

## **Infant Feeding Practices among Somali-born women now resident in Bristol**

**Susan Young**

Despite high numbers of Somali women arriving in UK cities in recent years there is little research into their infant feeding practices. Moreover existing studies tend to adopt a public health perspective, evaluating the women's infant feeding against policy recommendations and focusing on a narrow medicalised conception of infant feeding as nutrition.

This study sought to understand Somali women's infant feeding not from a public health stance but from their own perspectives and within the wider context of their lives, including their migration from Somali territories. To best serve this aim an ethnographic study was undertaken by participating in a weekly 'stay and play' group over the course of one year that catered for mothers and their under-three-year-olds living in a majority-Somali area of inner-city Bristol. The fieldwork included observations, natural conversations with Somali mothers, non-verbal interactions with their infants and toddlers, responses to a checklist of evolving questions and semi-structured interviews with 5 mothers. To complement and extend the fieldwork data 12 semi-structured interviews were carried out with infant-feeding professionals who worked with majority Somali populations in Bristol and other UK Cities.

Recent work from the field of evolutionary anthropology provided a theoretical framework that orientated the analysis and interpretation of the women's infant feeding practices. This framework was expanded and developed by integrating literature from earlier ethnographies of infant feeding in a variety of societies. The composite theoretical perspective illuminates how the women's infant feeding is interwoven in to the sociocultural context of their lives and provides a theoretical lens to explain their current practices in terms of their migration.

The study arrived at a model of infant feeding among this group of Bristol women that in its basic features was found to be consistent with descriptions of Somali women's infant feeding practices in other studies both pre- and post-migration. This consistency of basic features is explained as a legacy of evolved adaptations to life in the resource-scarce environment of the Horn of Africa. The lack of responsiveness to environmental change post-migration in core behaviours: breastfeeding as normative behaviour; combination feeding; and a 'high nourishment' ideal of infant feeding; may be partly explained as a time-lag among a first generation of mothers to arrive in Bristol. However the practices are understood to be adaptive in evolutionary terms because they were essential to the survival of infants and were strongly endorsed through conformity to social and religious codes of behaviour and culturally defined gender roles. As a result they are only superficially responsive to the change of environment caused by migration, primarily in terms of available resources. The lack of responsiveness to environmental change is also explained in terms of social dispositions for self-sufficiency and the creation of cultural boundaries that result in a lack of engagement with the women's present country of residence and a strong pull to conserve traditional practices. These social dispositions are also understandable in terms of their adaptive origins but they are exacerbated by the experiences of enforced migration and by maintaining transnational connections with their homeland, with internationally dispersed extended family and the Muslim community of the Middle East.

