'[In Australia] what comes first are the women, then children, cats, dogs, followed by men':
Exploring narratives of men from the Horn of Africa
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Abstract
This article reports on the 'struggles' of men in relation to negotiating gender-relations in Australia. The findings are drawn from my PhD research project that investigates the sexuality and sexual health of men with refugee backgrounds from Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Eritrea[2] in the context of migration and resettlement. Overall, participants stated that men have low social ranking within their communities and households in Australia. They attribute this to the economic independence of women, against the backdrop of men's inability to fulfil the traditional role as providers, and the laws and policies that govern relationships between couples. Upon resettlement these men are confronted with new ways of organising their intimacy — doing relationships, doing sexuality, and doing gender.[3] Their attempts to negotiate the ways that intimate life is organised in Australia influence how they enact their sexuality, and consequently, this affects their sexual health and sexual well-being. Accordingly, in this paper I argue that there is a need for programs to assist men in 'understanding' and 'negotiating' gender, intimacy and relationships within the Australian context.

'[In Australia] what comes first are the women, child, and cat and dog followed by man. The man is the last one. [Steve, 28 years old, Sudanese -born, single man and engaged, 12 years in Australia, unemployed]

'Men [are] the head of the family back home. Now we feel as men here [pause] African men we are like number four. First one is the woman, second will be children, we say may be number three will be cat or dog. And we are the last. That is the way we think. Because if your wife does not listen to you anymore, if your child, your own child does not listen to you anymore, so what do we say? Where is your position? If there is a dog at home or a cat at home, they [the women] look after it more than you. [Joseph, Key informant, community worker]

'This country is for women…Here, we [as men] feel like it is hell. We feel like it is the end of the life [pause]. The life is opposite to what I have been before… some

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[2] Referred in this article as the Horn of Africa

[3] 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' Plummer Ken "Intimate Citizenship in an Unjust World." In *The Blackwell Companion to Social Inequalities*, edited by Mary Romero and Eric Margolis, 75-100. Malden, MA: Blackwell 2005. He argues that people do intimacies when they get close to their emotions when doing sex and love, in marriage, friendship, bearing and raising children or caring for others.

people they say that 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 [this] because men have no power here [Patrick, 40 years old, Sudanese-born, separated from his wife, eight years in Australia, self-employed]

Introduction

Australia now provides individuals, including women, with diverse 'opportunities' to organise their intimate lives. This has happened partly due to activism for human rights and the implementation of policies and legislation that have created a 'safer environment' for people to exercise their rights over intimate lives. Some features of intimacy for women that we see today in the Australian society have not come easily; they have been gradual, contested, and often cutting across generations. Since the 1970s, for example, the country witnessed revolutionary movements by feminist that led to implementation of policies and legislation promoting their rights.[4] The success of these movements were crucial in laying the foundations on which women can now claim 'rights' around organising their intimate lives 'free of violence'. Today there are legislations in place to protect women from intimate partner violence.[5] via measures such as issuing restraining orders against a perpetrator[6].

Individual choices in guiding intimacies are severely restricted in many African societies partly because social life is usually organised around traditions and communal living. In many communities, much of what people do in their intimate lives is governed by their cultures and communities, the extended families, relatives and close friends.[7] Although human rights movements in the continent have started challenging some traditions that discriminate against women, many of these countries are yet to pass legislation that protect violence against women. For example, besides South Africa, which recognised rape within marriage as a crime in 1993,[8] many other African countries do not treat marital rape and domestic violence as crimes.[9] Consequently, cases of violence against women are under-pinned in part by the many laws, traditions, customs, beliefs and prejudices against girls and women in many African countries.[10] .It is with these

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[4] Pease Bob. "Moving beyond Mateship: Reconstructing Australian Men's Practices." In *A Man's World? Changing Men's Practices in a Globalized World*, 189-204. London: Zed Books, 2001.

[5] Putt Judy, and Karl Higgins. "Violence against Women in Australia: Key Research and Data Issues." Griffith, ACT: Australian Institute of Criminology, 1997.

[6] Alexander Renata *Domestic Violence in Australia: The Legal Response*. 3rd ed. Sydney: Federation Press, 2002.

[7] Mbiti John S. *African Religions and Philosophy*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Heinemann, 1989.

[8] Human Rights Watch. *Violence Against Women in South Africa: The State Response to Domestic Violence and Rape*. New York, NY: Human Rights Watch, 1995.

[9] London Scott. "Domestic Violence: Sub-Saharan Africa." In *Encyclopedia of Women & Islamic Cultures: Family, law, and politics*, edited by Suad Joseph and Afsaneh Najmabadi, 125-27. Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff, 2005.

[10] Okereke G. O. "Violence against women in Africa." *African Journal of Criminology and Justice Studies* 2, no. 1 (2006): 1 - 35; Rwomire Apollo ed. *African Women and Children: Crisis and Response*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001; Jackson Nicky Ali ed. *Encyclopedia of Domestic Violence*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2007.

perceptions of organising intimacies in Africa that the participants compared their experience in Australia. For over three or four decades the participant's countries of origin have experienced protracted periods of civil unrest.[11] Consequently, and as Plummer[12] argues, it is inconceivable to even think about rights around intimacies in such an environment. In such an environment, the 'intimacy debates' and rights of women are far removed from the concerns of everyday lives as individuals are preoccupied with surviving wars and fulfilling their most basic needs. Upon displacement many of these men continue to organise their intimacies around their families and network of friends in the countries of asylum. Horn,[13] for example, observed that married couples from these countries living in Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya had a 'hierarchy of responses' [p.164] in resolving intimate partner violence. She found that the community elders, immediate family members and friends were consulted first. If the issue was not resolved, it was taken over by humanitarian agencies and the police came in as a last resort. This indicates that in the process of migrating from their countries of origin to initial neighbouring countries of asylum, it is likely that these men did not experience substantial differences in 'doing relationships' with their wives. However, they encountered a different 'intimacy world' upon resettlement in Australia; a world that supports and upholds women's rights and freedom from any form of coercion. Negotiating through these unfamiliar 'intimate world' becomes the genesis of tension and ambivalence among some of these migrant men.

Methods

A qualitative approach was adopted to explore how the men organised their intimate lives in the context of migration and resettlement. The main research method of the study was in-depth interviews. However, key informant interviews and focus group discussions were used to elicit data that contextualises the stories from participants taking part in the in-depth interviews. All participants were drawn from Melbourne metropolitan area. Participants in the in-depth individual interviews and focus group discussions had to meet the following eligibility criteria: of African origin, at least 18 years of age, ability to converse in English, resident in Australia for at least three years. In total, seven key informants, four focus group discussion—organised according to the men's country of origin with between three and ten men —and 18 in-depth individual interviews were conducted. All interviews and discussions were digitally audio-recorded. The digital files were transcribed and analysed thematically using NVivo software as a management tool. The data has been presented in this article under one of the major themes developed during the analysis. Verbatim quotes have been used to ensure that the participants' explanations of their experiences are represented. However, the

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[11] Wilson Kyle. "Somalia (1988-1991 and 1992-Present)." In *Civil wars of the world: major conflicts since World War II*, edited by Karl R. DeRouen and U Heo, 675-714. Santa Barnbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2007.

[12] Plummer Ken. *Intimate Citizenship: Private Decisions and Public Dialogues*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003.

[13] Horn R. "Responses to intimate partner violence in Kakuma refugee camp: Refugee interactions with agency systems." *Social Science & Medicine* 70, no. 1 (2010): 160-68.

researcher has edited some transcripts to provide coherence of the sentences and provide clarity of participants' thoughts. The ethical approval for the study was given by La Trobe University Human Ethics Committee. Participants' identities have been concealed by using pseudonyms and changing any identifying details in the writing of this article.

<u>**Findings**</u>

A large majority of participants expressed the belief that women and children are in a privileged position compared to men in Australia. These participants pointed out two major arenas that they felt led to the loss of status: 1) women's economic independence against the backdrop of their inability to fulfil the traditional role as providers for their families, and 2) the Australian legislation about gender relationships particularly conflict between married couples. I examine these arenas below.

<u>Inability of the man to 'provide' and the economic independence of women</u>

In many African societies, including the Horn of Africa, the ability for the man to fulfil the provider's roles partly helps him to establish authority over his wife and children[14]. Upon resettlement, some men have found themselves unable to fulfil this role effectively due to lack of employment or being in a low income occupation[15] . Some participants felt that whereas the men faced substantial challenges in their efforts to provide for their family in Australia, woman have more opportunities to become economically independent. Participants regarded the lack of employment, and therefore the challenge of providing for the families, as a major factor that made them worthless in the eyes of their wives:

> *When men came here, some of them is very difficult to find a job… some of them are very disappointed they are not working they end up getting money from Centrelink.[16] And the wife also taking money from Centrelink. When she [the wife] sees things like that she thinks we are same and you [the husband] are nothing. (Participant D, Somali FGD).*

This 'economic scenario' affects how some unemployed men think their wives perceive them when they spend a longer time in the house:

> *When you [as a husband] sit home unnecessary [without a job] and your wife sees you every day, she might think that she is the boss (Participants E, Somali FGD)*

Some men are hesitant to share duties within the household despite the fact that they acknowledge the increased responsibilities for the women. These men consider the 'house' as a woman's domain. Consequently, they regard household tasks as women's

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[14] Silberschmidt M. "Disempowerment of men in rural and urban East Africa: implications for male identity and sexual behavior." *World Development* 29, no. 4 (2001): 657-71.

[15] Abdelkerim Abdelkerim A., and Marty Grace. "Challenges to Employment in Newly Emerging African Communities in Australia: A Review of the Literature." *Australian Social Work* 65, no. 1 (2012): 104-19.

[16] Australian government department that provides welfare services and payment

work:

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

Such views become a base on which they evaluate their sense of being men. This may lead to conflict between the couples when the man continues to hold on to the traditional view of manhood while his wife expects him to help out in household tasks in the face of the new situation in Australia.

Australian legislation

Domestic violence is treated as a criminal offence in Australia and conflict between married couples can be handled by the criminal justice system.[17] In their previous societies, it was the norm for conflicts between married couples to be resolved with the community. Since such conflicts were handled by the elders, who are mainly men, there is the possibility that decisions made could favour the husbands. It is from these patriarchal structures that Horn of African women in Australia have found themselves being 'liberated from' and having options of having the conflicts handled by other institutions as some participants lamented. Such participants linked these 'choices' to women's defiance of male authority:

> *Our wives became Australians…they are enjoying the freedom here. They don't care. Even if you bring family, they will not listen. They can even call police for your family here. (Patrick, 40 years old, Sudanese born, separated from his wife, eight years in Australia, self-employed)*

Undeniably, the women themselves do not have much choice regarding the handling of domestic violence as they have also found themselves under the Australian system. Nonetheless, some men still blamed them for 'disregarding' their traditions in relation to handling conflict within the family.

Closely tied to this is the men having to move out of family house as a result of an intervention order issued against them. Patrilocal residence is the common form of arrangement for a married couple in the Horn of Africa.[18] In case of a major conflict, separation or divorce, it is usually the woman who leaves the family house. This is unlike in Australia where the couple's residence does not have a patrilocal connotation. The possibility of men leaving the family house when there is a major conflict was considered as something that lowers men's status and therefore reinforces the belief that Australia as a country gives higher preference to women:

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[17] Holder Robyn. *Domestic and Family Violence: Criminal Justice Interventions*. Sydney: Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse, 2001.

[18] Eloundou-Enyegue Parfait M., and Anne Emmanuèle Calvès. "Till Marriage Do Us Part: Education and Remittances from Married Women in Africa." *Comparative Education Review* 50, no. 1 (2006): 1-20.

> *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 [to the husband] '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)*

Although such claims cannot be fully substantiated, a study done among a Somali community in the United States indicated that some women would deliberately separate from their unemployed husbands in order to get more financial benefit from the welfare system.[19] Though the researcher has not come across any studies in Australia that have investigated these issues it does not mean that it is not happening. Research needs to be carried out to investigate the theme further. Nevertheless, the possibility of men having to leave the family house in case of a restraining orders[20] have acted as a deterrent for potential perpetrators as highlighted by a participant:

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

Some participants tried to 'justify' women's subordinate position on the basis of religion:

> *For us [Muslim] what we face as males [pause] when a man and the woman marry, they have a religious contract where she has certain rights and the man is overall, mainly [is in charge]. (Participant D, Eritrean FGD)*

> *[In] our religion [Christianity] in Ethiopia, the father is the head. The man is the in charge. And we follow. That is our guidance for the woman and the man. (Participant C, Ethiopia FGD)*

Consequently, the failure for the women in Australia to adhere to their 'religious duties' and receive protection from the Australian system was likened to their rebelliousness from religious instruction.

Other used cultural practices like payment of bride wealth as a basis on which men can claim authority over women:

> *[The girl's parents] call the girl and tell her, 'you see the cows [payed in form of bridewealth], even if you go there [to the husband's house] and you do something bad, we don't have time for you here. You have now become a part of the other family. If you go and make crime there it is up to you. If they kill you it is*

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[19] Heitritter D. Lynn. "Somali Family strength: Working in the communities." (1999), www.brycs.org/documents/SomaliFamilyStrengthReport.pdf (19th March, 2012).
[20] Alexander.

up to you [since] you are the one who came to us to tell us that you love that man, and we agree and have taken cows from this man, so forget all (Mishek, 34 years old, Sudanese born, married, three years in Australia, student)

We [did not] get them [the women] for free. You pay something to live with them. They [the Australian government] shouldn't have a right of saying 'oh she can go', when you have paid something. Here there is something they call 'keep the receipt'. They always say that. Everything you [buy you] gonna keep the receipt. Where are we going to take our receipts back. You paid for the woman and in our culture you don't get [a] receipt. But here if you buy something and it is not good you take it [back to the shop] and you still get your money back. Or you change it. Where are we going to change the woman who is not good?... How about our money? Are we going back with our receipts so we can get our money [back]?...Freedom here is for the people who are free. You get them [the women] for free she has freedom [and] she can go anytime. If I get my woman for free, anytime she wanna go she can go. She bring boyfriend, I bring a girlfriend. But I paid sometime, why would I let her to be free? (Participant A, Sudanese FGD)

As Hunnicutt[21] has argued, practices like bride-wealth become avenues of men dominating women as a group both structurally and ideologically as they reinforce the belief among some men that they are 'naturally' superior to women.

<u>Implications of the discourse of 'loss of status and authority' to sexual practices</u>

The complexity of negotiating the way intimacies are organised in Australia affects the sexual practices and gender relations of men. There were indications that some married men may engage in extra-marital affairs as a way of compensating for their 'loss':

The freedom in this country… there are some restrictions towards sex life, but those restrictions press other buttons inside the African men to develop other means of having sex…The restrictions are the wife she said 'no, today there is no sex, no I refuse'. Ok, I respect that [as a man]. Ok I am going out. Ok, you say no? I am going out. I am going out with my friends to have fun. To you what does it mean fun? You don't know [the wife does not know]. You will have it there [sex] and come back and sleep…You restrict him from having sex at home, but you press other buttons, [that is] he goes out. (Moses, Key informant, community support worker)

This was a post-hoc justification that extra-marital affairs do not happen in home countries because men have unfettered access to their wives bodies. However, some men still use this rationalisation to justify their behaviour.

In addition, there was anxiety among participants in relation to sexual relationships between married couples due to the criminalisation of coerced sex within marriage. It

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[21] Hunnicutt Gwen. "Varieties of Patriarchy and Violence Against Women Resurrecting "Patriarchy" as a Theoretical Tool." *Violence Against Women* 15, no. 5 (2009): 553-73.

seems as though these men did not understand the difference between consensual sex and rape:

> *(In Australia] it looks everyone sleeping with his wife wondering when he is going to be charged with rape… like she can sue you anytime…So that brings a shock to everyone sleeping with [the wife] and just wondering when she is going to sue me (Participant I, Ethiopian FGD)*

Some single men bought into the discourse of 'the loss of authority' from older men to inform future decisions regarding marriage. Some reported that they prefer getting their marriage partners from overseas because women in Australia do not show 'respect' to their husbands:

> *I am not interested [to marry in Australia]. Because I just need to keep myself alive. Because here in Australia there are people who get into mental problem … And they have been destroyed by their women…The police can tell you not to come to see you child[ren] which are your own blood. (Steve, 28 years old, Sudan born, Single man and engaged, 12 years in Australia, unemployed)*

Interestingly, the majority of the married men who moved here with wives claimed that it is the culture that changes their wive's behaviour. Asked whether their 'overseas' wife won't 'change these men argued that 'overseas girls' are naïve to the Australian system therefore, less likely to separate or divorce their husbands in the future:

> *When you bring her here, she is still natural, she don't know much…But when you get her from Australia, she already knows what is going on. She know what number to call, she knows this, so it is a really big problem (Participant B, Sudanese FGD)*

Discussion and conclusion

In the Horn of Africa, men dominate women in many spheres of life.[22] Similar to many other African societies a man earns greater respect in these countries if he is able to provide and have command over his family.[23] This makes some men feel that by providing for their families, they are entitled to unquestionable authority over their female partners. Indeed, studies show that the majority of women in the Horn of Africa rely financially on their husbands.[24] This dependency may make them tolerate the husbands' decisions and actions. In such situations initiating separation or divorce by women would be almost impossible. Upon resettlement, these women find themselves in a welfare society that provides them with avenues to achieve some financial independence from men in that the money can be sent directly to a woman's bank

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[22] McSpadden L.A. . "Negotiating masculinity in the reconstruction of social place: Eritrean and Ethiopian refugees in the United States and Sweden." In *Engendering Forced Migration, Theory and Practice*, edited by D. Indra, 242-60. New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 1999.

[23] Morrell Robert, and Sandra Swart. "Men in the Third World: Postcolonial Perspectives on Masculinity." In *Handbook of studies on men and masculinities* edited by Michael S. Kimmel and Jeff Hearn, 90-113. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2005.

[24] Gebremedhin Tesfa G. *Women, Tradition and Development: A Case Study of Eritrea*. Trenton, New Jersey: Red Sea Press, 2002.

account.[25] This seems to challenge men's 'authority' as they perceive this as a strategy of opposing their social status. This means that women can 'claim' rights of a relationship free of coercion or initiate separation and divorce if they are not satisfied. This knowledge makes some men unable to subject their will as they previously did in the former societies. With legislation in place and numerous services to support domestic violence victims, men who may wish to 'establish' their authority over their wives through violence may fear the repercussion of their actions. These become sources of tension for men who continue holding onto their traditions and basis on which they attempt to make sense of themselves in Australia and how they relate with the women. Some of these men struggle to find their place in this 'new reality'. Some may define ways to 'fight back' by engaging in extra-marital affairs and transactional sex while single men prefer to marry from overseas as a way of 'opposing' the way gender-relations are organised in Australia. There is a need for education and support programs to assist resettled men from the Horn of Africa in negotiating 'new ways' of organising intimacies in Australia.

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[25] Fisher Colleen. "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 (3rd May, 2010).

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