

‘[In Australia] what comes first are the women, then children,
cats, dogs, followed by men’: Exploring accounts of gender
relations by men from the Horn of Africa

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Abstract

This article reports on the experiences associated with a shift in gender relations for men with refugee backgrounds from Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia and Eritrea in Melbourne, Australia. The findings are drawn from the author’s PhD research project. Upon settlement, participants reported experiencing new ways of organising gender relations that differed significantly from those of their previous societies. They believed that women were in a privileged position in Australia and, as a result, they viewed themselves and other men in general as victims of Australian gender arrangements. This article provides an overview of how gender relations are organised in the Horn of Africa and in Australia and uses this framework to contextualise participants’ accounts of their own experiences. The article demonstrates that participants’ interpretations of their situation in Australia affected the way they approached the organisation of their intimate lives.

Introduction

Men with refugee backgrounds from the Horn of Africa² experience a shift in gender relations on settlement to Australia as a result of, amongst other things, their changed ability to provide for their families, local practices regarding the division of domestic labour, and local laws and policies that govern how they relate with women.³ A number of studies have associated the experiences engendered by this shift with

¹ *Editor’s Note:* This article was awarded the 2012 AFSAAP Postgraduate Prize.

² The term Horn of Africa is used in this article to refer to Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea and Ethiopia.

³ Bob Pease, “Australia: Masculine Migration,” in *Men of the Global South: A Reader*, ed. Adam Jones (London: Zed books, 2006), 343; N. Mungai and Bob Pease, “Rethinking masculinities in the African diaspora,” in *Migrant Men: Critical Studies of Masculinities and the Migration Experience*, ed. Mike Donaldson, et al. (New York: Routledge, 2009), 96.

incidences of violence against women in this migrant population.⁴ However, there is a need for additional research exploring the underlying cultural factors that may predispose these men to violence against women. While acknowledging the impact of violence against women, it is important to understand how migrant men from these communities make sense of their situation in Australia and how this affects their relationships with women.

Methodology

My doctoral research adopted a qualitative approach to explore how the participants organised their intimate⁵ lives in the context of migration and settlement. All participants were drawn from the Melbourne metropolitan area and were recruited through purposive sampling. Three data collection methods were used: key informant interviews; focus group discussions (FGDs); and in-depth individual interviews. Seven key informants were interviewed to shed light on the needs of these migrants in relation to gender and sexuality. These informants were working with people from refugee backgrounds, including those from the Horn of Africa. Four FGDs were conducted to compare the men's understanding of the sexual cultures and gender norms in their former societies and those they experienced in Australia. The groups were organised according to the men's countries of origin to enable a more focused discussion. Each group comprised between three and ten men—three from Sudan, six from Eritrea, six from Somalia, and ten from Ethiopia. Finally, 18 in-depth individual interviews were conducted to

⁴ Colleen Fisher, "The Exploration of the Nature and Understanding of Family and Domestic Violence within Sudanese, Somalian, Ethiopian, Liberian and Sierra Leonean Communities and its impact on individuals, family relations, the community and settlement," (2009), <http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/current/settlement.html> (accessed 4 June, 2012); Colleen Fisher, "Context of Domestic Violence in Five African Communities from a Refugee Background Post-settlement in Perth, Australia," (2010), <http://www.inter-disciplinary.net/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/colleen.pdf> (accessed 23rd May, 2013).

⁵ I borrow the meaning of the word 'intimacy' from Plummer, who used the term to refer to "an array of arenas in which we 'do' the personal life—doing bodywork, doing gender, doing relationships, doing eroticism, and doing identities." He argued that people do 'intimacies' when they get close to their emotions, for example when 'doing' sex and love, in marriage, friendship, bearing and raising children or caring for others. Ken Plummer, "Intimate Citizenship in an Unjust World," in *The Blackwell Companion to Social Inequalities*, ed. Mary Romero and Eric Margolis (Malden, MA: Blackwell 2005), 75.

investigate the ways in which forced displacement and settlement may have affected the intimate lives of these participants.

To participate in the in-depth individual interviews and FGDs, the men had to be from one of the four target countries, be at least 18-years of age, be able to converse in English, and have been residing in Australia for at least three years. All interviews and discussions were digitally audio-recorded. The digital files were transcribed and analysed thematically using NVivo software as a management tool. This article is based on one of the themes—gender relations—that emerged from the analysis. In this article, verbatim quotes have been used to bring the reader ‘closer’ to the participants’ accounts. Participants’ identities have been concealed by using pseudonyms and changing any identifying details. The ethical approval for this research was granted by the La Trobe University Human Ethics Committee.

Intimacy and gender relations the Horn of Africa

Horn of Africa communities practice the kind of lifestyle that Plummer associates with traditional intimacies,⁶ because they organise their social lives within a constrained framework of traditions and cultural norms guided by communal living. In these communities, men enjoy more privileges compared with women in most spheres of life.⁷ These privileges start early in life. As girls grow up, they are indoctrinated to prepare themselves to be in the service of men. A good example is demonstrated within the institution of marriage. Though abstaining from pre-marital sex is highly valued in the Horn of Africa,⁸ this is particularly the case for girls, whose virginity is associated with family honour and bride wealth.⁹ Consequently, girls in these communities are usually subjected to high sexual surveillance by their families and the community in the hope that they will raise high bride wealth when they

⁶ Ken Plummer, *Intimate Citizenship: Private Decisions and Public Dialogues* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003), 9.

⁷ A. H. Abdel Salam and Alexander De Waal, eds., *The Phoenix State: Civil Society and the Future of Sudan* (Asmara: Red Sea Press, 2001), 73; Judith Gardner and Judy El-Bushra, eds., *Somalia--The Untold Story: The War Through the Eyes of Somali Women* (London: Pluto, 2004), 107; Mussie G. Tesfagiorgis, *Eritrea* (Santa Barbara, California: Greenwood, 2011), 137.

⁸ Rima Berns McGown, *Muslims in the Diaspora: The Somali Communities of London and Toronto* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1999); Edmund Abaka, “Ethiopia,” in *Teen Life in Africa*, ed. Toyin Falola (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004), 75.

⁹ Marshall Cavendish, *Sex and society* vol. 1 (Rockingham: Times, 2010), 274.

marry as virgins.¹⁰ The extremities of this subordination of women are demonstrated in the Dinka community of South Sudan where virginity is so highly valued that a girl who is not a virgin—no matter the circumstances through which she lost her virginity—is unlikely to find a husband.¹¹ Therefore, in many communities in the Horn of Africa, marriage is regarded as the only institution that grants women the right to engage in sex.

On the other hand, as boys mature into men they are expected to plan for marriage and start families of their own. As such, they see themselves as ‘burdened’ with the responsibility of bringing forth new community members through siring children after marriage. As one participant in this study put it, “a man must think marriage ... that [is] part of the culture.” Marriage, therefore, becomes a significant accomplishment for men in the Horn of Africa, symbolising success in life:

If you are born as a boy, when you grow up you say one day I will get married ... I will make a house, I will make a home, I will make a family ... It is a decision from the men.
(Patrick, 40-years old, Sudanese-born, separated from his wife, eight years in Australia, self-employed).

Marriage, therefore, is seen as a duty for all men to perform at some point in their lives. It forms the foundation of procreation and establishing a family. It symbolises a man’s achievement in life; his ability to sire children symbolises his virility. Consequently, a married man has higher social status and commands more respect than the unmarried man.¹² In many Horn of Africa communities, it has been the long-stranding custom that children are named in accordance with the father’s lineage.¹³ Therefore, a man with children has a reason to hope that his name will be carried on to the next generation. This is one of the

¹⁰ Rogaia Mustafa Abusharaf, “Revisiting Feminist Discourses on Infibulation: Responses from Sudanese Feminists,” in *Female “Circumcision” in Africa: Culture, Controversy, and Change*, ed. Bettina Shell-Duncan and Ylva Hernlund (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner, 2000), 154.

¹¹ Orly Stern, “‘This is how marriage happens sometimes’: Women and marriage in South Sudan,” in *Hope, Pain and Patience: The Lives of Women in South Sudan*, ed. Friederike Bubenzer and Orly Stern (Auckland Park: Fanele, 2012), 15.

¹² Richard J. Gehman, *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1989), 63.

¹³ Byron P. Palls, *Cultural Portraits: A Synoptic Guide* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2008), 97.

main reasons for men to marry in many African communities.¹⁴

In addition, the payment of bride wealth is a characteristic of marriages in Horn of Africa communities.¹⁵ It forms the foundation for raising children and establishing a relationship between two families. Shorter (1973) provided a succinct summary of the function of bride wealth in traditional African societies:

It was a process of real or symbolic gift exchange, legalizing a marriage, legitimating the children of a union, indemnifying the bride's family, stabilising the marriage to a limited extent, and propitiating the spirits. Above all, it had the function of giving cohesion to the extended family.¹⁶

However, bride wealth also reinforces the gendered differences between couples. For some men, payment of bride wealth acts as a basis to claim authority and conjugal rights from their wives.¹⁷ Consequently, the husband who forces his wife to have sex with him does not regard the act as inappropriate, or indeed a crime:

For us, there is nothing like raping when you are husband and wife ... when you signed the [marriage certificate] that is a commitment, giving consent that you will fulfil the needs of your husband. And then you as the husband will fulfil the needs of your wife. (Participant, Sudanese FGD)

Since men are expected to provide for their families in many Africa communities,¹⁸ a man who raises the required bride wealth is regarded as having the ability to provide for his family; an act that earns him respect from his in-laws:

¹⁴ Robert A. Levine et al., *Child Care and Culture: Lessons from Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 138; John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Heinemann, 1989), 241.

¹⁵ Mohamed Hassan Fadlalla, *Customary Laws in Southern Sudan: Customary Laws of Dinka and Nuer* (Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, 2009), 102; Fowzia Musse, "War Crimes Against Women and Girls," in *Somalia--The Untold Story: The War Through the Eyes of Somali Women*, ed. Judith Gardner and Judy El-Bushra (London: Pluto, 2004), 77; Steven Gish, Winnie Thay, and Zawiah Abdul Latif, *Cultures of the world: Ethiopia*, 2nd ed. (Tarrytown, NY: Times, 2007), 64.

¹⁶ Aylward Shorter, *African Culture and the Christian Church: an Introduction to Social and Pastoral Anthropology* (London: Chapman, 1973), 171.

¹⁷ Serena Nanda and Richard L. Warms, *Cultural Anthropology*, 2nd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2011); Jack Goody, "Bridewealth and Dowry in Africa and Eurasia," in *Bridewealth and Dowry*, ed. Jack Goody and Stanley Jeyaraja (London: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 5.

¹⁸ Pease, "Australia: Masculine Migration."

I paid 75 cows. And then the family will respect you because you have taken their daughter and you have given them something. (Patrick, 40-years old, Sudanese-born, separated from his wife, eight years in Australia, self-employed)

Nonetheless, it is the man's ability to continue providing for his family that helps him to maintain a higher social status in relation to his wife¹⁹ and gain respect among his peers and the community.²⁰

Of concern in these gender arrangements is that the majority of women in these communities rely on their husbands for an income.²¹ Consequently, they are regarded as 'workers' within the household.²² Since many of these household tasks are undervalued by some men, and there is an expectation on the part of these men that women will remain subservient:

Women are at home, they are there to produce children and also service the men, and they are not productive. When they get married they remain at home... A woman has just to serve the family; cooks, cleans, and so on... So she has to be an obedient wife. She should not ask much questions. She has to obey the orders, always. But sometimes she can protest against it but it stops there because economically she is dependent on the man. (Mustafa, 75-years old, Eritrean-born, married, nine years in Australia, retired).

¹⁹ M Silberschmidt, "Disempowerment of Men in Rural and Urban East Africa: Implications for Male Identity and Sexual Behavior," *World Development* 29:4 (2001):657-671.

²⁰ Robert Morrell and Sandra Swart, "Men in the Third World: Postcolonial Perspectives on Masculinity," in *Handbook of studies on men and masculinities* ed. Michael S. Kimmel and Jeff Hearn (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2005), 97.

²¹ Awatif Ata Elmannan Elageed, *Weaving the Social Networks of Women Migrants in Sudan: The Case of Gezira* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 2008), 22; Getachew Minas, "A Review of the National Population of Ethiopia," in *Digest of Ethiopia's National Policies, Strategies and Programs*, ed. Taye Assefa (Addis Ababa: Forum for Social Studies [FSS], 2008), 34; Tesfa G. Gebremedhin, *Women, Tradition and Development: A Case Study of Eritrea* (Trenton, New Jersey: Red Sea Press, 2002), 164; Gardner and El-Bushra, *Somalia—The Untold Story: The War Through the Eyes of Somali Women*.

²² Meyre Ivone da Silva, "African Feminists towards the Politics of Empowerment," *Revista de Letras* 44:22 (2004): 129-38.

According to Hunnicutt,²³ bride wealth becomes a base upon which men dominate women as a group. Kambarami²⁴ argues that bride wealth leads to the subordination of women to the extent that their sexuality is controlled by men. A girl is expected to remain virginal for a man and, once married, she is valued for her childbearing abilities. She is expected to engage in sex only with her husband and beget him children that are named after his relatives, and not to question her husband's sexual liaisons. In this way, her sexual desires are subjected to control by her husband, while he himself often engages in pleasurable sex by pursuing extra-marital affairs or even marrying another woman. This was demonstrated by a participant who fathered a child with another woman in Kenya, his country of asylum, when his wife was in Australia:

In our culture there is nothing she [the wife] can do... If she doesn't like [it] then I will tell her to go. I am the one who goes and marry. I am the one who pays the [bride wealth]. She is not the one... And she cannot say anything to my family... If she doesn't like she can go away... And how many times she will be pregnant? [do] I have to wait for two or three months before she gets a baby? That three months is difficult to stay... I should be having another [woman].
(Mishek, 34-years old, Sudanese-born, married, three years in Australia, student)

Mishek's account is linked to the practice of polygyny in his community and his 'right' to marry more than one woman. This practice increases his chances of fathering many children that, in the long run, would 'elevate' his status as a man in his community and preserve his name in future generations.

Finally, divorces are discouraged in the Horn of Africa communities. When it is apparent that the couple cannot live together, there is an obligation for the bride's family to pay back the bride wealth, while any children are left with the man.²⁵ To avoid this, the bride's family and her relatives usually play a key role in resolving conflict between their

²³ Gwen Hunnicutt, "Varieties of Patriarchy and Violence Against Women Resurrecting "Patriarchy" as a Theoretical Tool," *Violence Against Women* 15: 5 (2009): 553-73.

²⁴ Maureen Kambarami, "Femininity, Sexuality and Culture: Patriarchy and Female Subordination in Zimbabwe," (2006), www.arsrc.org/downloads/uhsss/kmabarami.pdf (accessed 24 June, 2012)

²⁵ Martha B. Baird and Joyceen S. Boyle, "Well-Being in Dinka Refugee Women of Southern Sudan," *Journal of Transcultural Nursing* 23:1 (2012): 14-21.

daughter and her husband:

If she is divorced she would be a burden on her family and the family has to feed her, and this is a new burden for the family. So she cannot even go far to be divorced and the family cannot encourage her to do that. So they try to solve the problem and to leave their daughter [in] the man's house. (Mustafa, 75-years old, Eritrean-born, married, nine years in Australia, retired)

Since patrilocal residence²⁶ is the common form of arrangement for a married couple in the Horn of Africa,²⁷ the failure to convince the woman to stay means that she has to leave the family home.

Participants drew from these ways of organising gender intimacies in their previous societies as they navigated life in Australia. In the process, they experienced differences in the way social institutions guide gender relations in Australia. This became a foundation upon which they started to question their views about relating with women.

Experiences of gender arrangements in Australia

A few studies have pointed to the changing responsibilities of immigrants in sites of settlement,²⁸ highlighting that men from Africa are called upon to contribute more to domestic workloads, including parenting. In addition, the majority of men with refugee backgrounds from the Horn of Africa face the additional challenge of being unable to fulfil their provider roles due to the lack of employment or access to low-income occupations only.²⁹ Those who may have obtained formal

²⁶ A system in which a married couple resides with or near the husband's parents.

²⁷ Parfait M. Eloundou-Enyegue and Anne Emmanuèle Calvès, "Till Marriage Do Us Part: Education and Remittances from Married Women in Africa," *Comparative Education Review* 50: (2006), 1-20.

²⁸ D. C. Este and A. Tachble, "Fatherhood in the Canadian Context: Perceptions and Experiences of Sudanese Refugee Men," *Sex Roles* 60:7 (2009): 456-66; Pease, "Australia: Masculine Migration."; Bob Pease, "Immigrant Men and Domestic Life: Renegotiating the Patriarchal Bargain?," in *Migrant Men: Critical Studies of Masculinities and the Migration Experience*, ed. Mike Donaldson, et al. (New York: Routledge 2009), 80; Jay M. Marlowe, "'Walking the Line': Southern Sudanese Masculinities and Reconciling one's Past with the Present," *Ethnicities* 12:1 (2011): 50-66.

²⁹ Abdelkerim A. Abdelkerim and Marty Grace, "Challenges to Employment in Newly Emerging African Communities in Australia: A Review of the Literature," *Australian Social Work* 65:1 (2012): 104-19; Omar M. Farah, "The African employment challenge: The achievements and challenges of the Horn-Afrik

education and work experience overseas face a major obstacle in accessing employment when their qualifications and experience are not recognised in Australia.³⁰ At the same time, immigrant women have found themselves in a society that provides them with some opportunities to become economically independent; for example, when the government deposits welfare support directly into their bank accounts.³¹

Such experiences contributed to the participant's perceptions of having lost their social status in relation to women:

The issue back home was that the man was the breadwinner of the family ... as husbands [we] were looking after the family, financially. When most of them came here they couldn't get suitable job to get income to provide for their family. So the father is dependent on the government and the wife is dependent on the government ... she might think 'what is the different between you and me? You are getting money, I am getting money... When she sees things like that, she thinks we are same and you are nothing. (Participant, Somali FGD).

This view is puzzling since a lot of men with refugee backgrounds have been, in any event, unable to provide for their families since their displacement (when their assets were stolen or destroyed or they were blocked from accessing them).³² A possible explanation for this difference in perception among the participants in this current study is the fact that, although the majority of these men and their families relied on humanitarian organisations in their countries of asylum, the support they received was rarely monetary; it was largely in the form of food rations, building materials and medicine.³³ In Australia, however,

Employment, Training and Advocacy Project 2007-2010," 2010 <http://cnlc.org.au/publications.html> (accessed 12 March, 2012).

³⁰ Ignacio Correa-Velez and G. Onsando, "Educational and Occupational Outcomes amongst African Men from Refugee Backgrounds Living in Urban and Regional Southeast Queensland," *Australasian Review of African Studies* 30:2 (2009): 114-27; I. Correa-Velez and S. Gifford, "SettleMEN: Health and settlement among men from refugee backgrounds living in South East Queensland," (2011), http://www.latrobe.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0009/144945/Correa-Velez,-et-al.-SettleMen-WEB.pdf (accessed 8 February 2013).

³¹ Fisher, "The Exploration of the Nature and Understanding of Family and Domestic Violence."

³² Karen Jacobsen, *The Economic Life Of Refugees* (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian, 2005), 24.

³³ Marc-Antoine Perouse de Montclos and Peter Mwangi Kagwanja, "Refugee Camps or Cities? The Socio-economic Dynamics of the Dadaab and Kakuma Camps

welfare support is in the form of money that, as mentioned before, can be deposited directly into the women's bank accounts. This becomes a source of anxiety because women are now able to make some decisions about the use of this money. Therefore, a change of economic arrangement created new power relations between the genders and, as a result, affected how unemployed participants interpreted their wives' perceptions.

In addition, a number of participants reported being hesitant about sharing household duties even though they acknowledged the increased responsibilities of the women in providing income for the family. These participants considered the household tasks to be women's work:

Most of the women expect us to do the house work ... their job is looking after the kids, feeding the kids or the men, and the men [are] expected to have the job outside the house and he is responsible ... [for] the financial conditions of the family. (Participant, Ethiopia FGD)

Resistance to share household tasks emerged from the participants' views that this would lead to a further loss of their status, authority and respect from women. In their former societies, women's tasks included child-rearing, food preparation³⁴, laundry³⁵ and other related duties, while men were expected to provide an income for their families.³⁶ As they grew up, these participants internalised these norms and took on the expected gender roles. As a result, helping out with household tasks in Australia was interpreted as degrading to their sense of being men. Due to such perceptions, some participants experienced difficulties dealing with the fact that Australia provided a space that redefined the roles of both men and women.

Participants were also confronted and confused by Australian laws that govern and allow government officials to intervene in intimate relationships. They came from societies where there was limited government interference in relationships between married couples; rather community elders were usually called upon to resolve domestic

in Northern Kenya," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 13:2 (2000): 205-222; Jacobsen, *The Economic Life Of Refugees*.

³⁴ Gardner and El-Bushra, *Somalia--The Untold Story: The War Through the Eyes of Somali Women*.

³⁵ Ritu Verma, *Gender, Land and Livelihoods in East Africa: Through Farmers' Eyes* (Ottawa, ON: International Development Research Centre, 2001).

³⁶ Fredrick Muyia Nafukho, Maurice Nyamanga Amutabi, and Ruth Nabwala, *Foundation of Adult Education in Africa* (Cape Town: Pearson Education, 2005), 91.

disputes between married couples.³⁷ However, gender relations in Australia are based on what Plummer has referred to as ‘postmodern intimacies’.³⁸ Australia provides a social space where people are increasingly organising their gender relations based on the rights of the individual. Violence against women is a criminal offence, and conflict between husbands and wives is often handled through the legal system.³⁹ To deal with intimate partner violence, a restraining order against a physically violent partner may be issued by the court.⁴⁰ Since a couple’s residence does not have a ‘patrilocal’ connotation in Australia, the possibility of men being forced to leave the family house in circumstances where there was a major conflict was regarded by participants as symbolising men’s ‘weakness’ in relation to women in Australia. This reinforced their belief that Australia as a country privileged women over men:

Some wives here they think themselves as having power. Not power for fighting [but] just power for the money and power for the police. Because when they call the police the police will say ‘you are here in the family like a lion or like a hyena. Go outside’. This is the power of the wife.

(Anthony, 42-years old, Sudanese-born, married, six years in Australia, employed)

Due to the legal system in place, women in Australia can easily pursue separation or divorce when they are not satisfied with a relationship. In this study, two participants reported having been separated or divorced after receiving intervention orders applied for by their wives. Although none of the participants acknowledged that they had been violent to their partners, interventions to curb violence against women, such as restraining orders, had acted as a deterrent to such crimes to some men:

Here in Australia my wife has a right to tell me go. I can’t kick my wife [out of the house] but my wife can kick me out. So I get stressed [saying] ‘oh if I do this my wife will kick

³⁷ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*.

³⁸ Plummer, *Intimate Citizenship: Private Decisions and Public Dialogues*. Plummer used the concept ‘postmodern intimacies’ to refer to new possibilities of organising personal life based on individual choices. In many developed countries, individual choices are regarded a fundamental human right.

³⁹ Robyn Holder, *Domestic and Family Violence: Criminal Justice Interventions* (Sydney: Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse, 2001), 2.

⁴⁰ Renata Alexander, *Domestic Violence in Australia: The Legal Response*, 3rd ed. (Annandale, NSW: Federation Press, 2002), 55.

me out'. (David, 35-years old, Ethiopian-born, married, five years in Australia, employed).

A number of participants occasionally referenced religious instructions as a guide to organising their marital relationships. Their interpretations of certain passages within the Bible and the Qur'an led them to believe that women were beholden to submit to their husbands and accord them respect. Some of the men holding these views believed that, post-settlement, women would discontinue their adherence to religious instructions under cover of the protection they receive from the Australian legal institutions:

When a man and the woman marry, they have a religious contract where she has certain rights and the man is [in] charge. Now, when they come here it is the legal system of Australia which decides the wife has right to go without even acknowledging the husband, to separate and even divorce. (Participant, Eritrean FGD)

Unlike in their previous societies, these participants found themselves in a democratic country that tolerates different religious groups and accepts religious diversity. In Australia, policymakers do not heavily draw from religious tenets in passing legislations about gender relations. As such, there is little direct influence that religious institutions have on the legal system⁴¹ although this does not mean that people do not hold religious views. Nonetheless, unlike in their former societies, where Sharia laws⁴² and Christian marriage acts⁴³ were often applied to social institutions, the marriage institution in Australia is guided by the secularly derived marriage and family law Acts.⁴⁴ Their former social institutions often privileged the men by giving them

⁴¹ Elizabeth Burns Coleman and Kevin White, "Negotiating the sacred in multicultural societies," in *Negotiating the Sacred: Blasphemy and Sacrilege in a Multicultural Society*, ed. Elizabeth Burns Coleman and Kevin White (Canberra, ACT: ANU E press, 2006), 2.

⁴² Ziba Mir-Hosseini, *Marriage On Trial: A Study of Islamic Family Law*, 3rd ed. (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2000), 23; Jamal J. Nasir, ed. *The Status of Women Under Islamic Law and Modern Islamic Legislation*, 3rd ed. (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2009), 21.

⁴³ Gita Gopal and Maryam Salim, eds., *Gender and Law, Eastern Africa Speaks: Proceedings of the Conference* (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 1998), 28.

⁴⁴ Rosalind F. Croucher and Francesca Dominello, "The New(er) Family in Australia and New Zealand—Definitions, Rights and Responsibilities," in *Families and Estates: A Comparative Study*, ed. Rosalind Frances Croucher (Hague: Kluwer Law International 2005), 120.

'divine' authority over women. This allowed the men to subject women to their will which, at times, led to the women's further 'oppression'. Australia's promotion of gender equality and the enhanced status of women made it difficult for some participants to embrace these specific aspects of their new society. This resulted in anxiety among those participants who held onto religious views of marriage to inform their attitudes and behaviour when relating with their spouses.

The experiences of a shift in the organisation of gender relations by the participants led to their general view that Australia was a country that prioritised the needs of women. This was a recurrent theme across the interviews:

Here, we feel like it is hell. We feel like it is the end of the life ... because the life is tough. The life is opposite to what I have been before ... the life is four levels here; number one is the women, the second is the children, the third is the pets, dogs, and then number four is the men. People say that because men have no power here. They are powerless ... this country is for ladies, it is the country of the women.

(Patrick, 40-years old, Sudan-born, separated from his wife, eight years in Australia, self-employed)

Such a view presents an interesting foundation upon which to reflect on and indeed question, the participants' views that women from refugee backgrounds from the Horn of Africa in Australia were in a better position compared to the men. This is because it remains uncertain whether or not the situation of the women from these communities has indeed improved. Although a recent study argued that women were better off than they used to be in Africa as a result of access to adult education,⁴⁵ other studies have indicated that the majority of these women continue to face major obstacles to receiving better education⁴⁶ and that they experience significant economic

⁴⁵ Susana Akua Saffu, "Adult Education and Community Capacity Building: The Case of African-Australian Women in the Northern Territory," *Australasian Review of African Studies* 31: 1 (2010): 15-36.

⁴⁶ Anikó Hatoss and Henk Huijser, "Gendered Barriers to Educational Opportunities: Resettlement of Sudanese Refugees in Australia," *Gender and Education* 22:2 (2010): 147-60; Faradi Tilbury and Mark Rapley, "'There are Orphans in Africa still Looking for my Hands': African Women Refugees and the Sources of Emotional Distress," *Health Sociology Review* 13:1 (2004), 54-64.

hardship due to a lack of employment.⁴⁷ Another recent study reported that these women faced more challenges in accessing employment in comparison with men.⁴⁸ More conclusive research needs to be done to explore the actual experiences of these women.

Negotiating arrangement of gender relations in Australia

A number of participants reported devising a variety of strategies to negotiate the way gender relations were organised in Australia. Some participants attempted to override aspects of gender arrangements in Australia:

I have a connection with my family in Sudan and I have connection with her family. They give her advice on how we can live in a foreign country. They tell her that you have to take care of your family and take care of yourself.

(Anthony, 42-years old, Sudanese-born, married, six years in Australia, employed).

This reflects an example of adaptation—the attempt to hold onto the traditional ideologies of organising intimacies that placed more emphasis on communal living and wherein conflict between married couples was resolved by the community elders. Due to the cultural expectation that married women respect and remain loyal to their husbands in the Horn of Africa, those men who were able to maintain contact with their community elders succeeded in introducing to Australia some traditional ways of organising their gender intimacies.

Another strategy involved threatening women with the possibility of resettling back in Africa in case of separation or divorce:

I told my wife that if she attempts [to leave], that that is the day I will leave Australia. And I go back to my country, let Australia come and get me in my country [saying mockingly]. That is the time I will organise myself and I will go. My wife cannot get even one dollar for child support [from me]. She can't. Let her suffer with the government.

(Mishek, 34-years old, Sudanese-born, married, three years in Australia, student)

⁴⁷ Celia McMichael and Lenore Manderson, “Somali Women and Well-being: Social Networks and Social Capital among Immigrant Women in Australia,” *Human Organization* 63:1 (2004), 88-99.

⁴⁸ Abdelkerim and Grace, “Challenges to Employment in Newly Emerging African Communities in Australia.”

This account reveals the anxiety some men feel at the prospect of having to continue to provide for their children in cases of separation or divorce from their spouses. The participants' thoughts of resettling back in Africa demonstrates the importance of the social bases of men's self-esteem and their quality of life. As noted earlier, marriage in many parts of Africa gave legitimacy to the children and their right to be provided for and to inherit their father's property. In such patriarchal communities, the man retains custody of the children in the event of separation or divorce.⁴⁹ Since separation or divorce in Australia may result in women being awarded custody of the children,⁵⁰ many participants regarded this as stripping men of their traditional rights.

A number of participants reported an attempt to accommodate the new ways of organising gender relations in Australia:

Culture is like a software. Like a human software. Computer needs software, human needs software... I have African culture software and I am also trying to have Western software ... In my earlier days I used to have conflict between this culture and my culture but there is acceptance that came later. (Hussein, 37-years old, Somali-born, married, 15 years in Australia, employed)

This is another example of adaptation, where some men have made attempts to incorporate some new aspects of Australian society into their gender relations. This group of men regarded these new ways of organising intimacies as more relevant to their lives. This adjustment involved renegotiating their 'traditional' perspectives and realigning their actions to the postmodern perspective of making individual choices in guiding gender relations. These men argued that every person should have the freedom to make personal decisions about how to organise his or her gender intimacies without fear of coercion, discrimination or stigmatisation from the community.

⁴⁹ Fadlalla, *Customary Laws in Southern Sudan: Customary Laws of Dinka and Nuer*; Sherene Razack, *Looking White People in the Eye: Gender, Race, and Culture in Courtrooms and Classrooms* (University of Toronto Press: Toronto, 1998), 123; Judith V. Olmstead, *Woman Between Two Worlds: Portrait of an Ethiopian Rural Leader*, (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 31.

⁵⁰ Maryam Jamarani, "Encountering Differences: Iranian Immigrant Women in Australia," in *Feminism and Migration: Cross-Cultural Engagements*, ed. Glenda Tibe Bonifacio (New York: Springer, 2012), 158.

Conclusion

Participants in this study came from traditional societies where life was organised through communal living and high value placed on family and community input into important life decisions. These values were expressed in a context of gender relations that saw men enjoy a higher social status and wield significantly more authority than women. Through this form of social organisation of gender relations, men were often successful in regulating women's behaviour. Participants arrived in Australia with expectations of organising their gender intimacies along the same lines as their former societies. Upon settlement, however, they experienced new arrangements of organising gender relations that were based upon the values of individual choice and individual rights.

By being compelled to engage with these new ways, a number of participants felt a sense of loss of their ability to subject women to their will and, with this, a loss of the sense of self-esteem that they had derived in their former societies through their successful fulfilment of their roles as 'men'. This loss was the result of a variety of issues, such as the limited influence of the extended family in relationships, economic independence on the part of some women, and the presence of legal institutions capable of intervening in domestic conflicts. The perception of loss of status was exacerbated in situations where participants encountered challenges in securing employment and were, therefore, unable to fulfil the traditional role of providing for their families.

As a result, some of these men found it particularly challenging to adjust to or even live in Australia; a society that they perceived gave women greater flexibility in navigating the traditional roles that were attached to their gender in their former societies. These views became sources of tension for those men who continued to hold onto traditional perspectives of gender relations. These experiences became the basis upon which they attempted to make sense of themselves, and their relationships with women, in Australia. While some participants spoke of the need, and indeed made attempts, to adjust to the way gender relations in Australia were organised, a number of them struggled to blend in and re-organise their lives to fit into the new society.

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