



Negotiating Respectable Masculinity: Gender and Recognition in the Somali Diaspora

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Abstract

Following years of civil war, many Somalis are displaced in Western countries as refugees or family re-united persons. This situation has caused multiple losses of social position and upheavals in gender relations. Although both men and women are subject to these changes, Somalis describe the situations of men as more difficult. Taking departure in multi-sited fieldwork in Copenhagen, Somaliland and London, this article explores how Somalis negotiate respectable masculinity in the Diaspora, arguing that men's difficulties are articulated as a transfer of male authority to the welfare state, reflecting female empowerment and male misrecognition. However, the focus on men's loss can also be understood as processes of positioning and of re-instituting a 'traditional' gender baseline in which the positions of respectable versus failed masculinity are established. Finally, the article argues that Somali men negotiate and enact respectable masculinity through associational and community involvement, creating alternative social spaces of recognition.

Keywords

gender, masculinity, recognition, Somali refugees, welfare state

Résumé

Suite à des années de guerre civile, beaucoup de Somaliens se sont installés en Occident en tant que réfugiés ou en vertu du principe de réunification familiale. Cela a causé de multiples préjudices en matière de position sociale et des bouleversements dans les relations inter-sexes. Bien qu'aussi bien les femmes que les hommes soient sujets à ces changements, les Somaliens décrivent la situation des hommes comme plus difficile. En partant d'une enquête de terrain

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multi-sites à Copenhague, en Somalie et à Londres, cet article explore la façon dont les Somaliens négocient une masculinité respectable dans la diaspora, avançant que les difficultés rencontrées par les hommes s'articulent comme un transfert de l'autorité masculine vers l'état providence, reflétant l'autonomisation des femmes et la non-reconnaissance des hommes. Cependant, l'attention apportée aux préjudices vécus par les hommes peut aussi être comprise comme un ensemble de processus d'orientation et de ré-institution d'un nouveau modèle « traditionnel » de relation hommes-femmes, dans lequel on fait la différence entre des positions de masculinité respectable et de masculinité défaillante. Finalement, cet article soutient que les hommes de Somalie négocient une masculinité décrétée comme respectable au travers d'une implication associative et communautaire créant des espaces sociaux alternatifs de reconnaissance.

Mots-clés

genre, masculinité, reconnaissance, réfugiés somaliens, état providence

It can be very difficult for the men. In the welfare offices, the men are on an equal footing with the women. Many men had very high positions before the war and it is difficult for them to accept that they have lost them. They keep on talking about what they used to have and what they used to be (Khadija Said, London, 2004).

How do refugees cope with changed gender relations following displacement? What happens to notions of masculinity in situations of marginalisation and loss? Forced migration combined with loss of livelihoods and social positions establish a particular context for the enactment and constructions of gender ideals for both men and women. Gender may turn into a discursive and moral battlefield where appropriate behaviour, moral values, and social status are negotiated and struggled over. Questions regarding 'respectable' or 'failed' masculinity and femininity might thereby become central issues for the understanding of community and culture in the group.

In this article, I offer a case study of how masculinity positions are negotiated and enacted among Somali refugees in Copenhagen and London, supplemented with views from Somaliland. Following years of dictatorship and civil war, a large number of Somalis are displaced in Western countries as refugees or family re-united persons. This has caused huge changes in gender relations and is a much-debated theme among Somalis in Western countries as well as in the Somali-speaking region. While many Somali men and women are subject to downward social mobility and loss of social status in exile, Somalis articulate the situations of Somali men as more difficult (Farah 2000; Hansen 2008; Kleist 2007a) – especially for men who had high social positions before displacement.

Theoretically, the article takes departure in an understanding of gender as performative, situational and relational, 'always being reinvented and rearticulated in every setting, micro or macro [...] always in motion, always dynamic'

(Kimmel, Hearn & Connell 2005: 7). This implies a focus on how gender is 'done' (Butler 1999) and negotiated as well as how gendered positions are co-constituted in interplay with other social categories such as racialisation, age, and social class (Jensen 2008; Wetherell & Edley 1999). I thereby understand masculinity as the enactments and articulations – as well as the negotiations and reinventions – of culturally defined ideals of manhood and male authority, intersecting with other social positions. In this article, I am particularly interested in how ideas of respectable and failed masculinity are related to specific intersections of social positions and social recognition (Fraser & Honneth 2003). Let me emphasise that I use the notions of respectable and failed masculinity as relational and positional terms, referring to two extremes in a continuum of masculinity positions, rather than fixed sets of attributes characterising particular groups of Somali men.

Three questions guide the article: How do Somali men and women articulate changes in gender relations in Western countries? Why is the situation of Somali men seen as more difficult than that of women? And finally: How do Somali men, who used to have high positions in Somalia, seek to re-establish and negotiate respectable masculinity? The article thus analyses how masculinity is articulated and enacted by Somalis – not whether Somali men 'really' have more difficulties than women. Three arguments are presented. First, I argue that Somalis articulate men's difficulties as a transfer of male authority to 'the system' – various welfare state institutions – reflecting female empowerment and male misrecognition. Second, I propose that the focus on men's loss can also be understood as processes of positioning and of re-instituting a 'traditional' gender baseline. This means that talking about men's problems as *particularly* difficult is a way of defining appropriate gender norms, discursively establishing the positions of respectable versus failed masculinity. Third, I suggest that (former) high-status Somali men use associational and community involvement to create alternative social spaces of recognition in which respectable masculinity can be enacted.

Methodology

The article is based on multi-sited fieldwork in Copenhagen, Somaliland and London. I interviewed Somali refugees in Copenhagen in 1999, and again in 2003 and 2004. In both sets of fieldwork, gender and family relations were central issues for the informants as well as an indispensable analytical perspective. The first fieldwork consisted of interviews with 14 Somali women and

nine men and focused on senses of belonging and strategies of mobility (Fink-Nielsen, Hansen & Kleist 2004). I returned to ten of these informants four years later in a larger study focusing on linkages between transnational engagement and inclusion in Danish society (see Kleist 2007b). This fieldwork included 51 informants: 32 men (15 in Copenhagen, 11 in Somaliland and six in London) and 19 women (14 in Copenhagen, three in Somaliland and two in London). Interviews were carried out in Danish and English, in a few cases with Somali translation, and were supplemented with a range of informal conversations. Likewise, I conducted participant observation in associations and drop-in centres, at seminars, in public spaces, and in private homes. Fieldwork in Copenhagen was supplemented with fieldtrips to Hargeisa in Somaliland in 2003 and to London in 2004, following the transnational practices of the Somali informants in Copenhagen (Marcus 1995), and studying how life in Western countries or Somaliland is articulated and imagined from different locations.

In both sets of fieldwork, the age of informants ranged from 18 to 70 though most were between 35 and 55 years old. The informants in Copenhagen and London were, with one exception, all first-generation migrants who had stayed in Denmark or the UK for at least seven years – and in a few cases several decades. While I tried to include persons of different backgrounds, all the formal informants in Denmark and the UK had permanent residence permits, or held Danish or British citizenship. Two-thirds of the informants in Somaliland were return migrants from Western countries, holding a Western passport. Furthermore, most of both the male and female informants had gone through secondary or tertiary education in Somalia or elsewhere, most were employed or students and many were engaged in Somali associations. Only a smaller number were unemployed. However, none of the informants in Denmark (and few of those in London) had been able to use or continue their educational background or career from Somalia in Denmark or the UK. These characteristics are necessary to keep in mind. It means that while most of the informants were among the more privileged Somalis in Copenhagen and London, they still had not been able to transfer their employment-related or educational status. It also means that the most marginalised and vulnerable Somalis were not included in the study – though the Somali informants often referred to them.

Somali Gender Ideals

Somalis have migrated for centuries, but international migration was spurred by the civil war which started in 1988 and spread to the whole country in 1991. Since then Somalia has been affected by political instability, humanitarian catastrophes and insurgencies, continuing to date. Somalis are now living all over the world and many Somalis remain oriented towards Somalia, following news, maintaining contact with relatives, remitting money, supporting reconstruction projects, or investing in land or business (Hansen 2007; UNDP 2001). This situation has led researchers and Somalis themselves to speak of a Somali Diaspora,¹ referring to the global dispersion of Somalis, who – to changing degrees – maintain a sense of belonging, contact and involvement in Somalia (e.g. Farah 2000). However, in most cases, the so-called Diaspora refers to Somalis living in Western countries and is associated with access to resources as well as exposure to Western culture, including gender and family relations.

Somalia is usually presented in the literature as a patriarchal and patrilineal clan-based society where gender and age structures the division of labour and where 'each individual has an exact place in society' (Lewis 1994: 19) and where men are assumed to have 'a social status superior to women' (Gardner & Bushra 2004: 11; cf. Warsame 2002). Gender ideals are described as complementary. Men are supposed to be breadwinners and heads of household, responsible for public and political activities, including *shir* – open councils where adult men debate important decisions and from which women mostly are excluded. A 'real man' – *raganimo* – is further characterised as being tough and brave but also helpful and generous as well as having oratorical skills, speaking eloquently and loudly (Hansen 2008: 1112). Conversely, 'good women' are supposed to take care of domestic activities and be obedient and docile. Yet Somali women have also played important economic roles, women generally have a strong decision-making role at the household level and are in control of their own income. Likewise, intelligence and strength are seen as attractive qualities for a woman (Lewis 1994; Warsame 2002).

The complementary gender ideals of strong and dominant men versus weak and docile women can be seen as expressions of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005) and femininity, functioning as prescriptive norms of dominant

¹ I refer to 'the Diaspora' as an emic term, used by Somalis to refer to Somalis living outside the Somali-speaking region. See Kleist (2008a) for an analysis of how the notion of the Somali Diaspora is employed by different actors.

gendered behaviour by ordering and reducing complexity. They are exactly ideals, hailed by some and contested by others. Furthermore, the introduction of Islam, colonisation, independence, and civil war have all resulted in significant changes in gender relations as well as there are and have been changes between urban centres and the pastoral population (Kallehave 2001; Kapteijns 1994; Warsame 2002). There is and was not one singular way of 'doing' Somali masculinity or femininity. Indeed, as Jansen notes in his study of 'misplaced' masculinities among middle-class Bosnian male refugees in Western countries, it is difficult to establish a gender baseline as a stable context of tradition towards which the present can be measured (2008: 188). Yet, as I argue in this article, the articulations of Somali hegemonic gender ideals constitute an attempt to establish such a baseline through references to the past and 'tradition' (cf. Sideris 2004), functioning as a repertoire of interpretation within which gender relations in Western countries very often are measured and understood.

The civil war and global dispersion of Somalis have challenged hegemonic gender ideals in the Somali-speaking region as well as in Western countries. The civil war split up families through the loss of lives or physical separation caused by the chaos of sudden flight. Many women became the heads of household and many married couples divorced – both in the Somali-speaking region (Warsame 2002) and in Western countries, leading some authors to write about a 'single mother phenomenon' (Affi 1997). However, Lewis (1994) remarks that the pastoral Somali population regarded marriage as unstable and that divorce used to be common before the civil war, emphasising the importance of not automatically perceiving gender relations in Western countries as in opposition to the pre-civil situation in the Somali-speaking area. The civil war and displacement also meant that numerous men as well as women had to give up their careers – or dreams of careers – ending up as cleaners, factory workers, bus drivers, or unemployed, rather than business men, lawyers or politicians. While some Somalis have succeeded in establishing successful careers, there is a high level of unemployment among Somali men and women in Western countries, meaning that many Somalis are dependent on social security. As women with children tend to be the main recipients of such benefits, many women have become the economic heads of households, while many men cannot realise the ideal of the male breadwinner. Furthermore, homelessness and khat abuse are reported to be growing problems among Somali men (Harris 2004). Finally, the reception of Somalis in Western countries has been ambivalent. Thus, on top of unemployment, and family and social problems, some Somalis have been subject to racism and, generally,

the Somali group has a negative reputation among many social workers, the media, and the general public (Fangen 2006; Harris 2004; Hopkins 2006). This is also the situation in Denmark.

Living in a Ladies' Country

The 16,550 Somali nationals and descendants (Integrationsministeriet 2008: 12) constitute one of the major groups of third-country citizens and the biggest African group in Denmark. Somalis began coming to the country in large numbers in the middle of the 1990s, following the civil war. This coincided with immigration and integration becoming increasingly politicised issues in Denmark (Hedetoft 2006), especially in relation to the extension of welfare provisions and asylum. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Danish media portrayed Somalis as 'very difficult to integrate' and as characterised by insurmountable cultural differences concerning religion and gender relations (see Kleist 2007a). Islam and gender were and are central issues in the Danish immigration debate (Andreassen 2005), contributing to gendered stereotypes of un-integrated Muslims and, more particularly, oppressed women and sexist men. The bad reputation of Somalis has been aggravated by the low level of employment: in 2003 only 16 per cent of Somali men and 6 per cent of Somali women were employed (Integrationsministeriet 2007: 57), placing Somalis among the three nationalities with the lowest level of employment in Denmark. To sum up, Somalis are highly visible as a racialised and religious refugee group in Denmark, yet many Somalis have no Danish friends and express that they feel invisible as individuals, not being recognised as persons with individual characteristics and life stories.

The ambivalent reception, unemployment and social problems can be understood as a situation of social misrecognition. I am here inspired by political philosopher Nancy Fraser, who understands recognition as a question of the social status of individuals and group members in relation to societal participation. In this view, misrecognition is a question of social subordination. Fraser writes:

If and when such patterns [of cultural value] constitute actors as *peers*, capable of participating on a par with one another in social life, then we can speak of *reciprocal recognition* and *status equality*. When, in contrast, institutionalized patterns of cultural value constitute some actors as inferior, excluded, wholly other, or simply invisible, hence as less than full partners in social interaction, then we should speak of *misrecognition* and *social subordination* (Fraser in Fraser & Honneth 2003: 29, emphasis in original).

Recognition is thus associated with power. It concerns how particular positions – for instance the categories of Somali men and women – are established in different social and political contexts, constituting dynamic status and recognition orders where some positions are constructed as natural and desirable while others are established as inferior. Many informants described their life in Denmark in terms of humiliation and failure (cf. Fangen 2006) – or as misrecognition. Ahmed Osman is an example. As the only person in his family, Osman had just managed to finish his education when the civil war broke out and he had to flee Somalia. He arrived in Denmark in the early 1990s and spent his first years in the country as a social security claimant, neither able to use his Somali education nor to study in Denmark. Being a proud and independent man, Osman found this an extremely difficult situation. “I never *ever* thought this would happen to me” was one of the first things he told me, describing life on social security as “a tough life, a lonely life, an unpleasant life”. This situation was further aggravated by the humiliation of the low social status and the bad reputation of Muslims in general and Somalis in particular. Osman emphasised that the situation of receiving social security is humiliating for both men and women. However, pointing to the obligation of Muslim men to provide for their families, he explained that unemployment and dependence on social security is experienced as particularly difficult for Somali men.

Gender and family relations are much-debated issues among Somalis in both Western countries and the Somali-speaking region, regularly discussed at meetings and seminars, Somali websites, etc. They were also subjects of intense interest among the Somali informants. While both men and women agreed that life on social security was humiliating, many of the informants claimed that Somali women benefit from the possibilities and rights of Western welfare states. In these accounts, the adaptability of Somali women is highlighted, whereas men are described as having lost social status. A Somali woman in Denmark stated it in the following way, accentuating the problems of men not being able to live up to the ideal of the male provider:

The women get integrated, but the men behave as though they were in Somalia. They want to make all the decisions; they want to work, but they are on social welfare and have problems because they would like to provide for their families. The men cannot do anything here. They had power in Somalia, and now they say that ‘Denmark is a ladies’ country’ (Fatima Farah, Copenhagen, 2003).

Criticising that the ‘men behave as though they were in Somalia’, Fatima expressed an understanding of context-bound gender ideals. The men’s behaviour is out of place because they have not adjusted to the socio-economic

realities in Denmark, in contrast to the women who are said to integrate in the *ladies' country*. Talking about Denmark as a *ladies' country* may reflect the fact that women often receive support from the welfare system, that the welfare state institutions are staffed mainly by women – such as social workers and counsellors – and finally, that gender equality is widely articulated in Denmark as an important value and characteristic of Danish society.² Furthermore, it mirrors an understanding of state intervention in family affairs and gender relations in terms of 'liberating women' that some men (and indeed also some women) found very controversial. This was the opinion of Ali Mohamed. As a young man, Mohamed studied law in Mogadishu and dreamt of becoming a judge. The civil war disrupted his studies and dreams, and after eight years of unemployment in Denmark, he had become an embittered man, expressing his mixed feelings about a women's project in his Danish hometown.

There is a women's project where I live. There are only women there and they talk all the time. There are *no men*. And it's *our women*, and we don't know what they do, or what they tell them. If they help them, if they oppress them, if they want to take religion or the veil away from them, or if they give them money and tell them to leave their husbands [...] they take away our culture (Ali Mohamed, Copenhagen, 1999).

For Mohamed, Danish women and social workers were potentially conspiring against Somali men and he suspected that Somali women's encounter with Danish social workers may destroy Somali culture. He thereby saw women as transmitters and reproducers of ethnic ideologies and cultural rules (cf. Anthias 1998), fearing for their 'pollution'. Like Fàbos (2007) has described with reference to Muslim Arab Sudanese in the UK, Mohamed drew upon a discourse of gendered authenticity that cautions against women's independence and emphasises their responsibility for maintaining cultural identity, threatened by the intervention of the Danish welfare state and its personnel.

Masculinity at Risk

Both men and women expressed concern about the interventions of the Danish welfare state in relation to family affairs. Generally speaking, there is a potential clash between the Danish (and more broadly Western) nuclear

² The importance of gender equality is reflected in the Danish declaration of 'active citizenship', which has to be signed by foreigners not holding a permanent residence permit, in order to emphasise 'Danish values'.

family ideal³ and Somali extended family patterns (Kallehave 2001). Likewise, Somali extended families are important in relation to child rearing, economic support of family members in need, and counsel with regard to marriage problems and other family-related issues. However, these are matters that the Danish welfare state supports, sets conditions for, and intervenes in, for instance in relation to the much-feared forcible removal of children and, more generally, upbringing of children. Public childcare is very institutionalised in Denmark, and day nurseries and nursery schools are strongly encouraged to support children's social and language competences – and to make it possible for parents to work outside the home. This institutionalised practice thus goes against the gender ideals of the male breadwinner and the stay-at-home mother and housewife as well as possibly reducing the importance of the extended family.

While some Somalis embrace the opportunity of public childcare, others express that they are 'made to feel inadequate by Denmark's feminism' (Evans-Prichard 2004) if the women stay at home with their children or desire to do so. Zeinab, whom I met in 1999, explained how she dreamt about moving to London where, according to her, it is possible to live 'the Somali way' where 'most men are employed and the women stay home'. Being an unemployed single mother of four, Zeinab longed as much for a loving and providing husband as for a less exhausting daily life. She was not the only one. Indeed, several of the informants claimed that the UK offers a more friendly environment in terms of multicultural policies, fewer language problems, better employment opportunities, less bureaucratic business regulation, and, often, the presence of networks of family and friends who can help out with childcare (Kleist 2007a). According to the informants, this means that men can more easily fulfil the role as breadwinner and women can be housewives without having to participate in various job training and language courses, as they do in Denmark (cf. Nielsen 2004). Certainly, the British welfare state is less extensive and gender relations generally more conservative and less equality-oriented than in Denmark or other Scandinavian countries. And certainly, it is estimated that more than 20,000 Somalis holding a passport from an EU country have moved from Scandinavia and the Netherlands during the last decade (Lindley & Van Hear 2007). However, there are social problems among Somalis in the UK as well, including under- and unemployment (Harris 2004), meaning that many Somalis end up in British welfare offices anyway.

³ While this rather narrow understanding of family is not necessarily mirrored in daily life, it forms the basis of Danish family re-unification practices, such as DNA-testing of children to check if they are biologically related.

According to Khadija Said, a Somali-British woman, who had established a women's association in London, life in the UK does not necessarily imply more 'traditional' gender relations.

It can be very difficult for the men. In the welfare offices, the men are on an equal footing with the women. Many men had very high positions before the war, and it is difficult for them to accept that they have lost them. They keep on talking about what they used to have and what they used to be. They don't want to start from scratch in school with their kids and be equal with teenagers. It is easier for the women after the war. They still have the responsibility of the house, the kids, etc. In Somalia, the men pay and do nothing else and they don't want to do anything else. Here, the men think that the system is pushing them, replacing their authority and that the women are doing the same. Here, there is power sharing (Khadija Said, London, 2004).

In Khadija's account, men's power and positions in Somalia before the civil war are contrasted with the present situation where their achievements and social positions are annulled – both in the welfare offices and often also in their families. While women continue their responsibility for the family and the household, men cannot uphold their position as male breadwinners, losing male authority and social esteem. Women thus remain *recognisable* as mothers and caregivers in Western countries (cf. Jansen 2008) or – in the Danish stereotype – as women oppressed by sexist men and thus in need of extra assistance, whereas unemployed Somali men appear as failures who cannot provide for their families or – again in the Danish stereotype – as un-integrated refugee men. Likewise, Khadija's statement shows how masculinity is linked to ideas of age and social class. Respectable masculinity is thus not only a question of behaving in the right way but also of an appropriate 'fit' between gender, age and social class (McSpadden 1999; Wetherell & Edley 1999).

Furthermore, Khadija indicates a transfer of authority from Somali patriarchy – where men hold power of public and political affairs – to the welfare state system and from the welfare state to women through 'power sharing' (cf. Hansen 2008). Many men explained this as a loss of authority and control over their families through direct or indirect state intervention. In the UK, there are numerous stories circulating about the '911 option': women and children calling the police to report their violent or threatening husbands or fathers (cf. Hansen 2008; Harris 2004; Pasura 2008). Somali men in Denmark and London also explained that women now expect men to share the housework and claimed that 'when women get an income, they sometimes think they can do without the man and throw him out'. Indeed, the theme of women rejecting, taking advantage of, or even evicting their husbands was

recurrent. One Somali man in Denmark explained how Somali women treat their unemployed husbands:

In Denmark, the women want the man to stay in the house and share the work. They say, 'you are not supporting, you are not a real man'. Some men are thrown out [if they don't do housework]. It is very embarrassing to be thrown out of your own house, maybe even by the wife that you brought here. They are hiding that they have been kicked out. They stay in the club and pretend they have somewhere to go (Yusuf Mansoor, Copenhagen, 2003).

This account shows how the ideal of the male breadwinner was negotiated as well as reproduced by Somali women, shaming men who neither provide nor do housework. While these men might have tried to enact 'traditional' masculinity, they nevertheless lose gendered respectability through the double shame of not being 'a real man' and being evicted by their wives (cf. Fåbos 2007). This phenomenon is known as 'getting the black plastic bag' (cf. Kusow 2007), referring to the big waste bag in which evicted men carry their belongings. Not surprisingly, Somali men described such situations as extremely embarrassing. Indeed, according to Somali-American sociologist Abdi Kusow, Somali women in Canada are 'economic warlords' (2007: 39), a metaphor which not only emphasises tension and conflict but also indicates a reversal of power and positions where women are perceived to be warriors and men victims.

Not all men blame women, though. Certainly, some men talked with admiration and devotion about their wives, praising their efforts and love. Some younger men were on parent leave with their young children while their wives were studying, and several other men described their wives as smart, strong and independent. Some women explained the difficult situation of men with empathy. Certainly, the male provider was missed, not only by men but also by some women, as Zeinab's example showed. And certainly, some men criticised men rather than women for causing problems in the family. Such a critique was formulated by Somali men in Copenhagen, London and Somaliland alike, usually distinguishing between those men who have managed to cope with life in Western countries – in the sense of managing family life and exploiting the opportunities that Western countries are perceived to present – and those who have failed to do so. In Somaliland, Haji Hassan, a successful and powerful politician and businessman, accused his male compatriots for being useless.

Women's position is a sensitive question. Somali women adapt better. The men in Western countries are not given the respect of the family because the governments give social welfare to the families and the men have no role to play. They feel alienated and that the system gives more priority to the women. When we were here, their mothers treated them differently. There was a work division, so the boys were spoilt and now they don't know how to

cook and wash... The men are useless there and have become a burden to the family (Haji Hassan, Hargeisa, 2003).

For Haji Hassan, Somali men in Western countries are becoming redundant and unable to adapt to the new circumstances, while 'women adapt better'. It should be noted that Hassan, who used to live in Saudi Arabia and was a very conservative Muslim, did not celebrate women's new positions but preferred women to concentrate on their families and households. Yet, in his eyes, women rather than men manage to cope with Western societies and life in the Diaspora. Gender relations in the Diaspora are also debated among Somalis in the Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya where some men 'talk with disdain about issues of gender equality, 'role-reversal' and immoral behaviour' (Horst 2003: 219ff). Likewise, ideas of liberated women and marginalised men are depicted in videos and popular songs with lyrics such as 'men have no future', 'women have more power than them [the men]' and 'hey, refuse to go abroad!' (*ibid.*: 222). However, as Horst also points out, such images of gender relations in the Diaspora do not restrain people from dreaming about Western countries. Rather, they reflect an ambiguous attitude where life abroad is depicted as potentially morally corrupted but also as presenting opportunities, and access to wealth and resources (cf. Kleist 2008a). Managing these challenges and opportunities are important aspects in respectable masculinity.

The examples above show that the discourse of changing gender relations in Western countries is articulated not only in Copenhagen but also in London, Toronto, Hargeisa and refugee camps in Kenya. While there are differences between the extension of the welfare state and the official emphasis paid to gender equality in Denmark and the UK, these differences are relatively small when compared to life in Somaliland or Somalia where there is no welfare state and no official gender equality policies. However, the discourse not only reflects (simplified and imagined) differences between Western countries and the Somali-speaking region. It also re-institutes notions of hegemonic Somali gender relations at a transnational level, establishing a gender baseline through reference to 'traditional' versus 'Westernised' gender relations where women are 'liberated' and 'economic warlords', while Somali masculinity is at risk.

Making Sense of Male Loss

It was striking that no matter whether men or women were blamed for the difficult gender relations in Western countries, men were seen as having the worst difficulties and women as being empowered. As shown above, many

Somalis articulate this situation as mirroring the fact that women have their own income (or, alternatively, social security) and thereby have gained financial and social autonomy, while men have lost political power, privileges and respect – especially if they are unemployed in the new country of residence. Thus, though both men and women face problems and misrecognition, men are seen as having *lost more*.

Men's multiple losses might be further aggravated by the contrast between life as a refugee in Western countries and the, sometimes idealised, life in Somalia before the civil war – especially for those men who held high social positions. The higher the social position before their flight or exit from Somalia, the bigger the distance between the old and the new life – and between the former and present social positions. This indicates the importance of social class in relation to migration. Indeed, as Levitt and Schiller point out, migrants and refugees might 'occupy different gender, racial, and class positions within different states at the same time' (2004: 1015) and difficulties of re-establishing these positions in the country of residence might cause frustrations. While an educated and middle- or upper-class background might facilitate some aspects of the processes of inclusion in a new country of residence, it may also cause frustrations and a sense of misrecognition when the social positions cannot be re-established.

This ambivalence – and instability – of social class in migration trajectories can be found among many groups of migrants and refugees, including highly educated and professional Eritrean and Ethiopian refugee men in the US and Sweden (McSpadden 1999), Mexican migrant men in the US (Goldring 1998), and Bosnian middle-class men in exile in Western countries (Jansen 2008). As Jansen notes, the distinction between refugees and migrants is 'politically and theoretically counterproductive', yet sudden and violent displacement can strengthen 'a widespread experience of accumulated loss' and ensuing difficulties in coping with 'the drop in wealth, status and recognition' (2008: 186). In Jansen's study, such coping problems are especially outspoken among male Bosnian urban, middle-aged, formally educated professionals. This was also the tendency among Somalis in Copenhagen – though the frustrations were shared among younger men and those who had *expected* to get a professional or political career in Somalia but never realised it because of the civil war. Ahmed Osman and Ali Mohamed are examples of this. Indeed, as Honneth has suggested, the discrepancy between *expectations* to recognition and *experiences* of its absence results in a sense of misrecognition and discontent (Fraser & Honneth 2003). Such feelings were prevalent among some Somali who felt disconnected from a promising future (cf. Ferguson 2008)

and despised and marginalised by the majority society as well as by some of their compatriots.

However, the explanation about male loss and misrecognition needs to be supplemented. First, both men and women have suffered status declines. Second, it presupposes a set of homogenous pre-civil-war gender relations in Somalia, where men were breadwinners and women housewives. The 'male loss explanation' thereby reproduces what philosopher Uma Narayan has termed the 'Package Picture', naturalising certain versions of culture and tradition while ignoring the processes through which these have come to be seen as dominant (Schott 2003: 142). I therefore suggest a complementary interpretation, namely that the focus on men's loss is *also* seen as an act of gendering itself, as positioning. Positioning has been defined as 'the way in which the discursive practices constitute the speakers and hearers in certain ways and yet at the same time is a resource through which speakers and hearers can negotiate new positions' (Davies & Harré 1990: 62). This implies that talking about marginalised or failed men not only is a reflection of female empowerment and male loss but also a way of negotiating masculinity. In the words of Wetherell and Edley, 'identification is a matter of the *procedures in action* through which men live/talk/do masculinity' (1999: 353, emphasis in original). The repeated articulations of men's problems and loss of social esteem contribute to the establishment of the masculinity positions of respectable versus failed men that men can identify themselves with or distance themselves from. Through identifying the deviant or problematic gender relations, the norm is thus, too, established (cf. Kimmel 2005: 415).

The position of failed men thus constitutes an undesirable outpost in a continuum of masculinities. In the words of Jensen – with reference to the stereotype of the *skollie*, the poor, coloured male thug in Cape Town – such figures inhabit 'a central non-place around which political and everyday identity is structured' (2008: 5). In the Somali case, references to marginalised or failed men were articulated during interviews as well as at public events such as seminars and conferences. It is a position primarily used to characterise other men rather than oneself, though some men – usually divorced and unemployed – did talk about their own difficult situation. Most men, however, talked about *other men's problems*, often distancing themselves from these men, sometimes with empathy, sometimes with considerable scorn. As Wetherell and Edley (1999) point out, hegemonic masculinity requires constant struggle and negotiations. Thus, while the talk about marginalised or failed men can be seen as an acknowledgement of the difficult life and gender relations of some Somalis, it can also be seen as an attempt to re-institute

complementary gender ideals and naturalise the male breadwinner as the norm – to establish a ‘traditional’ gender baseline. Likewise, it can be seen as an attempt to distance oneself from the category of failed masculinity. In this view, the emphasis on men’s problems is thus not only a reflection of men’s problems but also of a way of discursively ordering gender relations, articulating one’s identity through difference and disassociation.

Gendered Spaces of Recognition

The situation of changing gender relations and ensuing male discontent is not a phenomenon limited to refugees. It is often observed that the global restructuring of the economy has led to a decline in the traditionally male sectors of labour whereas there is a growth in the feminised caring industry. In the wake of these changes, some men experience that their ‘worlds have turned upside down, their entitlements snapped from them, their rightful position in their world suddenly up for grabs’ (Kimmel 2005: 429). Men as diverse as white American supremacists (Kimmel 2005), second and third generation Puerto Ricans in New York City (Bourgois 1996), Zimbabwean refugees in the UK (Pasura 2008), and coloured men in Cape Town (Jensen 2008) experience downward social mobility and loss of male privileges, not being able to maintain their breadwinner status or male authority. While only the Zimbabwean case is (partly) war-related, downward social mobility, changing gender relations and challenges of male authority are at play in all these cases. This was also the situation for some Somali men.

While the studies referred to above show that some men respond with violence and radicalisation to situations of loss, this is not the only reaction (cf. Jensen 2008). Goldring notes how Mexican men in the US use community and associational involvement to obtain status among their peers in an environment otherwise characterised by marginalisation and racialisation, producing and reproducing ‘zones of sociocultural intelligibility’ (1998: 175). Inspired by Fraser, this can be formulated as the creation of a status order – a social space of recognition where sets of cultural value constitute Mexican men as equal, resourceful and respectable – located at the margins of the receiving society but centrally in a wider transnational space.

Somali men also assert masculinity and recognition in different ways, including through Islam (McGown 1999), return to Somaliland (Hansen 2008), local or transnational political involvement (Kleist 2008b), and associational and community engagement. A demonstration of the latter took

place in London in 2004, when I spent an afternoon with Mr. Ismail, the son of a *sultaan* – a Somali clan leader – and once a successful banker in Somalia. In London, however, Mr. Ismail was one of the many Somali bus drivers but continued to play an important role among Somalis from his home region. Among other things, he was engaged in various Somali associations and it was in this capacity that I first met him in Copenhagen in 2003 at an international Somali conference where he was invited as one of the delegates from the UK. Now he took me on a walk around the multiethnic neighbourhood of Southall in western London.

While we are walking the streets of Southall and visiting various Somali shops, we encounter a number of men that my companion knows. We meet a heart surgeon, a former top politician, and several other important people. The men greet each other, exchange a few words, and I am introduced. [...] After our walk, Mr Ismail accompanies me back to Victoria Station. During the long train ride, he explains to me that the men appreciate it when they are addressed with their title, such as Doctor, President, Admiral or Director. “Here in London they are often greeted just by their name, like a teenager”, he sighs, and continues that “it is very difficult to have been in a high position and not be recognized with respect” (field notes, London, 2004).

The surgeon, the politician and, not least, Mr. Ismail himself, were all examples of men who had experienced a dramatic loss of status when they came to the West, unable to continue their professional careers and transfer their positions as men of status, competence and qualifications to British society. Being treated as teenagers, their social positions were flattened, made invisible and unrecognisable. In many ways, they resembled the Bosnian middle-class refugee men described by Jansen, whose ‘recognized subjectivities as men [were] largely non-transplantable from its localised context’ (2008: 193). However, in contrast to Bosnian men, who were not engaged in ethno-national associations or regular transnational practices, Mr. Ismail and his acquaintances were able to create a space of recognition for the re-enactment and acknowledgement of social esteem and respectability.

Associational or community activities thus offer a possible zone of socio-cultural intelligibility where respectability and recognition can be asserted. There are many Somali associations in Western countries (Harris 2004; Hopkins 2006), including Denmark (Kleist 2007b), catering for different people and purposes. Some associations organise social and cultural activities in the country of residence, often framed as supporting integration, and others are transnationally involved, supporting reconstruction and development projects in the Somali-speaking region. Some associations have both male and female members and executives, while others are gender-divided or heavily dominated

by men. And while some associations advocate the societal involvement of women or youth, others are clan-based and gender-divided, functioning as venues for the reproduction of gendered and generational hierarchies. Associations thus offer various possibilities for negotiating and enacting different social positions.

Furthermore, associations constitute a more open sphere than Danish politics and the Danish labour market. It is a constitutional right in Denmark and other liberal democracies to join or establish a lawful association, and many of the Somali informants were involved in a number of associational activities. Associations offer the opportunity of 'making a difference', as informants often phrased it, as well as engaging oneself in numerous ways. Serving on a committee, coordinating projects, attending seminars, or negotiating with project partners present rich opportunities for showing initiative, holding executive positions, or discussing important issues, thereby offering a space where Somalis can be recognised as resourceful *individuals* in contrast to the one-dimensional stereotype circulated in Danish society.

Involving oneself in an association or in community activities may thus have the *effect* of restoring individuality, status and respectable masculinity, but it is neither the only effect nor necessarily the intended effect. Indeed, the Somali informants emphasised that obtaining status and recognition was not the aim of their involvement. Ahmed Osman, who was busy with a number of community activities, including several executive positions, explained that he involved himself because he wanted to offer his assistance to others. Though he admittedly received respect and prestige for his engagement, he emphasised that this was not his aspiration. "I don't desire any position", he said, "I don't desire to be the chairman; I am not going for the money or for respect, not at all. I don't want all that. I just want to help my compatriots who need it." Like Osman, other associational key persons articulated their motives for involving themselves as selflessness and as related to strong norms of collectivity and reciprocity among Somalis; doing what they *ought* to do as responsible and respectable persons and men. They thereby referred to several aspects of masculinity, including political and public participation but also helpfulness and generosity.

However, while associations and community activities thus offer a social space for the negotiation and the enactment of respectable masculinity and, more generally, for recognition, it remains a relatively delimited space. Indeed, those men – and women (Kleist 2007c) – who successfully ran associations or held the most important executive positions were mainly formally educated and held jobs in Denmark, being part of the pre-civil-war Somali middle-class

or, in a few cases, the elite, emphasising the importance of social class. Yet, though a few of them had established themselves as spokespersons or had gone into Danish local politics, receiving broader societal recognition, the majority of the informants had not been able to transfer their social positions from Somalia to the Danish society. Thus, while Somali associations and community activities constitute zones of socio-cultural intelligibility, in which respectable masculinity and social positions can be re-enacted and recognised, these zones mostly remain invisible to the wider Danish society.

Conclusion

Based on multi-sited fieldwork in Copenhagen, London and Somaliland, I have shown how the discourse of challenged gender relations in the Diaspora is circulated in Western countries and the Somali-speaking region alike with stories of role reversal, 'liberated women', evicted men, and the '911 option'. Many Somalis describe gender relations in Western countries as a transfer of authority from men – or, more accurately, from a patriarchal gender order – to the welfare state and as a reflection of changes in power relations where women are empowered while men lose privileges. Such changes are particularly outspoken in equality-oriented welfare states like Denmark, though they are also found in the UK. However, male authority is under pressure and debated in a range of contexts, indicating that changes in and discourses about masculinity are part of more general societal transformations.

The discourse of empowered women and failed or marginalised men should not be confused with a general description of Somali gender relations nor of static gender identities among Somali refugee men. Rather, I argue that the discourse establishes a gender baseline against which the present can be juxtaposed, contested or celebrated, re-instituting conservative and 'traditional' gender ideals as the norm. Both men and women were engaged in this process, whether they missed the male provider or blamed 'liberated' women or failed men. In this way, the Somali gender debate can be analysed as an act of gendering itself. Talking about (other) men's failure contributes to the establishment of a continuum of masculinity positions where failed and respectable men constitute two extremes – and serves as a way of positioning oneself as respectable through the disassociation to the category of failure. This might overshadow other gendered experiences and discourses, such as loss of status among Somali women or men who struggle for egalitarian gender relations.

There are thus different Somali masculinities and ways of asserting masculinity, including being a good Muslim, engagement in transnational practices and politics as well as involvement in community activities and associations. The latter constitute gendered spaces of recognition – especially for educated men who used to have high social status in Somalia – where individuality and respectable masculinity can be recognised by peers, producing and reproducing social positions and gender ideals. However, these social spaces mostly remain delimited to other Somalis, often including people living elsewhere in the Diaspora or the Somali-speaking region. This indicates that while Somalis might be recognised as ‘full partners in social interaction’ (Fraser & Honneth 2003: 29) by their compatriots, recognition and status equality is rarely extended beyond the group and rarely transform societal misrecognition in the countries of residence.

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