



Funded by the European Union's  
Asylum, Migration and  
Integration Fund



# Caring for Unaccompanied Migrant Children

## Somalia



ARSIS, ASSOCIATION FOR THE SOCIAL SUPPORT OF YOUTH



## INTRODUCTION

---

Foster parents are one of the most important people in the life of unaccompanied migrant children – children who have had to leave their homes and embark on perilous journeys, and who have no adult to take responsibility for them.

If your child has grown up in the Federal Republic of Somalia (hereinafter referred to as: Somalia) or spent a significant part of their life in that country, this information leaflet will help you prepare to welcome and care for them. This leaflet is an educational tool that is designed to give you a first insight and basic introduction to Somalia. It is recommended that you build your knowledge further through research by, for example, consulting the resources listed at the end of the leaflet, exchanges with the Somali community (diaspora/migrant organizations) and the interactions with the child you are looking after.

## WHY DO CHILDREN LEAVE SOMALIA?

---

Unaccompanied migrant children and young people from Somalia may have left their country for several different reasons, which are complex and likely unique to each child. It is important to not make assumptions on why a child has left, but instead engage in dialogue (if appropriate, and not upsetting to the child) to understand the child's perspective. Be mindful that the child may already have had to re-tell their story to several people before you, and they may not wish to do so again.

The political situation in Somalia has been unstable in the past decades. This combined with a series of natural disasters generates a devastating impact on the civilian population, causing further food insecurity and mass displacement. Heightened political tensions between federal and regional authorities ahead of the 2020/2021 elections prevented the implementation of judicial, constitutional, and human rights reforms. The prolonged conflict, droughts, floods, and a locust invasion worsened the humanitarian crisis and resulted in the displacement of over 1.2 million people by November 2020, in addition to the nearly 2.6 million already displaced in the country.



© IOM/Muse Mohammed

A significant number of children fleeing Somalia are doing so to escape poverty, conflict and dream of a better life and access to education. In Somalia, it is estimated that approximately 840,000 children under the age of five are acutely malnourished, including nearly 143,000 who are likely to be severely malnourished by December 2021. Armed groups, such as the terrorist, jihadist group Al-Shabaab, target children for recruitment as soldiers, forced marriage, and rape. The situation forces children to flee, many times without their parents' consent. In cases in which families send their children abroad, the reality that a child has to face is not always known or understood by the families. They are also most likely to be victims of abuse, including sexual and gender-based violence (GBV), as well as exploitation. Migrating children face serious protection risks as well. Their travel conditions are extremely difficult, while smugglers often do not provide food and water and distances are often covered on foot.

## ABOUT SOMALIA

---



Somalia, officially the Federal Republic of Somalia, is an East African country located in the Horn of Africa. It borders Ethiopia to the northwest, Djibouti to the west and Kenya to the southwest. Somalia has the longest coastline of mainland Africa. Geographically, its terrain consists mainly of plateaus, plains and highlands. High temperatures prevail all year round, with periodic winds, monsoons and irregular rainfall.

The country has an estimated population of 16 million. The capital and most populous city is Mogadishu. About 85% of its inhabitants are Somalis, who have historically lived in the north of the country. Other ethnic groups, like Arabs and Bantu are concentrated to a large extent in the south.

Somalia has a long, interesting history and was a thriving commercial center in the classical era with strong trading links in the region. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Somalia was colonized by Italy, Britain and Ethiopia. In 1960, it gained independence with the establishment of the independent Republic of Somalia. The Supreme Revolutionary Council came to power in 1969 and founded the Somali Democratic Republic, which collapsed 22 years later, in 1991, with the start of the Somali Civil War.

In the early 2000s, a number of provisional federal administrations were set up, that were followed by unrest and conflict between rebel groups. By mid-2012, the guerrillas had lost most of the territory they had occupied and the search for more permanent democratic institutions begun. A new interim constitution was passed in August 2012, reforming Somalia as a federation. In the same month, the Somali Federal Government was established. Today in Somalia still faces an ongoing armed conflict, insecurity, lack of state protection, and recurring humanitarian emergencies.

## LANGUAGE

---

The official languages of Somalia are Somali and Arabic. Somali dialects are divided into three main groups: the North, the Benadir and the Mai. North Somali forms the basis for Somali. Benadir is spoken in Benadir coast, from Adale to the South in Merca, including Mogadishu, as well as in the inland. Mai is spoken mainly by the Digil and Mirifle (Rahanweyn) tribes in southern Somalia.

## FAITH AND RELIGION

---

99.8% of the Somali population is Muslim. The majority belongs to the Sunni branch of Islam and the Shafi'i school of Islamic jurisprudence. Sufism, the mystical expression in Islam, is also well established, with many local “jama'a” (“zawiya”) or congregations of the various Tariqa or Sufi guilds. The Somali constitution also establishes Islam as the state religion of the Federal Republic of Somalia and the Islamic Sharia law as the main source of national law. It also stipulates that no law which is inconsistent with the principles of Sharia can be put into effect. Without any official churches and out of fear from repercussions by Al-Shabaab, Christians worship in secret.

It is important to take time to find out what matters to the child you are looking after, rather than assume that they will observe certain practices or hold certain values and beliefs.

## FAMILY LIFE

---

As in any other country, family life across the country is shaped by different cultural, economic, social and other characteristics.

The communities in Somalia are organized on the basis of the clan. Belonging to a clan plays a significant role in social life, culture and politics. In general terms, clan groups are highly patriarchal and are divided into sub-clans, with smaller groups of extended families. The concept “family” itself often refers to an extensive kinship network and should be considered as collectivist with various communal responsibilities, i.e. upbringing of a child.



© IOM/Muse Mohammed

Traditionally, Somali families are large, with many households including five to ten children. In most families, men and elder family members were assigned positions of highest respect by religious tradition and have the overall responsibility for family unity and well-being. Usually, lifelong respect for parents is believed to be the parents’ right and the children’s obligation. There may be occasions of role reversal, where children, by virtue of language and learned behavior, teach their parents. Adolescents may be in a disconnect within families and the community: rebellion, involvement in gang related activities, drug use, and the recruitment for terror activities can cause anxiety or tensions within the family.

In most families, women take care of children and household chores, while Somali men are the breadwinners. It is therefore that mostly the Somali women are in charge of prioritizing and promoting their children's health, education, and well-being, while Somali men only take up a small role in this regard. Patterns of family interaction direct women to defer to men, especially in public. In general, men are dominant in public, while women are dominant with regards to in-home management.

The rate of female genital mutilation in Somalia is estimated at 98%. This harmful practice carries serious health consequences, and it increases the likelihood of dying during childbirth. 34% of girls are married before their 18th birthday and 16% are married before the age of 15. Being married robs them of their childhoods and increases the likelihood of early pregnancy and school dropout.

However, remember that each family is different: do not make assumptions on the child's views or behaviors around family or societal values, but ask questions (if appropriate).

## CULTURE AND TRADITIONS

---

Somali art is both traditional and modern. It includes the artistic tradition of pottery, music, architecture, woodcarving, etc. Furthermore, Somalia has a rich musical heritage centered on traditional Somali folklore. Somali scholars have produced many notable examples of Islamic literature over the centuries. With the adoption of the Latin alphabet as the nation's standard orthography in 1972, many contemporary Somali writers have also published novels, some of which have received worldwide recognition. In sports, football is the most popular in Somalia. Important domestic competitions are the Somalia League and the Somalia Cup, with the Somali national football team playing in international tournaments.

In addition, henna is an important part of the Somali culture. It is worn by women of Somalia on the hands, feet and throat during weddings, the Eid (Arabic word for feast, holiday or festival; there is, for example, "Eid al-Fitr", which is the "Festival of Breaking the Fast", and "Eid al-Adha" which is the "Feast of the Sacrifice"), Ramadan and other festive occasions. Somali henna designs often have floral patterns and triangular shapes. The palm is also often decorated with a henna dot and the fingertips are dipped into the paint. Parties with henna take place usually before the wedding ceremony. The Somalian clothing style is very diverse and mostly influenced by where people live. The diversity is a consequence of the country's location along an international trade route. Men typically wear a "macawiis", a sarong-like garment worn around the waist, while most women wear a "guntiino", a long piece of cloth tied over the shoulder and draped around the waist.



© IOM/Muse Mohammed

Islamic principles prescribe that the left hand should be used for hygiene purposes. Therefore, it is considered more unclean and should not be used for functions such as waving, eating, or offering items. Always use the right hand to gesture, touch people or offer items.

## FOOD

---

Somali cuisine, which varies from region to region, is a mixture of different gastronomic influences. It is the product of Somalia's rich tradition and trade. Despite the diversity, there is one element that unites the different local cuisines: all food is served halal, which means the animal was slaughtered and prepared as described and accepted by Islamic law. Moreover, there are no pork dishes, and no alcohol is served.

The most popular rice is basmati, which usually works as the main dish. Spices such as cumin, cardamom, cloves, cinnamon and sage are used to add fragrances to various rice dishes.



© IOM/Rikka Tuppez

The “Xalwo” (“halvah”) is a popular sweet, reserved for special celebrations such as Eid celebrations or wedding receptions. It is made from corn starch, sugar, cardamom powder, nutmeg powder and mistletoe. Peanuts are sometimes added to enhance the texture and flavor. After meals, houses are traditionally perfumed using frankincense (“liban”) or incense (“cuunsi”), which is prepared in an incense burner called “dabqaad”.

Preparing the right meals can help a child feel welcome in your home. It is best not to assume and instead find out what they like to eat.

# ADAPTATION TO A NEW ENVIRONMENT

---

Arriving in a new country may involve a significant culture shock and take a great deal of adjustment. The child you are caring for will need your support as they come to terms with their new surroundings, difficult experiences, losses, and uncertain future.

For Somali children who arrive in Europe, differences may be overwhelming: although they now are in a place of relative peace and security, the lifestyle and values of your country can be disturbing and confusing. For example, Somali young people may experience for the first-time media and advertising featuring nudity, romance and sex.

Young people may experience conflicting emotions. Some might embrace their new culture and reject the traditions of their elders; other may strongly identify with their existing cultural/religious values as means of keeping a connection with their country and community. Neither approach is right or wrong, and both should be respected.

It is important to keep communication open with your child to understand their needs, being aware of how your own culture also underpins your behavior. It is vital to engage in dialogue with your child (if appropriate and not upsetting for the child) to help them settle into your home.

*This document was funded by the **European Union's Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund** and was made possible through the work of IOM and ARSIS under the Unaccompanied Children in Alternative Residence (U-CARE) project.*

*The findings, interpretations and conclusions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of the International Organization of Migration or its Member States. The designations employed and the presentation of material throughout the work do not imply official endorsement, acceptance or the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of IOM or the European Commission concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area, or of its authorities, or concerning its frontiers or boundaries.*

*The content of this publication represents the views of the author only and is their sole responsibility. The European Commission does not accept any responsibility for use that may be made of the information it contains.*

*References used for compiling this leaflet and recommended for further research: Amnesty International, Somalia 2020; Britannica, Somalia; Care, Somalia Food Insecurity Crisis; CIA World Fact Book: Somalia; Cultural Atlas, Somali Culture; Lonely Planet: Somalia; Islamic Relief Worldwide, Women in Somalia Warn Against the Dangers of Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting; Reuters, Outrage as Somali parliament drafts law permitting child, forced marriages; Secretary-General on Children and Armed conflict; 2020 Report; UNICEF, Child Protection; UNICEF, No Mother Wants Her Child to Migrate.*



## **Unaccompanied Children in Alternative Residence (U-CARE)**

**International Organization for Migration**

Rue Montoyer 40, 1000 Brussels  
Belgium

T: +32 2 287 77 12

E : [iombrussels@iom.int](mailto:iombrussels@iom.int)

[www.belgium.iom.int](http://www.belgium.iom.int)



Funded by the European Union's  
Asylum, Migration and  
Integration Fund

