison to America. If you find yourself in a village and other places, it becomes a very different story.

AIDA NEARY:

I'm glad you talked about the children because this is my last question, it's not about children, but it's about girls. So I'll ask you about girls specifically. So, for young girls, let's say a young Ghanaian girl was 5 when she came in with her family, and they've been here 10 years now and she's 15. What do you think that young girl, who's lived in the U.S. for 10 years, and maybe in a refugee camp for 5 years, and is now in high school, in the public high school ... how do you think that young woman is different from her mother? Do you think the experience of being a migrant changed her? How is she different?

KOMLAN SOE:

Well, Ghana is a specific country…

AIDA NEARY:

The country matters less to me than to see how the role of women ... how that 15-year-old young woman thinks her role has changed by watching her mother change. How does she think of herself?

KOMLAN SOE:

It changes to the extent that it becomes a very challenging thing for the child. Being outside and being inside, you don't know where you are. But it depends on how the parents relate to each other. If it becomes an abusive home where the father always wants to assert himself and the mother is feeling any distress, then the child will start to see things differently. If it is a home that is quiet, and the father knows the mother's working, and they understand how to relate to each other, the child will still have an identity. She'll still be an American outside of the home and she will still be ... she will see it as positive way that she can maintain her Congolese identity, and then still understand the larger community. So it actually depends on the family, how the family relates, how the family fits ... how they really integrate, how they really understand.

AIDA NEARY:

So how well they integrated into society will determine how their daughter [feels]. So I have one final question. Do you find that young women, 17, 18 or 19, who come from refugee families, want the same role as their mother? Or are they looking toward a university degree, and then more than that? What are you seeing?

KOMLAN SOE:

I've observed that the girls, especially among the Liberians, and among the refugee and immigrant population … the girls are becoming more educated than the guys. There are more girls in school than guys. And it's very fascinating, and I think many of the girls try to be better than their parents, and it goes back to the search for identity. Your mom, she works all the time, and your father, he wants to assert himself. If you find yourself in that situation, you don't want to be like that. They fight hard to go further, and knowing their mom is not educated, or their father is the one who is educated or not educated ... then they want to be better than their mom, they want to be better than their parents. So these are things, when we settle these kids down, we tell them you have the opportunity to be a doctor, to be lawyer, even though your parents are not. It's not their fault that they're not, they find themselves in a situation that made them be who they are, but you can be better than your parents. You can improve, you can be a lawyer, you can be a doctor, you can be anything you want to be. The opportunity is here in America. So you can grow. You could be Michelle Obama someday, you could be a senator of Rhode Island. So you have the chance to do that. Your parents did not have the opportunity to be lawyers or doctors, but you have the chance to do that. So many of them see that they want to be better than their parents, they want to improve. And I tell them you can still do that and maintain your culture. You can still maintain your cultural identity. Being a lawyer doesn't make you lose that.

AIDA NEARY:

So that'll change society. Those young women will become doctors and lawyers and attorneys ... and that will change society. And the conversation for another day will be why are the young men not thinking the same way? But that will be a conversation for another day.

KOMLAN SOE:

It's very interesting ... it's shifting. On many campuses, and I'm sure at Salve here, there are more female students than males, especially among African girls and African guys.

AIDA NEARY:

Yes, we can have a whole other conversation about that. Thank you very much for coming, Komlan. Thank you for [answering] the questions; it was wonderful, a great opportunity. Thank you, Sister Virginia, for bringing us together. See you later!

Transcribed by Salve Regina University Allison Abgrab '17.