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# The impact of media representations on Somali youth's experiences in educational spaces

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## Abstract

In this article, I examine how the politics of representation following September 11, 2001 attacks on the US impact the experiences of Somali youth in educational spaces in North America. This research draws from a discourse analysis of representations of Somalis and Somalia in North American newspaper articles (n=82) between August and October 2011 and 51 interviews with Somali youth between the ages of 14 and 30. It also draws from ethnographic fieldwork for 16 months (July 2010–October 2011) in Kitchener-Waterloo and Toronto, Canada and Minneapolis-St. Paul, USA. This includes participant-observation at Somali youth events, organizations, centres, homework programs, mosques and after-school and weekend Islamic schools that provide spaces of learning for Somali youth outside of public/private schools. In this article, I argue that the representations of Somalis in the media as either perpetrators or victims of violence are gendered and have variously politicized Somali men and women within the current 'War on Terror.' As a result, Somali youth are targets of routine forms of structural violence, expressed in discrimination and marginalization as well as interpersonal forms of violence, including bullying. I examine how these forms of violence are both carried out and resisted in educational spaces and how they variously affect Somali youth's experiences in school. The article shows how Somali community educational spaces provide spaces of belonging and a space to learn the skills needed to challenge representations of Somalis and Somalia in the media. Somali youths' experiences of violence and within educational spaces reshape their identities.

## Keywords
Somalia, youth, gender, violence, media, identities

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## Introduction

This article examines how the politics of representation following the attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001 (from here 9/11), impact the experiences of Somali youth in educational spaces in North America. In this article, I argue that the media representations of Somalis are gendered, representing males as perpetrators and females as victims of violence, thereby politicizing Somali men and women within the current 'War on Terror.' As a result, various members of the receiving nation (i.e. peers, teachers) often target Somali youth using routine forms of structural violence, expressed in discrimination and marginalization as well as interpersonal forms of violence, including bullying. I examine how these forms of violence are both carried out and resisted in educational spaces and how they variously affect Somali youth's experiences in school. The first section of this article provides a brief history of Somalia- US/Canada relations to understand how global politics affect the North American media's portrayal of Somalia and its people. To understand the effects of the media on the everyday experiences of youth, I examine the media's connection with discrimination as it relates to the Somali case. In the second section, I carry out a media analysis of the representations of Somalis and Somalia in North American newspapers. This analysis allows us to contextualize youth's perceptions and experiences of violence that are seen in the interviews. The third section looks at youth's experiences of various forms of violence in educational spaces. Through youth's narratives, I examine the link between their experiences of structural violence and interpersonal forms of violence. In the final section, I look at how youth are resisting violence and creating change in their communities both locally and globally. The impact of these experiences on the reconstruction of youth's identities is also explored in the final section.

According to Scheper-Hughes (2004:14), structural violence refers to the invisible "social machinery" of social inequality and oppression, which reproduces social relations of exclusion reinforced by dominant ideologies[1] that stigmatize particular races, classes, and genders. Structural violence, for instance, obscures the social, political and economic history of poverty, taking it for granted and blaming poverty on the poor themselves (Scheper-Hughes 2004:14). Scheper-Hughes and Bourgouis (2004:1) argue that violence cannot be understood as only physical or interpersonal, but also as symbolic. Symbolic violence is part of structural violence.

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[1] Ideologies are a complex set of beliefs, values, ideas, worldviews, and opinions that shapes the way a person or a group thinks, acts, and understands the world. They are constantly changing depending on the context or circumstance (Hall 1990).

This violence is inflicted on an individual's personhood, dignity, and sense of worth. The socio-cultural dimensions of violence, therefore, need to be considered since they give meaning and power to violence (Scheper-Hughes 2004).

Structural violence targets what are considered by a society to be 'dangerous' populations such as 'illegals,' 'street' children, the homeless, and in this case refugee youth. It then becomes 'legitimate' to mediate and control these populations (Stephans 1995). Importantly, Scheper-Hughes (2004) posits that the power of symbolic violence derives from the ability to make the oppressed complicit in their own destruction: the poor against the poor or "black-on-black" violence, which conceals the reality of structural violence. In her research on violence in Brazil and South Africa, Scheper-Hughes found that "white-on-black" structural violence was masked through what Paul Farmer (2004) referred to as "pathologies of power" that force marginalized groups to be "complicit in the social forces that poised, intentionally or not, to destroy them" (Scheper-Hughes 2004:14). Her analytical insights are applicable to the Somali case, where some youth do fight with peers inside or outside schools and/or join gangs. The majority of Somali youth, however, do not engage in violence and seek spaces of belonging[2] found in community educational spaces. Here, they become involved in their communities and/or learn ways to challenge stereotypical representations of Somalis and Somalia.

**Methods**

The research was designed as a multi-sited and mixed method ethnographic research project. The study draws on preliminary research for 2 years (2008–2010) and ethnographic fieldwork for 16 months (July 2010–October 2011), including participant-observation with Somali youth and their families in after-school homework programs, refugee organizations and programs, Somali community programs and events, Somali youth programs and events, in families' homes and in mosques in Kitchener-Waterloo and Toronto, Canada and Minneapolis-St. Paul, USA.

During participant-observation, I conducted 36 individual oral history interviews and 4 focus group interviews (2 Kitchener-Waterloo, 1 Toronto, 1 Minneapolis-St. Paul) with 51 Somali youth (26 males, 25 females). While the youth were between the ages of 14 to 30 (see table 1), their stories are reminisces of experiences of their

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[2] In this article, I use the term "sense of belonging" to emphasize the ways an individual identifies with a particular place and society, especially feelings of exclusion and inclusion from the desired attachment, be it to people, places, or modes of being, and the ways in which individuals or groups are caught within wanting to belong and wanting to become (Probyn 1996, Fortier 2000).

childhood. These interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 4 hours.

**Table 1: Number of interviews with Somali youth according to age**

| Ages of Somali youth interviewed | Ages 14-19 | Ages 20-24 | Ages 25-30 |
|---|---|---|---|
| | 29 | 11 | 11 |

The youth were either first, 1.5 or second generation immigrants to Canada or the US. In this study, I use generation as a cohort (Kertzer 1983), based on the historical period and the age at which they resettled, to discuss and analyze the experiences of Somali youth and to integrate the local perspective of the generations of youth. The first generation is the cohort of newcomer Somalis who resettled in Canada and the US, but were born in Somalia and spent most of their lives in the country or in other countries, such as Yemen, Kenya, Ethiopia, or Saudi Arabia. The 1.5-generation is the cohort of Somali youth who were born in Somalia and were displaced as young children with their families. These children were raised in Canada and the US, but may have spent some part of their lives in other countries. The second generation is the Somali children and youth who were either born in Canada or the US. Table 2 shows that most of my interlocutors were from the first and 1.5-generations; therefore, the majority of this work draws on the experiences of these generations. In my analysis, the intersection of generation and gender will be explored. The project obtained ethics approval from the research ethics board at The University of Western Ontario.

**Table 2: Number of interviews with Somali youth in 3 generational cohorts**

| Generations of Somali youth | First Generation | 1.5 Generation | Second Generation |
|---|---|---|---|
| | 27 | 16 | 8 |

To analyze the themes that emerged in youths' oral history interviews, I examine how Somali youth interact, relate, and identify with their families and peers, educational actors, the wider Somali institutional and informal communities, the adoptive society, and the Somali struggle. To do this I examine how youth represent themselves, investigating the main identity[3] references and the ways they vary by

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[3] Identity is the interplay of one's experiences in the world and his or her worldview formed in particular historical and cultural settings (Gilroy 2002/1997:301). Identities are not static, however,

gender.

In addition to the interviews, I conducted a critical discourse analysis of the representation of Somalis and Somalia in newspapers in Canada and the US. Using news alerts with keywords "Somali" and "Somalia" as search terms, my sample consisted of articles in all Saturday, Sunday and Monday editions of Canadian and American newspapers between August 6 and October 16, 2011. The final sample of Canadian and American newspaper articles analyzed numbered 82. The number of articles according to country (Canada, USA) and type (national, provincial or territorial (Canada) or state (US), local, alternative) are in table 3. Local articles are those from city newspapers. Alternative newspapers are those that are not read or distributed in mainstream news outlets.

**Table 3: Newspaper articles according to country and type**
**Type * Country Crosstabulation Count**

|  |  | Country | | Total |
|  |  | Canada | USA |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Type | National | 12 | 30 | 42 |
|  | Provincial or state | 0 | 1 | 1 |
|  | Local | 10 | 21 | 31 |
|  | Alternative | 1 | 7 | 8 |
| Total |  | 23 | 59 | 82 |

To analyze the news reports, I first conducted an interactional analysis, that is, examining the interactions between different representations of Somalis and Somalia in the texts (i.e. newspaper articles) and the gaps and contradictions in the texts. To do this, I examined the whole-text language organization (i.e. the narrative, argument, and the structure of the dialogue) and the words used (i.e. vocabulary used, denotative and connotative meaning, and patterns of co- occurrence of words) (Fairclough 2001: 240-242). Second, I examined the images associated with the article to see how Somali bodies are made visible in the media (Fishman and Marvin 2003). Finally, I examined representations of the relationships between Somalia and Canada and the US, including the historical connections made or silenced in the articles. With this approach, I delineated three main themes: (1) representations of Somalis as perpetrators or victims of violence, (2) representations of American and

they are reconstructed through the revision of our memories to adapt to the present (Passerini 1987:17) and shape how we see the future (Gillis 1994:5).

Canadian relations with Somalia and Somalis, and (3) non-violent or positive representations of Somalia and Somalis.

## History of Somalia and US/Canada Relations: The Media's Construction of Somalis

The representations of Somalis in the American and Canadian media are largely about their entanglement with latent and explicit violence (Fishman and Marvin 2003:34). The US-led and UN supported Operation Restore Hope was launched in December 1992. For Americans, the perceived association between Somalia and violence stems back to this intervention in 1992 to 1993, which was supposed to help end the humanitarian crisis. During that time the US media widely circulated images of Somalis dragging dead American soldiers through Mogadishu. At the same time, the violence inflicted on the Somali people that included war crimes committed by the US and other UN troops largely went unnoticed (de Waal 1998, Fishman and Marvin 2003).

In Canada, what came to be known as the "Somalia Affair" (1993), the fatal shooting of two Somalis and the torture and death of 16-year-old Shidane Abukar Arone at the hands of Canadian soldiers, were even undermined by discourse of the backwardness of Africa (Razack 2004:4). The Canadian government responded to the Somalia Affair by disbanding the Canadian Airborne Regiment and granting a Commission of Inquiry. The incidents (many of which were not publicly acknowledged) came to be thought of as the acts of rogue soldiers, soldiers who did not have leadership, or soldiers who were pushed to near insanity due to Africans and Africa itself (Razack 2004:7). The Somalia Affair continues to be remembered using this discourse. For instance, in a *Toronto Star* article a reporter compares his experiences in Somalia and in Afghanistan referring to the "insatiable desert" blaming the Somalia Affair on the climate and weak leadership (Watson 2011); but never referring to the deaths and torture of the young Somali men as murder or even a mistake. By presenting the Somalia Affair this way, Canadian peacekeeping identity remains intact and the racism and violence against the Somali people at the hands of Canadian peacekeepers if not forgotten is justified (Razack 2004:7-8).

In the current geopolitical environment, the US is leading the global campaign against 'Terror,' which now is synonymous with Muslims, Islam, and the Middle East and Arabs (Zouaoui 2012). Following the attack on the twin towers, Muslim men were represented in the media as barbaric, coming from ancient desert lands whose hatreds go back far in history (Jiwani 2006, Thobani 2007). The dehumanization of Muslims is possible through processes of dehistoricization and depoliticization of the

attacks and the unequal structural relations between Afghanistan and Iraq and the US (Jiwani 2006:39).

The Bush administration made the liberation of Muslim women one of the main policy objectives in the war in Afghanistan (Abu-Lughod 2002). Following the declaration of this policy the media was flooded with images of veiled women who soon became the symbol of victimhood. The rhetoric of Muslim women who need to be saved implies superiority of the West over the East. At the same time, however, it conceals the connections between Islamic movements and engagements with the West (Abu-Lughod 2002). In the post-Cold War era, the UN has approached nation building and deconstructing using "women's empowerment" initiatives (Baines 2004:2-3). Underlying this approach is the assumption that women are more prone to peaceful relations than men. As a result, nation building programs and policies reinforce gender stereotypes of apolitical, passive, victimized women (Baines 2004). However, many scholars argue that a woman's decision to veil should be viewed as an act of agency (Abu- Lughod 2002, Berns McGown 1999, Tiilikainen 2003). The vast majority of Somalis are Muslims. As a result, they are for the first time, in the North American context, thinking about what it is to be Muslim, how to assert their Muslim identities, and studying Islam (Berns McGown 2003). Hoodfar (2003) argues that young Muslim women view Islam and modernity as well-suited in the North American context since women are able to privilege interpretations of the Qur'an that are more aligned with their views and experiences. This is the case for young Somali women who are learning about Islam in Somali community educational spaces and using this knowledge for advocacy and to create change in their communities, discussed in more detail later.

The media is a site to examine how structural violence is enabled by national ideologies of racism, sexism, class oppression and other forms of discrimination, and how these intersect, are reproduced and transformed (Hall 1990). Hall (1990:8) argues that media constructs and defines race, and produces and reproduces often unquestioned ideologies of racism, which become "common sense." This passive racism, Jiwani (2006) argues, is just as violent as overt racism, as it persists largely without being interrogated. News of racialized groups both within the nation-state and globally focus on their association with violence and conflicts. In Canada and the US, there has been an increased association between immigrants and racialized groups, and in the media racialized groups are being connected with crime (Jiwani 2006:39). Globally, the media represents post-colonial conflicts without interrogating the roles of Western states in instigating or prolonging the conflicts (Chimni 1998).

Within the US and Canada, Somali immigrants have been affected by racism and

xenophobia expressed in the media. For instance, in 2001 approximately 1,900 Somali refugees resettled in Milltown, New England. During this time, the media helped to fuel growing resentment in Milltown. The resentment stimulated town meetings to deal with "the Somali situation." Residents, who viewed Somalis as living off of the welfare system or taking jobs away from long- term residents, rallied. This was followed by a counter-rally of those who viewed Somalis as new neighbors who would eventually integrate into American society (Buck and Silver 2008). Although the "new neighbor" perception is less hostile towards Somalis immigration to Milltown, it is also problematic because it posits Somalis as grateful immigrants. In this narrative, the interventions of the Global North that impact the instabilities of the Global South are silenced. Further, the power dynamics of grateful immigrants and generous Americans are maintained (Buck and Silver 2008:47). Consequently, when news of Somali youth who return to Somalia, join gangs or leave school are represented in the media, they are viewed as ungrateful and abusing the generosity of the US or Canada. This conceals the structural violence these youth experience.

As will be seen below, the media analysis focuses on their representation of Somalis as Africans, terrorists and victims as opposed to Somalis as immigrants to North America because, at the time of the media analysis, North American newspapers were focusing on the East African famine. Even though the news focused on Somalia, these representations are presented in the North American news and read by Somali youth and members of the adoptive society. In representing Somali bodies in newspapers, the real lives of youth and their families are affected by the readers' views of them (Cherland and Harper 2007:243).

### Representations of Somalis in Newspapers

At the time of the media analysis (August 6-October 16, 2011), the news of Somalia and Somalis was focused on the famine in East Africa that was spreading and having drastic repercussions on Somalia. As of July 20, 2011, the UN declared that malnutrition rates in Somalia were the highest in the world. In the southern Bakool and Lower Shabelle regions, acute malnutrition rates were above 30% of the population. Among children less than 5 years old the deaths related to malnutrition exceeded six per 10,000. In the couple of months leading up to the UN report (July 2011) tens of thousands of Somalis had died and the UN estimated that 3.7 million, half of the Somali population, were in crisis (UN 2011).

In my analysis of the articles, I found that the two representations of Somalis as either recipients or victims of violence were often interwoven. For instance, there was a co-occurrence of words in the articles on the East African famine with *Al-*

*Shabab* and in most instances its links with *Al-Qaeda*, which invokes in the reader memories of 9/11. For example, *USA Today*, August 17, reported, "famine is worst in southern Somalia, where *Al-Shabab*, an Islamist terrorist organization with links to *Al-Qaeda*, is preventing aid groups from helping..." (Dorell 2011) and *The Edmonton Journal,* September 11 reported, "The problem is *Al-Shabab*, the *al-Qaida* affiliate that controls most of the starvation-ravaged regions of Somalia" (Gunter 2011), and *CBS News,* August 6, wrote, "In the south, where the famine is greatest, *Al-Shabab*, a terrorist group linked to *al-Qaeda*, is in control" (Hill 2011). These repetitive associations made between the famine and *Al-Shabaab* in the news without examining the relations between the transnational and local social, economic, and environmental forces that contributed to the disaster result in an internalist explanation for the drought and resulting famine blaming Somalia itself for the disaster.

In the articles, children are represented as the main victims, made explicit by providing statistics on the number of children who have died or are suffering from acute malnutrition; however, the number of men and women who have lost their lives is not presented. Children are presented in hordes, rather than as gendered individuals with personal histories. In the majority of the images of the famine there are pictures of women and young children, while there is only one of a man, a grief stricken father holding his baby's body wrapped in a prayer rug (Montreal Gazette 2011). Children are often shown as severely malnourished, lying on beds and are referred to as "faces of famine" (Hill 2011, Gettleman 2011).

For adults, there is a clear gendered differentiation between victim and perpetrator. Women in the images are represented as victims; caregivers of their ill children (Gettleman 2011) or standing in line at a refugee camp to get food (Hogendoorn 2011, The Huffington Post 2011) or medical care (Voice of America 2011).

Men are represented in the pictures and discourse surrounding the war and *Al-Shabaab* as the perpetrators of violence. For instance, in one image there is a group of men in green army clothes, faces covered, carrying bullets around their necks, guns in their hands, and sitting in the back of a truck (Gunter 2011). The outcome of combining these discourses is that they play into the narrative following 9/11 of the violence that Muslim women and children face at the hands of Muslim men's barbarism (Razack 2008:84).

The representations of Somali men as perpetrators of violence in the media dovetails with the 'War on Terror' rhetoric and constructs Somali male youth as a threat. Either viewed as dangerous, or at risk of becoming dangerous, Western views

of children and youth as a threat to societal order (Stephens 1995) interweave with the above narrative of male Muslims, constructing Somali male youth in Canada and the US as a threat to non-Somali, non-Muslim Canadian and American citizens. For instance, on August 7, 2010, *The Independent* published an article entitled "From high school hero to jihadist targeting the US." The article that reports on the allegation that twelve men and two women suspected of using a humanitarian charity to support *Al-Shabab* begins with: "They call him 'The Jihadist Next Door:' an all-American high school student from Alabama who recently popped up in a remote corner of East Africa..." (Adams 2010). The concern is not that Somali youth are fighting in Somalia, but that they will become threats to American and Canadian societies.

One of the main gaps I found in the articles was the absence of discussion of the structural violence, the human inequalities between the global North and the global South that is evident in the famine, specifically with relation to access to medicine. For instance, in the *Montreal Gazette*, August 14, an *Agence France- Presse* article is reprinted which states, "the baby died of drought and famine related complications;" however, later the article explains that the father with the baby was turned away from a government run hospital in the camp due to lack of drugs (Montreal Gazette 2011). The unequal access to medicine that affects those in the poorest countries in the world is evident in the images of women carrying children waiting in line for medical care for infectious diseases, such as malaria and cholera. The extreme human suffering of Somalis in East Africa, who do not have access to medication that is widely available in North America and Europe, is a clear example of the economic and political structural violence inflicted on the global South by the global North. Instead of any analysis of access to medicine, the articles represent people in the Third World, sitting passively waiting for aid to arrive (Hall 1990:17).

Moreover, my analysis of the articles showed that the US and Canada are represented as saviors and experts of the famine. It also reveals the US view that they have the right to control famine relief distribution. In an article in *USA Today*, August 17, the author suggests that one of the main obstacles in reaching *Al-Shabaab* controlled areas of Mogadishu are the US restrictions that prevent US money from assisting terrorist groups, and that aid was not getting to the people who needed it because of this restriction. Furthermore, the US State Department did not allow aid groups that received US funds to operate in *Al-Shabaab* controlled areas (Dorell 2011). In other articles, the restrictions of aid distribution are not blamed on the policies of the US State Department, but on *Al-Shabaab* who were blocking Western aid (Payton 2011). Silenced in these articles is any analysis of the link between

humanitarian interventions and imperialism or that other aid groups were involved in famine relief in *Al-Shabaab* controlled areas of Mogadishu.

The newspaper articles consistently referred to the amount of government money allocated to the relief efforts. The Canadian media suggested that the amount contributed by the government was sufficient, meaning they have done enough to help. For instance, the *Toronto Sun,* August 20, states, "The federal government said it *has already* made $72 million available *to keep more than 12 million people from death* in the East African country" (Valiante 2011, emphasis added). None of the articles, however, discussed the fact that the magnitude of the famine could have been preventable. Lankarani (2011) suggests that the drought in East Africa was predicted as part of global climate change in 2010, but it was not taken seriously. In fact, in 2009 DeCapua published an article in *Voice of America* that discussed a report issued by the UN Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit for Somalia stating that 1.4 million people were being affected by the drought in Somalia and that the humanitarian crisis is likely to get worse.

Further silenced in the articles was that there were actually few relief agencies, including health care professionals working in Mogadishu, despite the propaganda of the relief efforts from the West. Lankarani (2011) suggests that the health workers were very few and not adequately trained to deal with such a disaster and in a context where infants, children, and mothers were dying at such a high rate. One of the few articles that discussed the lack of relief in Mogadishu was in the *Toronto Sun,* August 20, that reported on a team of doctors from Islamic Relief Canada. One of the doctors interviewed stated that she did not see any other international relief organizations during her ten-day tour of Mogadishu (Valiante 2011). There is also a lack of attention to donor fatigue in the protracted refugee crisis that has left Somalis in camps in Kenya, Ethiopia and Yemen for the past two decades without sufficient funding and support.

The US and Canada are also represented as experts of the East African famine and the conflict in Somalia. For instance, in *The State Column,* August 14, a US 'expert' is quoted to show the number of children who have died as a result of the famine and drought in Somalia (The State Column 2011). In *USA Today*, August 17, the State department is quoted as the expert in knowledge surrounding *Al-Shabaab*'s refusal of foreign aid and how it prevents people from leaving the areas under their control (Dorell 2011). While American experts are given voice in the texts, Somalis remain for the most part voiceless, and there are very few quotes from East African experts.

Even the non-violent or positive representations of Somalis in the media were

associated with stereotypical representations. For the most part the articles focused on Somali-Canadians or Somali-Americans who are usually victims of violence. One is of K'naan, a Somali-Canadian rap superstar who together with Bono were advocating for Somalia and fundraising for famine relief (Hampson 2011). Other articles featured Somali-Canadians walking to raise money for famine relief (Butty 2011, CBC News 2011). In this research, the results of my media analysis of the representations of Somalis and Somalia parallel findings with the literature on the representations of Muslims in the media following 9/11. In the next section, I will move from an analysis of media representations of Somalis to how Somali youth make meaning of them.

### The impact of the media on the experiences of Somali youth(

I interviewed Somali youth regarding the negative representations of Somalis in the media, and its effects on their lives and identities. In the following quote, a 23- year-old Somali woman talks about her experience after the planes hit the twin towers in 2001.

> I didn't understand the heaviness of what happened. So I get home and my mom's like watching it and she just looks at me and she's like, "Our lives are about to change. It's over. We're screwed. Muslims are screwed"...Then... all this Islamophobia was coming out of the television screen and I was like "Okay, yeah it's true, our lives are changing" (Ikraan, March 5, 2011).

A 17-year old, named Heybe, who was born in Canada, talked about his frustrations over the representation of Somalia as a country because it contradicts his family's memories:

> The media is kind of, all biased. So I get frustrated sometimes. They say Somalia is the worst country in the world or that Mogadishu is the most dangerous city in the world. But it is somewhat true, but if they knew of how Somalia was then they would not be saying all this. My mom and dad say it was a peaceful country, a normal country (Heybe, March 8, 2011).

Kadiye, a leader among Somali youth in Minneapolis, discussed the lack of media attention to the American-backed Ethiopian invasion of Somalia in 2006. He noted how youth were confused as to why the media was not documenting the atrocities committed against Somalis as they were learning of them from their families back home. Kadiye suggests the crimes committed against Somalis in Somalia "woke up the youth," reigniting Somali nationalism in the diaspora. The youth reacted to this

by coming together to create change in their country.

> In '06 what happened is, Somalia was invaded. And… Somali youth were able to see what was happening there because they have families back home. And they had family that would call and would tell them, 'cause CNN doesn't tell you anything...so they know that the Ethiopian soldiers are raping women... They know that they're going house to house for no reason and killing people...so the anger's there (Kadiye, June 23, 2011).

Here, we see that the lack of media attention on issues that affect Somalis also affects youth's sense of belonging, conveying to them that the deaths of countless Somali people are not important enough to include in North American news reports. Others expressed the feelings of shame about being Somali as a result of the representations in the news, "I feel ashamed to say that I am Somali because there are crazy people [in Somalia]" (Idman, April 22, 2011). Kadiye expressed worry on how the media would impact Somali youths' identities:

> I think that also we need to do some programs that encourage our kids to be proud of being Somali. A lot of kids are not proud and I don't blame them because every time they look on TV they see a warlord that's killing people, people who are starving or pirates. Or some terrorist. So... that discourages them about being Somali (Kadiye, June 23, 2011).

From these interviews, it is apparent that media influences youth's feelings of their personal, familial, and national histories. The negative representations of Muslims following 9/11, and foreign interventions in Somalia do not go unnoticed by youth. In fact, the media representations of Somalia and Somalis as associated with violence and the contradictory lack of attention given to crimes against Somalis can lead to a sense of exclusion among youth.

**Structural Violence Experienced by Somali Youth**

On 16 October 2010, I sat in a banquet hall in Toronto where I listened to various speakers, who work on behalf of or with Somali youth, discuss the plight of Somali youth and the violence they experience. During that conference, the Toronto District School Board's Director of Education Equity stated that 36.7 % of Somalis in Toronto leave school early. The director, one of the few who focused on the structural inequalities that exist in Canada and how they affect youth, believed that the underlying issues for youth were alienation and disengagement. He argued that the bombardment of negative images in the media impress upon youth that they are

of no value (field notes October 16, 2010). These processes are evident in the stories of youth: "You will see that Muslims are almost second class citizens. And then the youth are obviously the ones who are the easiest targets because they're the ones who go to school" (Kadiye, June 23, 2011). Here, Kadiye is explaining that the media's representations of Muslims directly affect children who go to school and are embedded in an environment with peers, who may only know about Somalis from representations in the media. The research found that the media has a relationship with the discrimination Somali youth experience in educational spaces.

### Youth's experiences of racism

Both male and female youth experienced racism in school although in varying degrees. Even though the Somali youth I spoke with rarely explicitly stated that they experienced racism in school, their stories told a different experience. Aasiya, a 17-year old high school student remembers her family's first weeks of school in Canada, "I remember we started to get a lot of racist comments. It never really hurt me...racist comments. I was called the 'N' word once" (Aasiya, April 22, 2011). Jabrill, had similar experiences,

> I was picked on because [I was black] and I was Muslim. That is never really easy. At [the school I attended] there were a lot of wealthy kids and ... probably my family and me were the only dark people. Maybe they weren't used to it, but it was easier for them to pick on me (Jabrill, April 22, 2011).

Ikraan, now in her early 20s, articulated her feelings and beliefs regarding the hierarchy of citizenship in Canada and the impact on her family. In discussing her mother's dreams as well as her own, Ikraan says, "What I do know about is how Canada really puts you in your place, the racism" (Ikraan, March 5, 2011).

Ikraan was a good student in school, but she, like other young women I spoke with, felt that her teachers saw her as an anomaly rather than the norm.

> And my one teacher, he was like this older white male, like, old school science guy. He was a nice guy... He always made me feel like I belonged, as in, I've showed him that I belong in his classes. But at the same time, made me feel like I was a bit of an anomaly, like "what are *you* doing here?" (Ikraan, March 5, 2011).

The 1.5-generation, the generation of Somali youth who were born in Somalia and immigrated to North America as young children, and second-generation youth were more likely to report experiences of racism in interviews. Further, more males talked about their experiences of bullying that were instigated on issues of race than

females.

### Youth's experiences of discrimination

The male youth I interviewed talked about their experiences of discrmination based on associations made in the media between Somalis and piracy and/or terrorism. Their peers in school to bully them used these associations. Heybe, a high school student in Kitchener, discusses the changes he has experienced:

> What is kind of different now is stereotypes these days. Like they know about Somalia and pirates and all that. Like there are some ignorant kids out there that go around and start making fun of say me and my brother and some other Somalis I go to school with...I don't know they label us as pirates as well and don't really see why there is actually Somali pirates out there… Or they call us a terrorist (Heybe, March 18, 2011).

Others hear similar comments from their friends who pass these off as a joke, "My really close friends... so they throw jokes at me. So we had this heated conversation this one time about piracy" (Looyan, February 12, 2011). Educational spaces, such as mosques or *dugsi* (after-school and weekend Islamic schools) are also targets of discrimination. Kadiye, a young man in his early 20s in Minneapolis, explains how the media fuels discrimination, "When people see stuff on TV; you're seen as an enemy. Constantly at our mosque... people come at night and spray things like "Go home you terrorist" and stuff" (Kadiye, June 23, 2011).

The young women I interviewed and who wear the *hijab* believed they were more likely to experience discrimination because they were visibly Muslim. Abu-Lughod (2002) argues that the discourse of "saving Muslim women" mentioned earlier, implies they need to be saved from the oppression of Muslim men. The discourse reinforces the Orientalist notion that Islam is an inherently backward and oppressive religion. This is evidenced by the fact that Somali women's bodies have become reinscribed as the 'other' through articulations of women's rights (Razack 2008), implying that their rights are violated by men, mainly because they are Muslim. Aasiya describes her experience in high school:

> I always get, "Islam is *so* sexist"...I'll have people that will think of me as an oppressed person, sheltered, who don't know much about the world, have had someone say that to me...I get this all the time... because I wear this *hijab* ...I know that people think that that according to the law I have to go to school and that when I turn 18 that my parents will just marry me off (Aasiya, April 22, 2011).

Idman, who lived most of her life in different countries throughout Africa, recalls the feelings of difference she felt when she first went to school in Canada and her experiences of playing soccer on the school team:

> When I came to the school and wore the *hijab*, I felt not as comfortable as in Africa. I felt like everyone noticing I was different...I started feeling [different] because of the way they were looking at you...I won't say I felt shy, but not as comfortable as before. Because there was the issue in Quebec and that kind of thing was all political. Still soccer is soccer...But honestly... I think I could have done much better on that team if I didn't feel so different (Idman, April 22, 2011).

Here, Idman is talking about one of the *hijab* controversies in Canada. In 2007 in Quebec, a girl was told she could not play soccer while wearing a *hijab*. After some debate, the Quebec Soccer Federation upheld the decision that players were prohibited from wearing *hijabs* on the soccer field (Ravensbergen 2007). Idman's story shows that these narratives and policies can have an effect on young women's sense of belonging and in this case confidence.

### Youth's experiences of poverty

The focus on the dominant representations of Somalis in the media conceals other forms of structural violence, such as poverty, that many Somali children and their families experience. According to Ornstein (2006), 63% of Somalis in Toronto live below Canada's unofficial poverty line.[4] Three-fourths of Somali children live in families below the Low-Income Cutoff. Citizenship and Immigration Canada (2011) estimate that Somalis under 30 represent 80% of the Somali-Canadian population (personal communication Metropolis Roundtable, October 6, 2011). In the state of Minnesota, the Somali population is younger than the general population with a median age of 25 years resulting in approximately half of the population being 24 years old or younger (US Census Bureau 2010). According to US Refugee Resettlement Watch (2009) as of 2007 about 51% of residents who were born in Somalia are living in poverty; therefore, Somalis in the US are among the youngest and the poorest in Minnesota. Educational scholars and practitioners have long recognized that poverty has an impact on educational attainment (Levin 1995). My research confirms this view; I found that poverty impacts the education of Somali youth, which is exacerbated by the pressure on some youth to make money to help

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[4] There is no official poverty line in Canada the "Low Income Cutoff" continues to be the measure used by Statistics Canada.

their families in Canada or the US, and/or to send remittances back home.

A young Somali man from St. Paul described his experiences as follows, "The snow starts and it's freezing. A month later my mom got sick from the cold. She had surgery on her neck and could not work... I lived in West St. Paul and there was too much violence" (Aadan, July 2, 2011). Here, Aadan was describing his first few years in the US when no one in his family was working because his mom got sick during the winter and as a result had to move to a low-income area of the city that was known for gun violence. In Canada, Somali youth have similar experiences as 23-year-old Ikraan explained:

> We moved around quite a bit and you could just see how living in Canada just brought my family down. At first we were living... in Mississauga ... we had ... a decent apartment, everything was fine and there was a lot of hope. And then it just got really bad until one point when I was 10 (years old); we were actually in a shelter (Ikraan, March 5, 2011).

Iqra discussed how the underemployment of her father who was a journalist in Somalia had lasting effects on her father and her family:

> My Dad on the other hand, went through what most immigrant [men go through], he couldn't find a job...He couldn't find a job here, so he became a dishwasher...and that destroyed him ... He lost everything. He lost his self-esteem, his dignity... everything was stripped away from him (Iqra, April 16, 2011).

These cases show that the underemployment of Somali parents affect youth who experience the effects of living in urban poverty.

In the US, the inequity reflected in schools is not lost on the youth. Kadiye remembers his experience in Nashville, "The school was terrible, and they had books that were very old. As long as you went to school, you passed" (Kadiye, June 23, 2011). Alma compares her experiences in school in Toronto and Waterloo, "I lived the Toronto lifestyle and it's not good, especially the schooling and everything is not as good as here (Waterloo)" (Alma, February 10, 2011). Aamino believes that in some areas of Toronto there are lower levels of educational attainment, "In Toronto… schools… in certain areas… the children there don't graduate in general. Let alone the Somali community and there's a lot of violence there, guns, drugs" (Aamino, March 7, 2011).

Somali families in North America are often female-headed due to the loss of men during war and migration. As a result, the eldest boy usually takes on the responsibility to financially take care of the family as he sees this as his role. Many of

the young men I interviewed who were the eldest in their families sought employment to help their families while they lived in other countries. For instance, Aadan found a job as a mechanic's assistant in Saudi Arabia, Amiir got a job as a dishwasher when he fled to Egypt and Abuubakar worked as a machine operator helper in Yemen. Paid work helped alleviate some of the burden of poverty and offered these youth a sense of pride in helping their families. These experiences affect the ways these young men view themselves in North America.

For many of the young men I interviewed they wanted to get a job to contribute to their families financially and were struggling with the idea of staying in school and not having a job. Aadan describes how his brother supported the family, "No one was working in the family. My brother worked at a bagel factory and went to school at the same time to support the family" (Aadan, July 2, 2011). Somali youth who immigrated without other family members discussed the problems they experienced balancing school and work in order to support themselves. Anwar found work as a cab driver while he attended university, "I was 21 when I came… it was a challenge to just do normal things… and go to school at the same time. Just pay for myself. And contribute to back home" (Anwar, June 26, 2011).

It is not uncommon for an individual to have many dependent relatives in Somalia and/or other countries who rely on his or her monthly remittances. Many youth discussed the difficulties they have in trying to send remittances to their friends and family, while studying or continuing their education. Basra believes that many youth leave school because of the pressure to remit money, as was her experience:

> I came at 16 years old, 4 years ago. I started high school and I tried to drop out at 18 (years old) to get work and help my family back home. I needed money for my family and myself. The elders told me to go back to school, to finish high school. Many students leave school to send remittances –everyone needs to send money home. If mom calls and says, "There is no food," then what do you do? There is pressure from family to send money, to leave school to help family (Basra, June 14, 2011).

Anwar told me how much of his initial income went to his family members, "I remember this... when I came to this country there's this stipend... that you get from the county...They give you like $250 for the first month, and for 8 months that will continue... [I was] looking for a job and I was sending $100 back home from that" (Anwar, June 26, 2011). In Minneapolis, both the youth and the elders said that many youth leave school or do not go to college because there is pressure from family back

home to remit money (field notes, June 15, 2011). While it was common for Somali men and women, during my fieldwork, to comment on the need to have daughters to take care of them financially as they are thought to better take care of their families, similar to Horst (2008:154), I found that both young men and young women feel the pressure to remit and send remittances to family.

In summary, routine and normalized forms of violence are embedded into many Somali youths' lives. These manifest themselves in discrimination and poverty. The gendered representations of Somalis found in the discourse analysis of Canadian and American newspapers are the same representations made by Somali youth's peers to discriminate against them. Male youth experience discrimination based on the belief that they are violent whereas female youth experience discrimination based on the belief that they are oppressed.

Many of the youth I interviewed came from female-headed households, the majority of which are on social assistance. Families headed by both parents experienced unemployment and underemployment, which not only affects the families' economic well-being, but also their emotional health. A group of youth that is often overlooked is Somali youth who have immigrated to Canada or the US without family and therefore need to support themselves and their family in Somalia or in other countries while attending school. The importance of remittances that ensure the survival of families in Somalia and elsewhere in the diaspora directly affects the socioeconomic status of youth in Canada and the US.

**Interpersonal Violence: Fighting with Peers and Joining Gangs**

In this research, I found that some Somali male and female youth who were once the recipients of structural violence started to react to their marginalization by fighting back. Although I use the term "bullying" in the following I recognize the need to be critical of bullying discourse because this overreaching term has the possibility to conceal the root causes of bullying that includes racism and discrimination, a much more systematic form of violence. The findings reveal that structural forms of violence can lead to interpersonal forms of violence among youth, including joining gangs. Male youth revealed that the reason they joined gangs was for protection from peers who were bullying them in school.

"It's a society where, I guess, you have to prove yourself. It's like a prison. If you don't prove yourself then you're going to be bullied" (Kadiye, June 23, 2011). Kadiye is attempting to articulate the kind of environment a Somali newcomer experiences in school. He attempts to understand the reasons he fought with his peers at school, "Even bullies, they don't want to get hurt. They don't want to constantly fight every

day. They want someone that they could beat up today and then that's it. So me being hardheaded, they didn't like me" (Kadiye, June 23, 2011). When I asked Jabrill what caused him to fight in elementary school he said:

> Being isolated...not being picked on but like unanimously being picked on just everybody. Then you don't know who or where to fight and you are enclosed into this little box and there was nobody there (Jabrill, April 22, 2011).

Newcomers I interviewed observed that they were bullied because they were labeled as 'refugees' and did not speak English. Roble remembers his experience in elementary school in Minneapolis:

> I started as a 4th grader in Minneapolis, 99% Somalis who come to first period didn't know English...The other students would make fun of me and they would call me *qohoti* as a joke, meaning refugee. I got into fights for the first two months and would fight everyone. I got suspended (Roble, July 2, 2011).

Other youth describe situations where they fought because they were sticking up for family members. In fact, many of the male youth I interviewed believed it was important that they went to school with family members who would protect them from bullies: "My little brothers got picked on so I would go and fight them. I had to fight to stick up for them. I got detention" (Abdikarim, July 2, 2011). For both young men and women bullying was directed at them by a number of different peer groups, including other Somalis. In addition, there is pressure by youth themselves to join certain groups, including gangs and if the individuals do not agree, they may be bullied. The divisions and alliances between clan-families sometimes play a role, thus those who do not belong to the dominant clans are more likely to be bullied.

For some youth, their experiences of exclusion lead them to violence as a way to cope with adversity. In my interviews, some of the young men explained they were pushed to hang out with certain groups of people because they were excluded from other Somalis. Aadan, who immigrated to the US when he was a toddler, explains:

> Before I came to *dugsi* I hung out with bad people. They fought, some went to jail, gang bangers. They were the first people I met when I was little, Somali people are cocky and say I am not Somali. The others had my back, not Somalis (Aadan, July 2, 2011).

Somali youth often get involved with violence when they are labeled, excluded, or ostracized from certain peer groups, including other Somali youth. One extreme case was of a young Somali man who was the leader of a Somali gang, who made attempts to justify the violence he committed as follows:

> There was no one to protect the women. Black Americans did not make us feel welcome. They showed us they didn't respect us. We come from a warrior country; but, we came here to do right to go to school, to get jobs. They pushed me to be fighting with them and I said I would keep on coming. I organized people to beat them (Amadayo, July 2, 2011).

Amadayo's story and the others above show the relationship between interpersonal, structural, and symbolic forms of violence. Scheper-Hughes (2004) suggests that violence can be thought of as a continuum that includes "small wars" or "invisible genocide" that make the oppressed complicit in their own destruction. This is carried out in everyday spaces, such as in the schools and in the streets. Amadayo's case shows how the continuum of violence, starting with structural forms, including poverty and discrimination and symbolic forms, such as racial dominance enabled him to dehumanize African-Americans. These processes of dehumanization led to interpersonal violence, constructing African- Americans as expendable persons (Scheper-Hughes 2004:14). After being stabbed, Amadayo left the gang life and has been attempting to get others to do the same. He finds strength in the *dugsi*, a place with people who have helped him to reconnect to his faith, offered him social and emotional support, and given him a purpose by providing him with a mentorship role to youth who are involved with gangs.

## Spaces of Belonging and Creating Change

### *Islamic educational spaces*

Somali communities have responded to the perceived risk of their youth, including the establishment of community educational spaces to raise awareness of Somali history, cultural life and to develop communal support. Similar to Amadayo above, many Somali youth find in *dugsi* a place where they feel they belong. At a *dusgsi* in St. Paul I interviewed four young men who described the role of the *dugsi* in changing their behavior and increasing their grades. Roble explains his experience:

> A year ago mom would say go to *dugsi*... There was nothing else to do after school, so I come here. I come here for tutoring, to study Qur'an...My grades went up, it helped me. I used to have Cs and Ds and now I have As and Bs (Roble, July 2, 2011).

Ghedi describes what life was like before he went to *dugsi* and how it has changed his life, "A year ago I used to hang out with bad people who did bad things. I started fighting with other boys. I came to *dugsi* and haven't gotten into a fight since freshman year. I am learning Arabic and the Qur'an" (Ghedi, July 2, 2011). Berns-

McGown (1999) observes that Muslims in the West re-negotiate their relationship with Islam. Aadan explains how the *dugsi* he attends in St. Paul has adapted its programs to meet the changing needs of Somali-Americans, "Now I learn the Qur'an and understood it. Memorizing is not enough for Somali- Americans. I am hanging out with good people. Now I sometimes help my mom with the Qur'an, and read when I get home" (Aadan, July 2, 2011). Here, Aadan is saying that he had to learn how to analyze and understand the Qur'an to enable himself to relate the teachings to his life in the US. Similar to this *dugsi*, in Kitchener, I attended a mosque that had large prayer rooms along with multiple classrooms for students to learn the Qur'an. It also had a library filled with books in Arabic and English to promote literacy and to provide an Islamic education. The mosque had a large gymnasium for boys' basketball and soccer. Heybe describes his feeling of belonging to the mosque and the program for boys in Kitchener:

> Fridays we go to the mosque because we are Muslim. All the brothers come together we have a class and then we play basketball...It feels good when you have a group of friends that don't make fun of each other. It has made life in Canada a lot of fun (Heybe, March 8, 2011).

It is important to note that young men more than young women attend the *dugsi*. This is partially due to the fact that sports programs are for boys.

Islamic educational spaces not only provide a space of belonging for Somali youth, but also the courage to assert their Muslim identities and to offer them the knowledge and tools to challenge dominant representations of Somalis and Muslims in North America. In the past Islamic educational spaces, including *dugsi* or *madrasa* (Islamic schools or institutions) were spaces to assert Muslim identities and form resistance movements against colonizers (Samatar 1982). In Somalia and in the diaspora, they continue to be important for religious education and identity formation. Hoodfar (2003) suggests that young women often take to wearing a veil to assert their identity rather than being identified by others as an outsider through processes of exclusion. Ikraan who attended mosque with her mother remembers how she resisted Islamophobia after 9/11 by going to school wearing a *hijab*:

> I was really angry at the backlash of what happened... I actually never used to wear the *hijab*, ever...[Then] I was wearing the *hijab* and I did for, like, a couple months in eighth grade. I was like screw this, like I want to be visibly Muslim, like talk to me now, like, talk to my face (Ikraan, March 5, 2011).

In Ikraan's story we can see that colonial stereotypes of Muslims and the demonization of Islam can play a role in young women's decisions to veil (Hoodfar

2003). Aamino had similar feelings of challenging the representation of Somali women by wearing a *hijab*.

> This is something that's an obligation of my faith, and as a Muslim ... I represent people...if I didn't wear it people would know I'm from Somalia but they wouldn't know what faith I was... I make it a point that people know because I'm a good person (Aamino, March 7, 2011).

In the current post-9/11 social and political environment young women find it important to reinforce their Muslim identities (Berns McGown 1999, Hoodfar 2003).ᔆ

## *National educational spaces*

Many youth are challenging the dominant representations of Somalis by coming together, advocating for their communities and getting involved in national and political processes. In my fieldwork, I found that both young men and women were eager to receive a Somali national education. Aasiya, who in her oral history interview describes her feelings towards Somalia and bringing her passion into her classroom:

> Canada kind of triggered something in me to become politically active... Thinking of Somalia, but raising awareness. I do chapels in school. I would write letters to the PM (Prime Minister)... I head up a social concerns group in my class. And I really do want to go back to Somalia even if that means risking my life... I don't want to see people in a huge culture clash and not feeling comfortable, I want them to go back home. And if I can't do it in my lifetime at least I want to ensure it for my children's lifetime (Aasiya, April 22, 2011).

Through educating the youth and bringing together different generations Kadiye is working towards raising national consciousness through youth leadership: "We encourage youth to be leaders... We were working on different projects back home that deal with such things. Dealing with elders and getting them to educate the youth and kinda put youth in a leadership position" (Kadiye, June 23, 2011).

Youth groups, such as the US based Young Achievers and Poet Nation, have created community educational spaces that have enthused youth to become more involved in some way with Somali communities in Somalia or elsewhere in the diaspora. For example, during the Young Achievers shows, the youth dress for the most part in traditional Somali clothes and perform Somali music and dance, and recite poetry. Similarly, Poet Nation promotes Somali roots in poetry. Fisher (2003:363), in her research of African Diaspora Participatory Literacy Communities (ADPLC), found that youth use poetry as a vehicle to combat poverty and violence

in their communities. Poet Nation, acts in similar ways, using poetry, traditional Somali music and contemporary hip-hop that sends political, social, and cultural messages to their peers. While touring different venues for performances, they have joined I am a Star, a campaign to unify Somali youth and communities, aid workers in Mogadishu, and other volunteers and donors to provide humanitarian relief to Somalia. Through their campaigns, youth have helped communities in Somalia, including rebuilding hospitals, funding mobile hospitals, making clean water accessible, and improving sanitation, among other projects. These projects not only help to rebuild infrastructure and institutions in Somalia, but also reignite national consciousness among the youth in the Somali diaspora.

### The reconstruction of identities

Many Somali youth have feelings of exclusion as a result of their experiences of structural and interpersonal violence. Idman expresses how her feelings of difference affect her:

> I felt, I realize now I have developed into a new person.... I have become more sensitive from this kind of stuff. I don't really like it... I felt like I had to step back now because no one accepts me because I am different so I don't want to get hurt (Idman, April 22, 2011).

Some youth expressed feelings of exile, "I guess growing up in Canada you never felt like it was home, 'cause it's not. And I don't have a home, that's how I see myself, I can't go back to Somalia, I'm not going to call this place my home" (Ikraan, March 5, 2011). Idman who has been separated from other Somalis for the majority of her life expresses similar feelings of exile, but also longing to belong to the Somali nation.

> I find identity means if you know who you are...if you are with your people a lot and you are close with them...but if you're not of their same culture or their same country, you are not really who you are...I am from Somalia, but in your heart you feel this empty hole because you have not been with your people... You know how people sit up with pride; you feel they are proud of it because they are with their people they love it even if their country is in war, they don't care. They love it because they are with their people. I don't feel that (Idman, April 22, 2011).

Feelings of exclusion compel some youth to work towards proving they belong to the American or Canadian societies. For this reason, some have tried to conceal their Somali identity because they believe it is difficult to cope with multiple national identifications, as Kadiye explained: "That's a huge problem with Somali youth...

'cause they feel that if they give up their Somali identity, they'll lose themselves. And if they give up their American identity, then they are isolated" (Kadiye, June 23, 2011).

Others promote their other national identifications because the representations of Somalis in the media embarrass them:

> To be honest if I see too much negative I feel I want to deny who I am. I am in denial sometimes and I will turn on and praise more my mom's nationality, Yemeni nationality than my Somali nationality because I am half. But I honestly I am ashamed I feel like denying it (Idman, April 22, 2011).

Conversely, Jabrill feels like he needs to embrace his Somali identity and challenge the representations of Somalis.

> I don't feel embarrassed because there are a lot of good Somalis but I feel sorry for them because I don't believe that people are *bad* they are just put bad situations...And it affects me a bit more than people would expect because I think I'll have to make up for their losses by giving Somalia a better name in my own little way by being successful or helping the country itself...I feel very much Somali (Jabrill, April 22, 2011).

Still, other youth have embraced their supranational identities. Aasiya articulates her identification with the Islamic *umma*[5] through her story of choosing to wear the *hijab*, "I don't believe you have to wear [the *hijab*] but that is my opinion...because why I wear it, it's an identity ... so I always say I am Muslim. It's who I am, the way I live my life" (Aasiya, April 22, 2011).

For Ikraan who identifies with being both Somali and Muslim, she also identifies with the African diaspora or a black identity:

> Being black also is a new identity that I've taken on now. I didn't take it on back then 'cause being Somali was what it was. And like other Caribbean, African peoples in my neighborhood didn't see me as black...I didn't know for the longest time where I fit and I didn't really feel comfortable taking that title on. I felt Muslim first, or Somali first, and I still do. But in my new environment, I'm black. And that's funny because my identity became this way because of how I've been treated, and I get treated...(Ikraan, March 5, 2011).

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[5] Islamic *umma* denotes the community of Muslims that transcends national and state borders and boundaries (Berns McGown 1999).

Almost all of the youth I interviewed identified with being Somali. Many of the youth were involved in rebuilding Somalia, with groups that raised national consciousness among the youth by maintaining knowledge of their national histories as well as reinventing culture and traditions. Others helped Somalis in their local communities. For the majority of the youth being Muslim is inextricably linked with being Somali (Berns McGown 1999, Horst 2008). Few others identify with the African diaspora, an identity that they adopted in Canada and the US. These cases show that these levels of identifications may coexist, although depending on the context, one may take precedence over others.

### The effects of media representations on youth's identities

The gendered representations of Somalis in Canadian and American newspapers are not separate from post-9/11 geopolitical processes. They mirror those experiences of discrimination Somali male and female youth experience in educational spaces in North America. Male youth who are viewed as perpetrators of violence are considered at risk for leaving school, fighting with peers, joining gangs or getting involved in criminal activities. They are also viewed as "the risk" (Stephans 1995), that is as if there was something inherent within them that make them particularly prone to violence because they are Somali, black, and Muslim. Through this research I have made young men's views and experiences visible to reveal the different challenges they experience as young Somali men in North America (Brun 2000).

For young Somali women, the representation of the veiled woman that needs saving in the North American media was instrumentalized to justify the US military invasion of Afghanistan (Abu-Lughod 2002), and this has led to discrimination and violence. This research, however, supports others that have found Somali women's vulnerability and victimhood should not be assumed (Abu-Lughod 2002, Hoodfar 2003). This study builds upon others that have found that the media constructs and reproduces ideologies of racism (Hall 1990, Jiwani 2006), but differs by considering the various ways this is experienced by youth based on their gender.

The findings build upon Scheper-Hughes' (2004) theory of the "continuum of violence," which illustrates the relationship between structural, symbolic, and physical violence. Similar to Scheper-Hughes and Bourgouis (2004), the findings demonstrate that the socio-cultural dimensions of violence need to be considered in research. Youth's experiences with routine, normalized, and interpersonal forms of violence need to be examined using a gendered perspective that is also grounded in history and considers the effects of current geopolitical processes. The approach will help to understand the reasons people become violent and/or the ways they react to

the violence. Displaced youth also need to be considered as gendered actors with specific needs, strengths, vulnerabilities, and desires (Brun 2000).

The representations of Somalis as perpetrators or victims of violence conceal Somali youths' strengths and coping strategies in North America (Boyden 2009). The development and spread of Somali community educational spaces take on particular importance due to the experiences of discrimination in Canadian and American societies. Through using educational spaces as sites to examine how media representations affect local lives it also becomes evident that school performance is not separate from relationships with peers, families, communities, or global politics. As a result, this research supports existing studies, which propose that researchers need to examine the interactions between different learning environments, and how they influence students' educational attainment as well as their identities (Lukose 2007).

Similar to other studies of identity (Gupta 1997), this research shows that Somali youth have multiple and simultaneous, and not always contradictory identities. For instance, Cressey (2006) found that young British Pakistani and Kashmiri people are pulled in multiple directions of identification. These include British and Pakistani or Kashmiri national identities as well as their Muslim identity. This is similar to the Somali case. Few of the youth spoke of their subnational identities, whether they were clan related or regional, even though I am aware that they are present. Clan-family identities are important in social relations and intersect with political practices within the Somali community, even when submerged. Almost all of the youth I interviewed identified with being Somali. Youth, however, also expressed simultaneous attachments to Canadian and American national identities.

El-Haj (2002), in her study with Muslim and Arab youth, called for more research to understand how global politics and the resulting media representations contribute to shaping youth's identities. The case of Somali youth builds upon other research that shows identities are reconstructed in different contexts and environments (Farah 2005). For instance, in the current post-9/11 social and political environment young women find it important to reinforce their Muslim identities. This research confirms others that suggest that many Muslim women view wearing the *hijab* as an avenue to assert their Muslim identities, helping them to mediate and adapt to the adoptive society (Hoodfar 2003). This study also supports research that shows that Somali immigrants, including youth, are redefining what it means to be Muslim in North America (Berns McGown 1999).

Some Somali youth identify with the African diaspora, an identity that they adopted in Canada and the US where traces of theories of race from slavery and

colonialism remain. In assuming these identities, the youth are not denying their Somali and Muslim identities, but identifying with them simultaneously. They are transforming what it means to be Somali in North America and in this historical moment.

**Conclusion**

Media representations of Somalis and Somalia affect Somali youth in North America. The effects on youth include discrimination, racism and bullying by their peers in schools. As a result of these experiences some youth leave school and engage in interpersonal forms of violence, including joining gangs. The findings of this research show; however, that we need to change the focus on the youth themselves to consider the effects of the larger social, economic, and political dynamics that put youth at risk. Community educational spaces influence Somali youth's experiences by offering them support and creating spaces of belonging. More research is needed on the affects of community educational spaces on the integration of refugee youth in schools.

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