



## BRYCS Parenting Conversations: Aline, A Burundian Social Worker

*On August 1st and 14th 2007, BRYCS staff spoke with Aline [1] about her life and experiences as a Burundian parent now living in the United States. Aline works as a social worker assisting refugees in the U.S. She and her husband, Alain, have four children.*

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### Family Background

My husband and I came to the U.S. in 1998, through the U.S. Refugee Program, along with our six-year-old daughter and our four-year old son.

I am originally from the Kirimiro region of Burundi. However, after marriage, women do not present themselves as being from their native village, but rather from their husband's region. He is from one of the southern provinces.

I would prefer not to identify my ethnic group; many Burundians today prefer not to identify their ethnic group because of the inter-ethnic conflicts in Burundi and neighboring Rwanda. However, my husband and I have a mixed marriage—we are from different ethnic groups. We feel proud of this, since it is an example of peacemaking between our ethnic groups.

The conflict in Burundi is similar to that in Rwanda: the ethnic group in power has targeted the ethnic group that is not in power. In Burundi, due to the mono-ethnic military regime, the Hutus were forced into exile, and many Hutus have been in refugee camps in Congo, Tanzania, Kenya and Zambia—all the countries around Lake Tanganyika. In Rwanda, by contrast, it was the Tutsis who were forced into exile. But after the 1993 and 1994 genocide in both countries, both ethnicities were fleeing.

### Seeking Refuge

Our flight from Burundi was very traumatic for our children. While we were still in Burundi, we had been internally displaced within the country, and the children saw fighting between the rebels and the army. Even after we had fled to another country, the children feared they were hearing gunshots every time there were fireworks. The children would run from people in uniform, because of their frightening memories of people in uniform from Burundi.

Our family did not end up in a refugee camp, because we had the connections and resources to flee to another African country where we set up house. However, our family was separated during flight for a period of two years. I left first, then our children came to join me, then finally my husband came. We remained in that country for four years. My husband was a victim of political persecution in Burundi, and we could not remain permanently in our country of refuge, so our family was referred by the UNHCR to the U.S. Embassy for resettlement through the **U.S. Refugee Program**.

## Education

Both my husband and I have university degrees from Burundi, but we could not use them in the U.S. Our education gave us a bachelor's equivalency here, and we both have pursued graduate degrees since our arrival. I received an engineering degree in rural development while in Burundi, but here I have completed a master's degree in social work and now I work in refugee services.

I speak Kirundi (the language of Burundi), Kinyarwanda (the language of Rwanda), Swahili (a trade language of the African countries in the Great Lakes region), French and English. All of these I studied in school, except for Swahili.

## Childcare

In addition to our 15-year-old daughter and 13-year-old son who were born in Burundi, we have a seven-year-old son and three-year-old daughter, born in the U.S.

I don't expect that we will have any more children here because childcare is an issue in America—this is the biggest challenge we have as parents. We still believe in the community raising the children, so we have arranged childcare within our ethnic community.

We believe in group discipline—a parent is a parent, and we all know what is best for bringing up children. We know that someone from our ethnic community will be instilling those same values in our kids. We believe that group discipline can work better in this new society.

The refugee resettlement agencies in our community have been encouraging single mothers in our community to get certified to provide in-home childcare. Due to family size, language and other barriers to employment, this can be a good form of work for many single refugee moms.

There is a norm here that you may have to come pick up a child from a daycare center for any little thing. If there are behavioral issues, daycare centers may not have the patience to deal with it.

But we feel comfortable knowing that our childcare provider can correct them, can keep them in order, rather than saying, "It's not my child, so I don't have the authority."

We have a saying in my culture: "The baby is yours while it's in the womb, once out it belongs to the community."

The birth is a celebration. The community celebrates this newcomer; they hold a ceremony to present the baby to the community. This is held about two weeks after the birth—around the time the umbilical cord falls off. A poem is recited, which signifies that everyone here is your guardian. Everyone feels responsible for the neighbor's child. It becomes like a social obligation; to us it is a great value. The fact that you can live here without knowing your neighbor is a problem.

## Childcare in Burundi

In Burundian culture, especially in rural areas, an 8-year-old girl starts being trained to carry a baby on her back, so her mother can run an errand. The mother might go to the market for two hours or something, but she would not be gone all day. In Burundi, we know that people around also feel

responsible to help them while we are gone. The concept of caregiver belongs to everybody.

Many refugee families who come to the U.S. still believe that an 8-year-old can watch a younger child, but there are other dangers, such as electrical appliances, crime, kidnappers, etc. But back home, we didn't have those dangers. Once these families know the dangers here, they will not leave their children.

For us, a 10-year-old or 13-year-old girl is big enough to carry a baby on her back. Once she has menstruated, she is physically ready to start a family, so she is able to care for children.

Children may be carried on the back as long as they are breastfed and until they are comfortable walking. They might be carried on the back even up to 5 years old, especially if it is a mother's last baby.

The normal age to see breastfeeding is up to 3 years. Mothers are proud of nursing. They see it as a way of showing affection for their baby. It is also a natural way to delay the next pregnancy, so people will continue nursing for that reason as well.

Here, breastfeeding makes people feel ashamed, or embarrassed to show their intimate body parts, but then people will wear short-shorts. In Burundi, people are not ashamed to show themselves breastfeeding, but they would not wear such revealing clothes.

## Marriage and Family

I was 25 when we married, and my husband was 32. I have three brothers and two sisters. My husband has a larger family—five sisters and three brothers—because his father had two wives. My husband's mother only had one son, so his father asked his first wife for permission to marry a second wife in order to have more sons. In our culture, sons carry on the family name, and they are a form of social and economic security.

We have no other family members in the U.S. Our siblings are either refugees in other African countries, or they are still in Burundi. We hope that someday they will be able to come to the U.S. We are waiting to hear from UNHCR in their host countries.

## Family Role Changes and Discipline

The thing that has changed here is social status, for example, whether or not you can afford a maid. Discipline has not changed.

We had been able to afford domestic help in Burundi. They had permission to discipline the children, and we trusted them; they had the same values.

Here we both have to be working, providing parenting, doing the cleaning and cooking—that has been a big shift because we had been able to afford help with this before.

We were very frustrated in the beginning, but we have gotten used to it.

When my family back home would call during my pregnancy, their main concern was “How are you

going to handle it? Can you get help?” Back home, we would all help each other, watching each other’s children, but here we don’t have that.

Men are not typically involved in taking care of the babies, but my husband helped with raising the children while I was in school in Burundi, so he continued that here. But we have observed more problems for other couples in adjusting to these role changes in the U.S.

Back home, the mother takes care of all the children until puberty. Once the boys reach puberty, the father takes over the guidance of the young boys.

If a child is disobedient, the mother will be asked what she is doing—how is she guiding that child? But here, you are both to be involved—both mother and father.

Here they say that people have freedom, or that it’s none of your business, but everybody—even teachers—want to be involved in family dynamics.

In our culture, it’s not appropriate to talk about what is going on inside the family. To us, it seems upside down here: they say they want to protect your privacy, but they violate that privacy in wanting to know why a child has a bruise.

People here should not rush to judge people who are from other countries. When they rush to judge and say a family is dysfunctional, sometimes it is really the system that is dysfunctional. Service providers should try to understand the family first, including the culture. They can always get interpreters and a community representative to help them understand. They will harm the family by separating them.

Regarding the use of American discipline methods such as time-outs—for us it is not working. Children need to feel the punishment. Of course they won’t really hurt the children. We discipline with love.

### **Challenges for Recent Burundian Refugees in the U.S.**

I know of one case in which the parents were illiterate and had less exposure to urban life. Their children assimilated first and became the teachers of the parents, making family decisions in the favor of the children. The mother sought help from the local child welfare agency and asked them to mediate. The mother asked that the children be removed, saying, “Take them, discipline them in your ways, and then bring them back, because if we use our ways, we’ll get in trouble.” Juvenile probation authorities became involved and worked with the parents and teenagers on communication and decision-making.

Most of the recently arriving Burundian refugees are coming out of camps in Tanzania, where they have been since 1972. Many are settling in Georgia, Ohio, Arizona, or North Carolina. With this new group I am observing young girls—age 15 or 16—who are already mothers, being resettled with either their own mothers or with extended family (aunts, older siblings). Because the girls are mothers, they think they are old enough to be responsible for the children, but here we have to follow the guardianship and child welfare laws. These young girls are the mothers, but they cannot

make full decisions for their children because the grandmother is supposed to be the immediate caregiver, and the grandmother doesn't necessarily see herself in that role.

Or the girls have been independent in the camp, taking care of themselves, but they have developed behaviors that cause conflict with the responsible adult relative. The caseworker may think the family dynamics are not so strong, or they may be too quick to judge. So resettlement agencies should seek out services available to young mothers, and also workshops on healthy relationships between men and women, and within families.

I have also seen some challenges for families raising youth who had the role of protector while in the refugee camp, but according to the laws in the U.S. the parents are in charge. For example, maybe due to the mother's health condition or the death of the father, the older kids in a family took over being fully responsible for the family while living in the refugee camp. When the family comes to the U.S., the older youth still feel like they should be responsible and should sign all of the paperwork, although this is not the case under U.S. laws.

Guardianship is also a difficult concept for refugee families who are caring for children that are not their children by birth. When we discuss the guardianship procedures in the U.S., they say, "I have been caring for these children since they were young. Do you think I will drop them now?" It's automatic—they want to raise these children as their own kids. The paper won't change anything.

As resettlement caseworkers, we must reassure them that there is nothing wrong with them, but the government needs the papers signed. The family needs to know that the paperwork is necessary, so that someone is responsible and the family is eligible for full benefits for the children. The family should be encouraged to continue caring for the children, and should understand that the guardianship process is for the advantage of the children and the family.

### **Child Welfare in the U.S.**

I salute the institutions in the U.S. to protect children—foster care and adoption. Many children can be put in situations of danger here, so they are protected at least.

In Burundi, we have orphanage centers and also private religious groups will care for children. There are some adoptions too, but they are done by wealthy families. Otherwise, orphans would be cared for within the family or community.

### **Being a Bi-Cultural Refugee Services Worker**

I am very sensitive to other people making quick judgments about clients or to unfair situations for clients. My first reaction is to take the client's side, to understand the dynamics before I judge. That's how I am, and that is how I want to be treated myself.

I wish we had enough funding to hire more caseworkers, so we could lower our caseloads and better meet client needs. Sometimes it's hard because we want our fellow refugees to feel welcome and not to feel undermined. It's true there can be burnout for bi-cultural workers. This would be a good topic for training: how do we help bi-cultural workers to avoid burnout? The strategy I use to avoid this is to use other community members to help me out. I also do my own volunteer work in

the community outside of working hours.

## Household Responsibilities for Children

In our culture, it's OK for children to take care of certain responsibilities, but here they think we're asking too much of them. For us, it is a source of pride: we're preparing them to be good caretakers when they grow up. Our teens still want that same level of responsibility here as well.

Cleaning responsibilities are given mostly to girls; watching over cattle or fixing things are given to boys. Here my son washes the car and deals with the garbage, and my daughter helps with our 3-year-old baby and does the dishes. Whenever my husband is not there, my son checks that the doors are locked at night. His father has talked with him about his role in the family when he grows up; he's being trained by his father to be the protector. My daughter also leads the family in nighttime prayers. She gathers the family together and reminds us to do them. We are Catholic—like two-thirds of Burundians—but some people are changing to Protestantism since the war, and due to exposure to Protestantism in the refugee camps.

My seven-year-old boy was born here. At his age, my other kids knew how to sweep the house, but he says that it's not his job yet; that he needs to play. I don't know what makes him believe he cannot do it. Beginning around age six, we have kids who go down the river to search for water. Sweeping, mopping: they learn that about age six while the parents are farming.

In Burundi, there are cultural norms about cleaning up before sunrise—you need to sweep before sunrise or your friends will stop coming. So children know they have to get up early to clean the house. Girls at the age of puberty are encouraged to wake up early and clean themselves.

Here we expect our children to help with the dishes. We have children that by the age of 13 are able to cook a meal and feed the parents when they come home from work, especially during summer break. During summer break our children do most of the cleaning, laundry and dishes.

## Guidance for Teens

Talking with your children is very important. In our culture, at the age of puberty, we send them to their aunts and uncles, who can talk with them about anything. Here we don't have aunts or uncles, but we have some good friends. Our friend's son came to talk with my husband, and it is OK for our kids to talk with our friends, like they would talk with an aunt or uncle. Parents may have too much emotion, or be too strict, but an aunt, uncle, or friend can respond in a softer way.

## Burundian Values

There are several core Burundian values I want to pass on to my children.

1. **Sharing food:** Food is a sign of hospitality. Every person who walks in our door is welcomed by food.
2. **Respect for elders and authority:** That's how we raise our kids to respect their parents and to understand that they hold wisdom to pass on. One way this respect is shown is through greeting. We greet with two arms—shaking with one hand and holding the other person's forearm with our other hand—this is a wish of peace to the other person. A one-

handed shake is disrespectful; it's like you're considered nothing.

3. **A strong faith:** We believe in one big creator, no matter which faith. Catholic, Protestant, Muslims: we use the same word "Imana" for God. Many Burundi names have "Imana" in them. When we name our children, we put the name "Imana" in it; it's like asking for God's blessing.
4. **Family values:** This is related to the interpretation of the nuclear and extended family. Children belong to the extended family, society, and friends. Decisions are based on those ties. No one is left behind; we care for the elderly. We have a saying: "Once a rabbit grows older, it nurses from its baby." This means the parents do their best to raise their children, then in old age it's the children's turn to take over. Children have to work hard, so that when they grow up they will be able to care for their parents. Marriage is a consent between family members. The separation of a husband and a wife is a decision made by a council of elders, who will work to keep the couple together. The system is patriarchal, so the wife would lose her children if the couple separates. Everyone believes in a marriage that lasts. The bride and groom's families become good friends. They like to see the family growing.

## U.S. Values

Some of the U.S. values that I appreciate include that people here are very hard workers. People respect time in order to help them fulfill their duties.

People here have strong faith too. There are many churches, people worship God, church services are shown on TV: all of this helps us with our faith.

Education here is open to everybody without discrimination. There are laws protecting people.

People here share what they have; they give to others and make donations; this is helpful to refugees.

## Hopes and Fears for Children in the U.S.

I hope that my children do not get too influenced by peer pressure. Here youth expectations are high and unrealistic about what they should be as persons. Sometimes it is driven by the media and youth think they are "cool" or special by copying what they see. I don't like that "cool" thing; it's not helping to develop their personality. It's a different way of character development, rather than fulfilling their goals.

I don't want them to feel like drugs are something they should try. It gives me hope when they recognize the bad things that their friends are doing.

I hope they focus on their schooling and obtain higher education. Here, the opportunities are plentiful.

My hope is also that they become good parents. We talk about how many children they want to have when they grow up, what kind of marriage they want. I hope they get good examples from us.

1 - Names have been changed to protect participants' privacy.

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### Discussion Questions for Refugee Serving Agencies:

1. What do you know about Burundi and the Burundian refugees resettling in the U.S.?
  - BRYCS' Burundian Refugees - Highlighted Resources
2. How do "Internally Displaced Persons" (IDP's) differ from refugees?
  - UNHCR page on IDP's
  - Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre
  - USAID Assistance to Internally Displaced Persons Policy
3. What assistance does your agency offer to refugees in need of child care services?
  - BRYCS' Child Care Toolkit
  - *Resource Guide for Families, Friends and Neighbors who Care for Children*, from Child Care Resources, available in Amharic, Chinese, English, Somali, Spanish and Vietnamese
4. How does your agency assist parents acting as guardians for refugee children?
  - BRYCS' *Guardianship: Frequently Asked Questions*
  - BRYCS' *Guardianship Information by State*
5. How does your agency recruit and support bi-cultural workers?
  - BRYCS' *Developing Refugee Foster Families: A Worthwhile Investment*, see p. 3 "Keys to Training and Retaining Bi-Cultural Workers"
6. What advice would you give to refugees about appropriate household chores for children in the U.S.?
  - *Helping Children Become Responsible*, from the University of Minnesota Extension Service
  - *Childhood Chores Teach Responsibility*, from Bradley Hospital
7. How can human service agencies help newcomer families to prepare for and adapt to family role changes in the U.S.? What services are available in your area to support refugee couples?
  - Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), *Healthy Marriages Grants*
  - BRYCS' *Parenting Toolkit*, see p. 22 "Marriage Enrichment Programs for Refugees";
  - BRYCS' February 2004 Spotlight, "Helping Refugee Parents Adjust to Life in the U.S. "