

## The New Vermonters: Seeking Respite, Global Refugees Resettle in Vermont

By Cindy Ellen Hill



A late spring day of planting at the New Farms for New Americans program garden site in Burlington's Intervale.

Photo: Margaret Michniewicz

Morning sun glints pink-gold off the Winooski River through a chartreuse curtain of leaf buds in Burlington's Intervale. Dandelion seeds float across an emerald field of hay grasses yearning their way skyward. Emerging from the tree line as they trek down the hill to the riverside plain, bright spots of color appear, clustered in groups of three and four. Patterns emerge: a bright pink shirt, a blowing red and black skirt, striped hats, floral scarves. They grow closer, padding gently along two parallel tracks of flattened grass towards a rectangle of plowed brown earth near the river. Their voices are hushed and musical, blending with the enchantment of the moving water, the gentle breeze, the morning birdsong. A red-winged blackbird considers the new arrivals, then sets off in a joyous frenzy of darts and dashes: whoever they may be, their passage has kicked up a fresh wave of winged breakfast.

The first colorfully-dressed arrivals now reach their farm plots, while more trickle down from the parking lots at the Ethan Allen Homestead. They spread out across the plowed acreage, seeking their own stake-and-string-marked squares of ground, singly or in couples, husbands and wives, cousins, friends. They rake, pull up clods of grass and cast them aside, or kneel to set in rows of onions or cabbage seedlings. They open tote bags and pull out bottled water.

A young man bends over a red metal wheelbarrow with a broken front axle mount, trying optimistically to make a too-short bolt hold it all together. They greet one another in words that do not pass commentary on the glory of the early summer weather, but rather acknowledge the sacred being behind each other's eyes: *Namaste. A salaam walekum.* The God that is within me greets the God that is within you. They are members of Burlington's refugee community, the newest Vermonters to arrive from around the globe seeking respite from war, famine, and oppression.

## *Asylum*

Refugees often travel as far as their resources will allow, and without any legal documentation. Armies or militia groups hounding refugees' heels with bullets do not usually pause to issue passports and visas allowing their targets to legally exit the country. Individuals or small family units with means may make it as far as the United States, Canada, or the western European Union. Prior waves of immigrants, like those escaping the Irish famine, also had no documentation—but immigration laws at the time did not require any. If you landed here and could secure a job, you were in. Today's increasingly stringent immigration laws don't permit such results-based management models. The only option for persons arriving undocumented with hellhounds at their heels is to apply for asylum—and to sit in jail while the application is considered.

A grant of legal asylum is rare and difficult to obtain, and must be based on a demonstration that the person seeking asylum “was persecuted in their home country and/or have a well-founded fear of future persecution if they were to return to their home country. This fear must be on account of their race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or their political opinion,” explains Michelle Jenness, coordinator of Vermont Immigration and Asylum Services, and organization founded in 1987 to assist asylees and other immigrants with legal status issues. Jenness got her start with the organization working in Vermont as a carpenter in the 1980s. Friends involved with moving people escaping the brutalities of El Salvador and elsewhere in South America to the Canadian border to seek asylum in their much larger program knew of Michelle's undergraduate degree in Latin American studies and asked her to translate. Soon advocacy for those seeking refuge became her passion.

Since 1980, the US has admitted nearly 3 million refugees, but only about 500,000 asylees; yet in 2009 alone there were over 800,000 asylum seekers globally recognized by the UNHCR. Among these are victims not only of the usual war, hunger, and depredation which have always been characteristic of the lives of refugees, but also some of the worst deliberate depredations which mankind can mete out upon its fellow men and women.

“There are over 1000 survivors of torture and trauma in Vermont, victims of organized violence,” Jenness says. “They are entering a largely white population, they have limited English proficiency, they have lost their families, their social status, it is difficult for them to adjust. But these are the strong and resilient ones – if they made it here, they must be.”

An asylum application is, in effect, a post-hoc request to be considered a legal refugee, after already making one's way to a place of refuge. While refugees entering through the refugee resettlement program are often—though not always—from village and agrarian or indigenous subsistence roots, with few economic and educational resources, asylees are often immigrants from among the higher socio-economic strata, and often urban regions, of their home countries, according to Jenness: Asylees are people with the means and abilities to reach the United States and apply for legal asylum status. “They made it here on their own steam,” she says.

Beyond all logic, the young man, Abdi, gets the nut and too-short-bolt to hold together. He rights the wheelbarrow and passes it off respectfully to a woman wrapped in yards of printed fabric, held to her body in a stunningly attractive yet, for the typical American, utterly indiscernible manner.

Abdi spent most of his life in refugee camps in Somalia and Kenya. “We went from camp to camp, moving all the time,” he says. “It was crazy.” But he says it with a smile and a dismissive what-are-ya-gonna-do shake of his head, sounding like a teenager talking about waiting in long lines for concert tickets rather than a person whose formative years were spent dodging bullets while starving and dehydrated.

## A Land of Immigrants



Masiti Mohamed, a mother of three, will begin classes soon with Community College of Vermont and aspires to become a doctor.

Photo: Margaret Michniewicz

Vermont has long been a land of immigrants. Contrary to its stalwart English Protestant image, Vermont's communities teem with families whose origins lie in Ireland, Italy, Canada, Poland, Russia, and elsewhere around the world. They came to build railroads, quarry slate and marble, run textile mills, and farm. Some came to escape political hardship, others were fleeing famine and oppression or just seeking fortune in the land of opportunity.

Today, the greater Burlington area regularly welcomes new immigrants. Many of them are refugees from lands unfamiliar to Vermonters, such as Bhutan and Burundi. These newcomers' stories are both the same as and different from those who have come before. Will they, too, find meaning, joy, and a new sense of self-identity in the Green Mountain State?

"Vermont has always received a number of immigrants through its history," says Denise Lamoureux, Vermont's state refugee coordinator. "The difference with the refugees [from other immigrants] is that they have been selected by the U.S. government because they have been persecuted, and then they benefit from government-sponsored programs to support them in their first five years after arrival." Vermonters may think they are seeing more refugees lately, she adds. But that's "because recent groups are Asians or Africans, [so] they are more visible in a 97 percent white state."

Masiti Mohamed is one of those Africans, living now in Winooski. With her strikingly beautiful, smooth, dark face framed by a somber-colored *shaash dango* – the headscarf worn by many married Bantu women – she recounts being forced to flee with her family from the little villages and farms of her Somali homeland when she was only seven.

"The war was going on when they came to loot. When you had something, they came and took it, they took it away. The people who live in Somalia, there are the Somali Bantu, [who] are the minority, and the Somali Somali, they are the majority. They have the guns, and when they see you have something, they take it away from you," Masiti explains.

When they came to take Masiti's family's land and possessions in the early 1990s, the family had to put aside their attachment to their homeland and leave. "My father and mother and my older brothers were farmers," she says. "They grew tomatoes and okra, maize, pumpkins, different types of squash. I miss the land where I was born, and the farms."

They fled towards Kenya. “Most people walked to the camps,” Masiti says. “My dad had some money, and we got transportation, and so it took two days.” With her parents, three sisters, and brothers, she found herself living in the Dagahaley refugee camp in northern Kenya, along with 65,000 other refugees from the Great African War and other conflicts in central Africa.

Masiti and her family spent nearly ten years living in the camp. Finally, Masiti, her husband Mohammed (whom she married in the camp), their son, her parents, and her siblings were accepted by the U.S. State Department’s refugee resettlement program.

“We came in 27 February 2004, in the worst snow,” Masiti recalls, her slender fingers stretching out expressively, as if she can still feel the cold, wet air outside the Burlington airport. “We had never heard of Vermont. When we left the camps, they bring you to another place first for orientation, but they talk about America generally, not about individual states. They said the coldest place in America was Alaska. They never said anything about Vermont. The only thing in America we had heard of before was New York City. Then, when we were leaving that place to come here, that’s when we learned we were coming to Vermont, but we did not know anything about it.”

Any curiosity they might have had about their destination was subsumed by the experience of their first airplane flight. “In the airplane on the way over we could not close our eyes,” she says, gesturing upward, her dark eyes alight. “We could not believe we were in an airplane. We never stopped looking out the window the whole time. When we landed here we thought everything would be fine. And it was fine,” she says. “Except the weather.”

### **Who is a Refugee?**

It starts with a war, or an act of ethnic cleansing, or a political rout. A refugee, according to the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, is “A person who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.”

refugees worldwide in 2009, plus an additional 4.7 million at 60 camps in the Middle East overseen by another agency. Refugees can be repatriated, integrated into the local population near their refugee camp, or resettled to a third country. But many refugees live years, or decades, in refugee camps before any of these options becomes available.

### ***Refugee Protection Act of 2010***

On March 16 2010, the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the adoption of the Refugee Act, Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration Eric P. Schwartz noted that “we must strive to practice at home what we preach abroad” in terms of detention of our own deportees as well as asylum seekers.

To that end, Patrick Leahy together with Carl Levin have introduced the Refugee Protection Act of 2010, noting that the immigration detention system holds 30,000 asylum seekers each year. On any given day, tens of thousands more are held awaiting deportation hearings, according to Michelle Jenness at the Vermont Asylum and Immigrant ...

“What we are basically doing is criminalizing immigration,” Jenness says—an approach which began in the early 1980’s, just after the Refugee Act was passed, and has increased daily since. Detention of immigrants took a leap in 1996, when Congress redefined and greatly expanded the types of offenses for which immigrants, including lawful permanent residents, can be deported and applied these definitions retroactively. Deportable offenses now include minor misdemeanor offenses, and immigrants may be held for deportation even if these

offenses occurred long ago. As a result, despite a dwindling national crime rate, our jails are filled to capacity with immigrants—including previously resettled refugees—awaiting deportation hearings.

The Refugee Protection Act of 2010 would allow pre-asylum-hearing release upon demonstration of a “credible fear,” and ensure conditions of detention that allow access to counsel, medical care, religious expression, and family visits. If passed, it would also allow for the Attorney General’s office to recommend appointment of counsel for asylum seekers—welcome news for the dozens of attorneys who volunteer countless pro bono or low-paid hours on this complex and demanding field of humanitarian law each year. The Act would not increase attorney resources for refugees and other immigrants awaiting deportation; these must rely on the continued services of pro bono attorneys such as the many that Vermont Immigrant and Asylum Services trains and supports each year.

The term “refugees” is not applied to people who remain within their own national boundaries. There are 26.6 million Internally Displaced Persons (including people displaced due to natural disaster), and another 5 million or more ‘stateless persons’ without a country. The total number of UN-recognized refugees, internally displaced persons, and stateless persons is approximately 47 million people – nearly one percent of the world.

### **Refugee Resettlement**

The UNHCR was launched in 1950 with a three-year mission to repatriate the 1 million people displaced by World War II. But work took longer than anticipated. Then Soviet forces crushed the Hungarian Revolution in 1956 and millions fled; and decolonization of Africa in the 1960s created further displacements on a massive scale.

Then came the increasing U.S. role in Vietnam. In 1975 the U.S. State Department Reception and Placement Program started resettling Indochinese refugees fleeing the post-French-decolonization. Unlike prior refugees, the Indochinese were not coming to established family and cultural networks, and many did not have easily transferrable occupational skills. Additional governmental support was required to ensure their successful transition.

In 1980 that support was codified as the Refugee Act, a law sponsored by the late Senator Ted Kennedy (D-MA) with the notable support of Senator Patrick Leahy (D-VT).

The Refugee Act established the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, an interagency effort under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security Citizenship (USCIS) and Immigration Services. USCIS reviews the refugee situation worldwide each year, consults with Congress, then drafts a recommended Determination for Presidential Consideration. Once signed, the annual Presidential Determination sets admission levels and regional allocations for refugees in the upcoming fiscal year. Priorities for admission are: 1) cases identified and referred to the program by the UNHCR, a U.S. Embassy, or designated non-governmental organizations, 2) groups of special humanitarian concern, and 3) those seeking family reunification with a person already admitted as a refugee.

The U.S. State Department Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration Overseas Processing Entities conducts refugee eligibility interviews, screening, background checks, and medical exams, and then notifies accepted individuals of their admission. A spouse and unmarried children under 21 may accompany any admitted refugee.

Refugee resettlement is initiated by application from the refugee. No one is forced to move or relocate, and even after selection they can decline the offer of resettlement, though in most cases, that means remaining in the camps indefinitely.

“The security in the camps is getting better, but it is not up to date,” Masiti Mohamed says with gentle understatement, referring to the UNHCR refugee camps in Kenya. “The local citizens around the camps, they

don't have much to survive with. They have less than the refugees, so they come and steal the food and things.” Staying there after being offered a slot in the U.S. resettlement program was not a viable option for her.

### **From Refugee Camp to Vermont**

The U.S. State Department determines the location within the U.S. to which each particular refugee will be resettled, generally moving whole families, villages, or at least cohesive ethnic blocks together. The International Organization for Migration arranges transportation to the U.S., and notifies one of the nine national non-profit resettlement agencies across the country that the refugees are on their way. In New England, that usually means the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI), which aids in resettlement to smaller cities throughout the Northeast.

“I think what the State Department has always done is try to find good communities for resettlement, whether they be large or small, but they want to support whatever is working for Americans,” says Judy Scott, executive director of the Vermont Refugee Resettlement Project (VRRP), an affiliate of USCRI. “The State Department [...] found that smaller communities had some particular challenges and wanted to make sure that the resources were developed.”

Those developments evolved into the Preferred Communities program, a system of funding to ensure that smaller cities had the resources available to be successful resettlement hosts. USCRI applied for inclusion in the benefits of the Preferred Communities program for a number of their host communities – including Burlington/Colchester. Other USCRI Preferred Communities include Buffalo and Albany in New York; Akron, Ohio; and Raleigh, North Carolina.

The number of refugees presently living in Vermont is elusive. “Once people arrive here they can move around anywhere they'd like to move, so there are people who move to other places, as well as people from other states who move to Vermont, so we don't keep track of it,” says Scott. “We look at it in terms of the people we resettle here. We have records back to 1989, and since 1989 have resettled about 5000 refugees in Vermont.” According to U.S. Census data, 3.8 percent of Vermonters are foreign born. Of these 22,000 persons, fewer than a quarter are refugees.

### **It Is New**

Back at the Intervale, a lean Bhutanese man, wearing a soft grey shirt and rough black pants, loads a dented blue wheelbarrow with composted manure and wheels it down the narrow, compacted track that serves as a path between garden plots. He turns a corner and the barrow slams to a halt, nearly sending him tumbling over the top. He backs up, tries to push again. The axle on this one, too, has broken off its aging frame. Some men and women gather around it, lift the front, ease it to its dumping spot, then carry it to the edge of the field and leave it upside down, to be fixed another day, with another bolt.

### ***Refugee Act***

In the 30 years since the adoption of the Refugee Act, the US has granted asylum to over 500,000 people and resettled about 2.5 million refugees. About three-quarters of these have been from Indochina and the former Soviet Union states. Annual admissions figures have ranged from a high of 207,116 in 1980 to a low of 27,100 in 2002, as reported by the Department of Health and Human Services Office of Refugee Resettlement (HHS ORR). Fiscal Year 2009 saw entry of 75,000 refugees and Obama's 2010 Presidential Determination allows up to 85,000 refugee admissions.

With fortuitous timing, a small gold pickup truck arrives with assorted tools and supplies, driven by Josie Weldon, director of the New Farms for New Americans program. A transplant from Oregon by way of college in Connecticut, Weldon started work in a microbusiness development program, then went to work for VRRP and then for the Association of Africans Living in Vermont (ALV).

The New Farms project received federal funding from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Refugee Resettlement (HHS ORR) starting in 2007, with the project's first growing season in 2008. Most HHS ORR money goes into direct resettlement activities, "so this is a bit different," Weldon says. Here they "partnered with USDA [the U.S. Department of Agriculture] as they recognized that a lot of the refugee groups have strong agricultural backgrounds, and what with the concern over food safety and security, and the crisis of losing small family farmers, they decided to see if we could start some farms."

The New Farms project involved only Africans in its first year, and now sees mostly refugees from Bhutan and Burma, as well as newcomers from Iraq. About 50 households are involved in the project, but women have been the focal point. "Most of the households are women, especially when we started," Weldon says, "and they are still the majority leading the farming effort. In the Bhutanese community a lot of the men are involved, and some in the Burundian community – but women have been the leaders in the projects and are the highest earners."

The New Farms project is designed to launch economically productive market farms that will support the participating families' self-sufficiency. The project is operating in three tiers. In Shelburne, Weldon has connected five experienced households with some private land to farm, and she remains a resource for obtaining supplies and materials. These are the most independent of the farmers. In Burlington, the Intervale Center serves as the project's agricultural consulting partner, and four families have established market farming operations within the existing network of support the Intervale Center provides. Then there is the incubator farm, these three acres on the floodplain at the Ethan Allen Homestead.

"We have training meetings throughout the winter, on farming, business counseling, land and markets, and we work with folks individually," Weldon explains. "The incubator farm is for aspiring farmers who are learning the skills to run their own business, participating in selling their food."

Last year, New Farmers sold produce at five Burlington-area farmers' markets, learning how to price and display their wares and how to make change and deal with customers. "We had some Somali Bantu women last year selling on their own and they had some success," Weldon says. "Some of them were selling prepared foods and that became a niche, selling vegetable soups and samosas, flatbread and chapatti. They are using their own food; that's where they are making money." She adds, "We are also selling wholesale, and that's a learning process." Few of the New Farmers have previous entrepreneurial experience; most were subsistence farmers in their homelands, who might have sold their excess produce to neighbors or at a small local marketplace.

Figuring out what the local market wants to buy and eat is an initial marketing hurdle. Interpreter and wheelbarrow mechanic Abdi explains that the Somali Bantu love to eat camel meat, but with a grin acknowledges that it probably would not sell around here. There are limited markets within the refugee and immigrant community for produce items brought from the homelands, like a variety of mustard greens grown by the Bhutanese farmers from seed they brought with them. But these are unlikely to generate large enough sales to provide meaningful income streams.

"They are looking for guidance and assistance in accessing markets," Weldon says. "It's taken us a while to get our foot in the door as new producers, and there are barriers for this group: they have limited capital and limited English so you have to think much more creatively about how to market." American Flatbread, along with other Vermont restaurants and specialty food makers, has been purchasing the project's produce, with Weldon helping coordinate the sales. The New Farmers at the Intervale site will be selling to a large farm stand that needs more vegetables.

"Increasingly we can help link people to the markets directly so they can benefit from making all that money on their own," Weldon says. But money is not the only upside. "This has been an amazing food access program for our community," Weldon says. "And there are so many psychological benefits to gardening."

In the bed of her truck, along with more metal rakes, pitchforks, and hoes, sits a new wheelbarrow. Weldon sets the offering on the ground, and several men and women eye it. The lean man who had his front axle blow out moments before takes the initiative and grips its handles. He rolls it back and forth a little, then tilts his head upward with a broad grin. “It is new,” he crows. In English.

### **English is Difficult**

Sabitra Dulal pauses to greet some visitors, setting down her tools to clasp her hands together and make a slight bow. “*Nepali Namaste*,” she says, explaining the gesture. She repeats it, teaching patiently. She wears a fuchsia shirt printed with horses and a hodgepodge blend of plaid and print skirts and overshirts along with a striped fleece ski hat. Despite the warm sun and hard work of digging and raking and planting, most of the Bhutanese women are wearing hats by custom. She poses gleefully for pictures with her metal rake, and talks about her crops. “Tomatoes, beans, hot peppers,” she enumerates. “Very hot peppers.” She crinkles her nose in approval.

Sabitra is one of the more than 100,000 Bhutanese – mostly ethnic Nepalis, or Lhotshampas – who were forced to leave the Buddhist kingdom of Bhutan in 1991. A single mother, Sabitra lived in UNHCR refugee camps in Nepal for 19 years. Beginning in 2008, thousands of Bhutanese refugees from the camps in Nepal have been resettled primarily in the U.S. but also in Canada, Australia, Denmark, New Zealand, the Netherlands and Norway.

A few string-delineated plots away, Burnimy Dashed breaks up clods of dirt, rebelliously bareheaded. An elfin sprite, her long black hair streaked with silver and pulled back in a ponytail, Burnimy wears brilliantly striped, but mismatched, shirts and pants in shades of sun and sky and flowers. She lived in the Nepal camps for 12 years and arrived in Vermont two years ago. She is single, and made the journey with her father and mother and three brothers, but her cousins and her father’s sisters and brothers remained and are now living in India. They talk on the phone from time to time, she says.

In Bhutan, Burnimy had farmed, growing rice, ginger, and vegetables, some of which are familiar here – beans, cucumber. “But there they farmed 12 months of the year, not like here,” she says through an interpreter while her small hands dispatch a stray clump of grass roots from the ground. The winter was cold, but “now is okay,” she says in English, gesturing with approval to the sunshine and warm early summer day.

She gestures to the crowd now trying out the new wheelbarrow, and speaks for a moment with the interpreter. In Bhutan they carried everything on the head, not in wheelbarrows, he explains, so they have to get used to the technology. “It is better,” Burnimy says.

“English is difficult,” she adds with courageous understatement.

“A constant challenge is language,” affirms Judy Scott. “I remember someone telling me after they had been here a few years that ‘the hardest thing about coming here is that people think that I am only as smart as the words I can say, and I know so much more than that.’ But what I have seen as I’ve been talking to them about friends and relatives who live in other places in the U.S., is that learning English is easier here in Vermont because there are so many volunteers here, so they get to know Americans and have conversations with them. I see that as a real challenge, and at the same time because we are conversational and talk to each other in Vermont and make connections, that’s what enables you to put down roots and make this place your own.”

### **Dollars and Volunteers**

Making connections is the full-time job of Vermont’s State Refugee Coordinator, a position created as a part-time slot by then-Governor Richard Snelling and expanded to full-time in 2001, aided by funding from HHS ORR.

Denise Lamoureux, new to Vermont herself then, applied for the job. “The greatest and most challenging aspect of the job is that it covers everything,” she says. “Refugees need jobs, training, have health issues,

economic needs, child care and early childhood challenges, everything that other Vermonters also need – in addition to the cultural and language issues.”

Together with Department of Education English Language Coordinator James McCobb, Lamoureux administers the Refugee Children School Impact Grant. Funding goes to the schools most impacted by refugee students – those in Winooski and Burlington. Lamoureux does outreach and education and chairs the Refugee and Immigrant Service Providers Network, an informal network of approximately 300 Chittenden County service providers.

“Priorities change with the economy and the population we resettle. Some years, children’s issues are at the forefront; some years, it is health and mental health that take up much of my time,” Lamoureux says. “This year, because of the economy, the priority is employment and housing.”

Addressing those priorities includes juggling a veritable blizzard of federal grants and funding programs. “Federal funding pays for health insurance coverage for refugees who are not eligible for Medicaid for the first eight months after the refugee arrives in the U.S., and for a system to ensure that all refugees undergo a Domestic Health Assessment,” Lamoureux says. The state also receives a social services grant to underwrite employment and English Language Training services for refugees and asylum seekers for the first five years of their residency in the U.S. ALV and VRRP provide employment services, and VRRP provides English Language Training.

Volunteers are the lifeblood of those VRRP programs, and are a good part of the reason that Vermont’s resettlement community has a low out-migration rate: most people who are resettled here stay. Refugees from elsewhere also move here to join family. “I have traveled to other places in the United States, to Ohio, and Missouri, and Chicago, to visit relatives,” Masiti Mohamed says. “But they have all moved here now, because of the sense of security here in Vermont and also because of the financial picture. It is less expensive here than in many of the cities.”

“We have a very welcoming community and indeed a strong program,” Judy Scott says. “We recently had a monitoring visit from the State Department and we were told that we are one of the best sites in the country. People are integrating into our community much faster than in other places. In our volunteer program, people are connected with people who were born here or been here a long time and are able to introduce them to the culture, the place geographically. And if you have a volunteer coming to your home and you don’t have a common language it’s a high motivation to speak English.”

The Catalogue for Philanthropy ranks Vermont thirty-fifth in its “generosity index” – a listing based on claimed tax deductions for big cash charitable donations. Vermonters may not write too many big checks – or maybe they just don’t itemize – but they certainly do roll up their sleeves. Volunteers greet newly arrived refugees and ensure they get a hot meal and get to their furnished apartment safely, then sign up to befriend families and introduce them to American culture – shopping, driving, getting to school and religious institutions.

“The bottom line is that because we are able to bring in so many in-kind donations, used furniture and other goods, and because volunteers are so generous with their time, for every \$1 we bring in to support the program, \$18 worth of services are generated,” Scott says. “That’s remarkable. It demonstrates the willingness of people to give of themselves.”

### **Fleeing For My Life**

Rukiya Barrekeh wears a long red and black patterned dress. Its hem flaps around her bare feet as she breaks up clods of dirt and rakes the warm dark soil in her New Farms plot. “I love it here. I love growing vegetables, working in the farm plot and seeing the vegetables come up from the soil,” she says through an interpreter. “If I did not love it I would not keep doing it. I would do something else.” Her voice rings with exuberant

confidence, possibly with the joy of having choices and the will to make them. She will be selling her vegetables this year at farmers' markets and some restaurant clients.

Like Masiti Mohamed, Rukiya is Somali Bantu, a cultural group whose ancestry rendered them victims of persecution, prejudice, and oppression. The outbreak of civil war in Somalia in 1991 led to increasing violence against them, including property confiscation, villages burned to the ground, and widespread rape and murder. Violence and cultural discrimination continued in the refugee camps, especially against women. The U.S. approved resettlement for 12,000 Somali Bantu beginning in 1999, with small groups brought to different locations around the country. About 600 Somali Bantu now live in Chittenden County.

In Somalia, Rukiya lived in the city, doing backbreaking construction labor, hauling concrete to where the builders needed it. By 1996, she had to run. "I was fleeing for my life," she says through an interpreter. "I had no time to think of what to bring or to stop to bring seeds."

Rukiya stayed in camps on the border between Kenya and Somalia for three years, then lived in Kakuma for another four years. Kakuma – the Swahili word for "nowhere" – is a UN refugee camp in Kenya, inhabited by nearly twice the number of residents as the city of Burlington, situated on bare dusty ground beneath scorching corrugated-metal roofs. The average daily temperature is 104 degrees Fahrenheit. Inside the camp's chainlink fence boundary live more than 50,000 men, women, and children from Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia, Burundi, the Congo, Eritrea, and Uganda.

Rukiya's eldest daughter is still in Kakuma. She last saw her in 2003, when her daughter was 15. She has no family there, Rukiya explains through the interpreter, just herself. Rukiyah and her husband, Abdulekeh, who is hoeing the earth beside her, have six children here. But she cannot stop thinking of the one who remains in Kakuma.

"We talk by phone sometimes," Rukiya says, through the interpreter, "but I am hoping she can come here. Have you ever been to Africa?"

### **Women's Work**

The changes inherent in the transition from elsewhere to Vermont are often deeply personal – the parent or child left behind, the land a son or daughter will never inherit – but some of the challenges are familiar to all newcomers, and some are not so different from issues American women wrestle with daily.

For a recent arrival, the question 'What's for dinner?' can be doubly daunting. "One confusing thing was where to get the food we eat," Masiti Mohamed says. "Like the meat, we have to make sure who slaughtered it and how it was slaughtered." The Islamic Society in Colchester helped, directing Somali Bantu families to places where they can purchase goats and cows to be slaughtered in accordance with their dietary laws. "The other difficult thing was the new food in the supermarkets," she says. "You walk around and say, 'What are these things?' until you learn what they are and how to prepare them."

The chance to advance their own education is new for many women refugees. "I did not go to school before the camps. We were not allowed," Masiti Mohamed recalls. "Schools are free in the camps. But when you reached a certain level, the other people they start torturing you when the teachers are not looking, they throw stones at you and beat you, and you have to be quiet and assist them. They are the bosses there, so you are fearing to be going to school. Girls went to school there, the young girls, if they had older brothers to support the family, otherwise they have to work."

Once she arrived in the U.S., Masiti went to Adult Education for a placement assessment. "To get a high school diploma, I needed to get my transcript, but how can I get a transcript from the refugee camp?" Her voice holds only a hint of ironic exasperation. Though Masiti went to work immediately after arriving in Vermont, she has since turned her full attention to raising her three young children and studying. She anticipates receiving her

high school equivalency shortly and starting with classes at Community College of Vermont in the coming year. Her goal is to become a doctor.

Another big change can be women's employment. "For example, in Somali culture, in Africa it was not possible for women to have a job and earn money in the way it is here," says Judy Scott. There, the husband supported the family, though the wife might cook food to sell or keep chickens. As with American colonial housewives, the woman decided how she spent her "butter and egg money," but it was not the primary means of support for the family. "Here, if the woman is the only person working, it's necessary for that money to go to support the family. That can create a difficult situation," Scott explains.

"In most African culture family is very, very important," says Yacouba Jacob Bogre, Executive Director of the Association of Africans Living in Vermont (ALV). Bogre landed in Vermont as an immigrant from the Congo in 2003 due to his own strong family connections. While working as an attorney doing civil litigation and public administration legal work in Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso, his wife, working on labor issues for the UN, got assigned to Haiti. While she was there, the Great Africa War broke out, and return to the Congo was impossible. Instead, she made her way to the U.S. and received asylum, avoiding a conflict that resulted in the deaths of over five million people.

"Some of the men feel they are losing power as the women are working now. In the U.S. the decision-making process in the family is shared between the man and the woman. In Africa, it depends on the community. In some cases the man makes the decision, or in many places he goes home and discusses it with his wife and family but privately, and then publicly he states what the decision is," Yacouba says. "Mostly here [at ALV] we give advice, to give men and women support. We remind people that here they need two incomes in the household. It is not a shame for the woman to be working; it is necessary."

The tension is not unfamiliar to American women. "It's something quite similar to what's been going on in this country in many years," Scott says. "My own generation was the first one to think we can have everything – education, professional jobs, family – and it is taking years for our society to figure this out, and we still haven't. That is the same situation that newcomers are in. However, they are expected to be able to leap forward and be where everybody else is right away when in fact it takes time, and they may be bringing some wisdom and understanding that we've lost in our maelstrom."

That wisdom is frequently tested, as women often have an easier time getting unskilled, low-end employment than men do. "If you had a husband and wife who were doctors, the woman would not have an easier time than the husband, but when you have people who don't have education and don't speak English and don't have particular skills, we still have gender-based roles that employers expect," Scott explains. "Hotels – not all of them but many – prefer women for housekeeping, for example, so a woman may be able to get work."

The situation recalls that of Irish Famine immigrants, whose women found placements as nannies and governesses while the men faced signs on factory doors stating that no blacks or Irish need apply. "This is not something that is unique to the current day," Scott says. "This is the history of our country. We've always had new groups coming and had to acclimate quickly and we've always found new, creative ways to do it."

Present economic conditions aren't making things easier. "There has always been immigration, even during the Depression," Scott notes, "but there is no question but that the economy has made things difficult. The great thing is that all evidence points to the fact that we are coming out of it, and the goal of the U.S. refugee program is early self-sufficiency, working to support their family. That's why they come here; that's what they want."

The VRRP employment department offers refugees training in resume and cover letter writing, job interviewing, and workplace basics. It also works with employers, educating businesses about the fully legal and very eager workforce available and serving as an employment agency, matching particular client skills to an employer's needs. On average, according to HHS ORR, refugees fully pay back all the public support given to

them within 25 years of their arrival, through the taxes and social security payments they generate while working. Many reach that pay-back point significantly earlier.

## ***CONTACTS AND RESOURCES***

### **Vermont Refugee Resettlement Project:**

<http://uscri.refugees.org/site/PageNavigator/Vermont/vermonthome>

Volunteer office (802)338-4632

462 Hegeman Avenue, Suite 101, Colchester, VT

[vrrp@uscrvt.org](mailto:vrrp@uscrvt.org)

Needs: volunteer English tutors, family friends, and donations of household goods

### **New Farms for New Americans Project:**

[www.africansinvermont.org](http://www.africansinvermont.org)

Josie Weldon, Program Specialist [josieweldon.aalv@yahoo.com](mailto:josieweldon.aalv@yahoo.com)

Needs: Farming and gardening tools, markets for produce

### **Association of Africans Living in Vermont:**

<http://www.africansinvermont.org/>

Association of Africans Living in Vermont

72 No. Champlain St., Burlington, VT (802)985-3106

[AfricaVermont@yahoo.com](mailto:AfricaVermont@yahoo.com)

### **SomaliBantu Community Association of Vermont:**

<http://www.somalibantuvermont.org>

Needs: Garden supplies and tools for home subsistence gardening project; knitting and sewing supplies for the women's textile group

### **Bhutanese Women's Textile Cooperative:**

<http://chautarivt.com/>

Needs: Yarn, knitting needles, fabric and sewing machines

## **Artisanal Efforts**

While some refugee women seek employment, others look for ways to launch their own businesses, often relying on skills practiced in their homelands. A group of Bhutanese women in Burlington is using traditional textile skills to launch a new enterprise: Chautari, the Bhutanese Women's Fiber Arts Cooperative.

"Some of the women had taken part in a similar venture in the refugee camps," explains Supriya Serchan, a Bhutanese immigrant who works for VRRP and also works with her parents selling samosas and other Nepalese food at Burlington's City Hall farmers market and elsewhere. "Except there they were working to order for an outside vendor and here they are maintaining control over their products from design to sale. Presently it's an informal grassroots collective but they are considering organizing it further and seeking new marketing outlets."

Chautari's logo is a visual word-play on the pepal tree, a large, spreading tree sacred in Hindu and Buddhist cultures under which people gather midday to talk. In the Bhutanese Women's Textile Cooperative logo, the tree is formed of people, reaching out and intertwined, growing upward together.

The group has met every other week for the past year at the Champlain Senior Center, which donates the meeting room and has provided shelf space to store product inventory. The 15-odd members bring projects to

the meetings, where they can pick up more supplies, but do most of their handiwork at home, where they can balance it with other work, child rearing, or school.

Chautari sells its wares at the International Festival at the Champlain Expo Grounds and at other craft markets. The group has printed up product labels displaying the photo and story of each artisan. With donated wool, needles, and looms, they knit bags, scarves, hats, socks, sweaters, crochet tablecloths, and weave table linens and shawls. Their products are familiar and useful in Vermont, but imbued with unique styles and shapes.

In Nepal, the women used backstrap looms. Burnimy Dashed – one of the New Farmers who is also a textile artisan – demonstrates, sitting on the floor and gesturing where the strap would go around her waist, how she would scoot backwards to tighten the warp, then lower and raise the heddles to weave the cloth.

Now they are using a table loom that was donated. Supriya pulls a piece of brightly-colored, intarsia-woven cloth from a storage bin to illustrate. The piece is just an experiment, she explains, gesturing to the stunning piece of interwoven geometric shapes – the color-shifts blending seamlessly, the cloth edges flat and even – because they are still trying to get used to this new kind of loom.

The women all knit one children's sweater pattern that they learned together, but otherwise they knit their own designs, and find their artistic expression stymied by the inability to select appropriate materials. Durga Bista, an elegantly dressed woman in an embroidered burgundy shirt and sparkling earrings accenting her sweet round face, produces works that demonstrate considerable talent: a taupe child's sweater in a stepped basketweave pattern; doilies crocheted like a garden of pink flowers on a green backdrop.

Across the table, Punya Dahal wears a bright pink shirt, a yellow and red bead necklace, which many of the other women also wear, and blue flowered pants. She pulls out a child-sized complete bittersweet-orange winter ensemble, its hat rim knit sideways with deep ridges of a highly unusual pattern. "You measure around the head, then sew it together, then pick up the stitches and make the top," she says, speaking in Bhutanese and gesturing through the process.

She picks up some mustard- and brown-colored wool and casts on to a circular needle, then begins knitting from a pattern, holding the yarn in her right hand and throwing it in what American knitters call the English style. Within a row or two she gets confused, and calls Supriya over for assistance. "We are trying to work with some American patterns," Supriya explains. "It helps their English, too." The two put their heads together and count off the stitches.

Tika Neupane, dressed all in purple, is looking with fascination at a bit of ribbing knit into the foot of a sock on the table. She compares it to a sock that Punya has knit, trying to determine where the ribbing fits on the foot. She says, "I will try this," then contemplates the week's donated yarn that Supriya is pulling from a bag. Two tan-and-pink skeins are pretty, but she holds it next to the loose end of yarn from the socks on the table and shakes her head: too thick. Supriya tosses two skeins of purple heather sock yarn her way, and it seems just the thing.

"They like the really bright colors, but they don't have them to work with," Supriya says. Aside from the purple sock yarn, the donated wool is mostly brown. "These donations are welcome, they are better than nothing, but they can not choose their own colors and have to work from what they have. We would like to get non-profit status and write a grant, so we can get more wool and get the kinds of looms that they are used to."

And sewing machines, chimes in Naraad Hikari. She sewed all her clothes in Nepal, Naraad explains as Supriya interprets. Her clothes, shirts, the Indian dresses. She would like a sewing machine so she could sew again.

## **Raising Kids**

Balancing work and childcare is another issue quite familiar to many American women, but for refugees it also includes wrestling with integration while maintaining the family values of their home culture.

“We see the changes mostly in younger people,” says Yacouba Bogre. “The older people fear they are losing power over their youth. They can not discipline the children and the children do not respect the parents.”

Masiti Mohamed agrees that it is difficult and different raising children here. “In Africa, if you needed to go out they would stay with their grandmas and grandpas, they were right there. But here you need a childcare provider if you are going to school or working. Back there, the relatives will take them, but here they are all working,” she says, underscoring the irony of American abundance: we have everything in terms of material goods, but everyone has to work long, hard hours to get it.

Some of the cultural child-rearing issues can rise to legal conflicts. “In Africa, if your child was out in the street, your relatives would grab them and take them and say, ‘You should not be doing that,’” Masiti says. “But here, if you leave your child alone or your child is in the street, then the police are coming and the social services are coming.”

Like other refugees now living in Vermont, the Somali Bantu try to maintain their children’s cultural heritage even as they embrace American life. “We teach them at home culturally, not to forget their religion, not to forget their home country. We show them pictures of where I and their dad and their grandmothers were born. We have some relatives still there and we talk to them,” Masiti says.

Her family has been able to continue observance of their major religious holidays – Ramadan, Eid – but Masiti fears they are losing the cultural holidays of her homeland, like a seven-day-long New Year’s fire celebration called Deb-Shid, or the forest festival of Anyakow that involves masks, carvings, and dancing all night beneath the trees and stars.

Remembering those cultural celebrations becomes a tradition in itself as successive generations grow farther from their homeland, yet still want to honor their past. The Burlington Irish Heritage Festival held each March continues to demonstrate step dancing and traditional Irish music to keep community memory alive more than 150 years after most Irish immigrants landed in Vermont. The Bosnian Lilies, established in Burlington in 2001 by Mediha Jusufagic, brings the children of more recent Bosnian and Herzegovinian refugees together to learn the language, music and dance of their parents’ homelands. Greek festivals and Latin American street festivals in Burlington, the French-Canadian heritage days in Vermont, the New World Festival in Randolph, all speak to Vermonters’ continuing desire to share ancestral culture with new immigrants, and new generations.

## **A Future of Freedom**

Some refugees who come to Vermont make their way home after peace is restored, to join relatives left behind and either reclaim their lost homes or start anew on more familiar soil. Others stay and dream the American dream.

“Here, we hope to buy land and a house but it is so expensive,” Masiti Mohamed says. “We looked at it but then there is the insurance and the other things to pay and you have to be very careful about how expensive it is.” But living in an apartment and growing a garden on donated land does not deter Masiti from calling Vermont home.

“For me, I don’t want to go back there to Africa. The security is not up to date. In Somalia they do not have a President yet. I hope so, that they can solve this but I don’t think so, not soon,” Masiti Mohamed says thoughtfully. “We like the security here. All that I need is freedom, and security.”

*Cindy Ellen Hill is an attorney and freelance writer living in Middlebury.*