

# Gendered Experiences of Conflict and Co-operation in Heterosexual Relations of Somalis in Exile in Gothenburg, Sweden<sup>o</sup>

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## Riassunto

*Il fattore sessuale in situazioni di conflitto e di cooperazione nelle relazioni sessuali di Somali in esilio in Gotemburgo, Svezia*

*Guerra civile e povertà in Somalia hanno spinto molti Somali ad immigrare. Questi immigrati non solo hanno lasciato fisicamente le loro case, famiglie, parenti, amori, amici, ma anche luoghi familiari, culture, abitudini per ritrovarsi isolati a causa della profonda diversità tra la loro cultura e quella della nazione che li ospita. Diverse pubblicazioni suggeriscono che in Svezia siano presenti 15.000 Somali. La maggioranza di questi è arrivata tra la fine del 1989 ed il 1996. Circa un terzo di questi vive nella città di Gotemburgo e dintorni.*

*Il nostro lavoro ha inteso esplorare e descrivere il fattore sessuale in situazioni di conflitto e di cooperazione nelle relazioni sessuali di Somali in esilio in Gotemburgo, Svezia. Sono state effettuate interviste approfondite con 6 donne e 7 uomini utilizzando un questionario semi-strutturato. Inoltre sono stati realizzati gruppi di discussione con 10 persone (2 donne and 8 uomini), utilizzando la tecnica "focus group". Lo studio è stato eseguito tra maggio 1999 e gennaio 2000. I risultati evidenziano che sia la cultura Somala che la religione Musulmana non approvano che i bambini nelle scuole seguano corsi di educazione sessuale o che durante le lezioni vengono pronunciati i nomi degli organi sessuali, se non metaforicamente. Le bambine, diversamente dai coetanei maschi, vivono durante l'infanzia esperienze molto dolorose, come le mutilazioni genitali femminile ed il controllo della verginità; queste procedure possono portare ad un forte regresso psicologico con perdita dell'autostima nelle persone esposte. Le narrazioni riportate mettono in evidenza storie in cui le donne Somale sono degradate e portate ad aderire a situazioni imposte dai loro uomini. Sono soggette a una forma di controllo sociale molto rigorosa, che è particolarmente attenta alle questioni riguardanti la sessualità. La loro integrità come donne è di conseguenza un fattore di secondo piano.*

*Quando i profughi Somali sono arrivati in Svezia, alcuni di loro hanno adottato uno stile di vita moderno ed adeguato al sistema sociale del Paese ospitante: questi sono stati principalmente i giovani ed anche alcune donne. Una nuova cultura crea la necessità di aderire a nuove norme comportamentali e modifica anche il senso di autostima. La situazione di esuli tende a generare conflitti orizzontali tra gli sposi e tra gruppi di persone, ma anche conflitti*

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*verticali tra le nuove generazioni e le precedenti; tali conflitti sono molto pronunciati quanto si tratta di sessualità e relazioni sessuali. Le generazioni giovani mettono in discussione l'autorità dei loro genitori; esse si trovano a vivere in un contesto sociale nuovo del quale percepiscono i rischi, ma anche le potenzialità. Sogni e scelte nuovi non corrispondono alle aspettative dei loro genitori e questo può generare gravi problemi. Dal punto di vista della tradizione coloro che si allontanano dalla cultura originale, le mancano di rispetto. Dal punto di vista sociale questo significa più specificatamente mancanza di rispetto per il dominio e la superiorità maschile.*

## Introduction

### The problem

In the Somali family and in the society the division of power between men and women is not balanced. Religious tradition gives men precedence over women "Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, Because Allah has given The one more (strength) Than the other, and because They support them From their means Therefore, the righteous women Are devoutly obedient, and guard In (the husband's) absence With Allah would have then guard" (26).

In Somalia girls and women have a low status with limited rights and influence in relation to men (3, 7). They are culturally subordinated to men; they have neither rights of land- or livestock ownership nor may they take part in the management of the community, or even of their own household economy. Almost all family decisions are made by men and women are rarely, if ever, consulted. Even important decisions or deliberations concerning women's private lives, such as marriage and divorce, are exclusively dealt with by men and made by men. However, women may influence the men's activities through their brothers, husbands, sons and elderly. As well they are supposed to be cunning to make their husbands accept what they want. Furthermore among women's property for life include gold-articles such as ear-ring, bracelet, wedding ring, and a wedding necklace (19).

Somali society has been substantially changing during the last 50 years in and out of their country. The way of life of many Somalis has been changing and as a consequence there has been some positive modification concerning men's attitude to female's right. Thus, Somali cultural background described elsewhere (13, 16, 17) in some extent may reflect on a traditional and idealised system. However, gender inequality is an intrinsic part of the Somali culture (1). This is also found in Somali folk stories, songs and proverbs. Women are considered to be intellectually inferior to men. This is illustrated by a Somali proverb, which says that "intelligence is not found where there is milk" (milk being associated with women).

The Somali culture view a girl as a temporary member of the household, who is cared for until she marries and brings home the customary dowry. A woman's diya payment is measured half of man's diya. A recent murder case report from the southern Somalia town of Kismaayo suggested that traditional elders argued that "A man worth 100 camels cannot be executed for a woman worth 50, the killer was not apprehended or prosecuted" (7). Women are disadvantaged in the Somali cultural system and this is even reflected in their mortality (2).

Few girls enrol in both urban and rural schools and more fail to complete the course of education than boys (3, 4, 7). This could be due to the fact that the girls assume a heavier burden of household duties and care of their younger siblings. Aden (3) reported in the following quotation that men in the Somali rural

community also considered education of the girls, even in the Qur'an school, as empowerment and a potential danger to the male dominance.

"...daughters should help their mothers both at home and in the field instead of studying. Often, we do not let girls study even the Qur'an, in case they attempt to compete with males and divorce their husbands if they disagree for some reason".

However, gender and power structure in different socio-cultural Somali context need to be studied properly and it should be brought into the attention of politicians, decision makers and planners. Choi Ahmed (9) pointed out that "in current significant histories written about Somalia, women and gender dynamics are excluded".

Political upheaval and poverty at home have been forcing many Somalis to immigrate. These immigrants do not only leave their physical house, families, relatives, loved ones, friends, but also familiarities, culture, customs, comforts, traditions and values which make people feel togetherness and belong to each other (27). Often immigrants do end up in no man's land being between their own and new home culture, and they are seen as strangers (8, 27).

It was reported that there were about 15 000 Somalis in Sweden (22) the majority of which came here from late 1989 to 1996 due to the civil war in Somalia. These Somalis are spread all over Sweden, however, about a third of them live in and around Gothenburg (Göteborg) city. It is believed that most of these immigrants who have arrived in Sweden are abroad from home for the first time. Moreover, they have set off on this journey with little or no information about modern sex education and sexual relations, and women's right to negotiate over sex (5, 6). Therefore, on arrival to this environment, many families experienced an unprecedented exposure to explicit information on social norms and life, which confused them. The objective of this paper is to explore and describe gendered experiences of conflict and co-operation in sexual relations of Somalis in exile in Gothenburg, Sweden.

### Theoretical frame of reference

Our ambition was not only to cover some specific cultural and gender theory (10) but also the symbolic interactionist perspective (11). The latter postulates things about the relations between the individual and society. It is a theory which in a dialectic way, at the same time, considers the fact that people are both determined by and creators of society. Even if the individuals internalise the values and norms of their surrounding social environment, they also take active part in the transformation of the same environment. What is clear in symbolic interactionism is that other people, social life and social context are of crucial importance in forming people's cognitive maps, attitudes and patterns of behaviour. It forms their selves and their perceptions of their selves. As Richard Stevens points out (24), it is clear that people's values and ways of thinking are both socially rooted and more individualistic, and that a special quality of our minds is our ability to reflect. This means that people, in the long run, will change their personalities because of these reflections. It also means that these changes are most likely to take place in what Anselm Strauss labels "turning points" in life (24), for instance, when moving from one culture to another like the Somalis living in Gothenburg have done.

The culture, however, is not something one has in her/his genes. Living people transmit it; namely from the beginning and most determinedly by his mother and father, then by his family in Somalia. Later on, it will be transmitted by friends, and, after that, more indirectly by mass media, religious messages, etc. All these people can be regarded as significant others, i.e., the more momentous and trustworthy in the inner dialogue, the more significant. When you then internalise all these voices in your self, they appear in the shape of what the symbolic interactionist labels the generalised other. With this, the socialisation process is accomplished.

### Choice of method

This research study "Gendered Experiences of Conflict and Co-operation in Heterosexual Relations of Somalis in Exile in Gothenburg, Sweden" is shown in (Figure 1). The arrows in Figure 1 indicate that a constant comparison was made between the interviews, according to the Grounded Theory (12). The study is primarily governed by a symbolic interactionist perspective (11) implying that the findings are regarded as results of a joint venture between the participants and the research team. The findings are meant to be used as information for education and communication programmes against HIV/AIDS/STDs and related gender issues by the City of Gothenburg Immigrant Services Administration (Göteborgs stad Invandrarförvaltningen). It might also be used as a basis for further investigation.

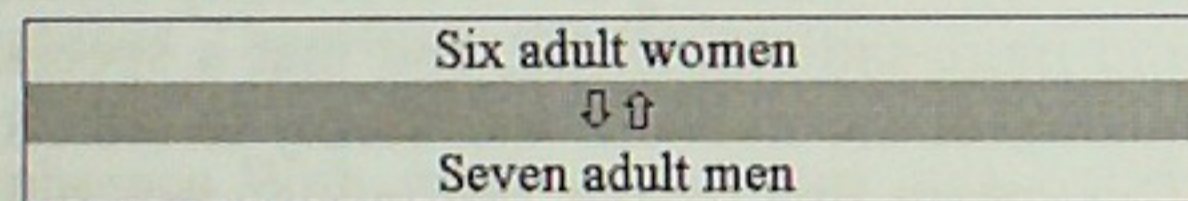


Figure 1 - Information gathering process

### Subjects

During the section of the study for participant invitation we contacted by phone 13 potential research participants (6 women and 7 men) which all were chosen because they were Somali ethnic, living in Gothenburg and willing to share with us their experiences of the issue of interest. This was followed up a face-to-face introductory meeting. We met them individually on the first occasion, and gave them full information about the aim of this study, the modality and the information gathering process, our intention to use a tape-recorder during the interviews and we pledged to protect individual anonymity and to keep confidential the information gathered. We also explained that

the individual research participant had the right to speak her/his own dialect and to chose where she/he would like the interview to take place given that the interview was to be carried out in a private and calm atmosphere, and that it could last between one to two hours.

All 13 potential research participants that we contacted were initially successfully interviewed, and all interviews were tape-recorded, except one, which we did not need to do so because he gave us a simple schematic diagrammatic discourse. Questions were asked in conversational style. Seven of them (4 women and 3 men) chose to be interviewed at a research collaborator's flat, but one of these women was re-interviewed in her man's flat. One more woman was interviewed both in her flat and her man's flat, and another one was interviewed at a friend's home. One of four remaining men was interviewed in his flat and on some occasions in his car, another man in his office, one more man in his relatives' flat, and the last man was interviewed between a restaurant in a Gothenburg shopping-mall (Femman), in the streets to and from the latter shopping-mall (Femman), and in the library of the City of Gothenburg Immigrant Services Administration. All first leg interviews lasted between 50 to 60 minutes, except one interview which lasted about 2 and half hours due to the interviewee's willingness to provide a lengthy and interesting narrative. The three first interviews were entirely transcribed in Somali and translated-transcribed into English, all the rest were transcribed in Somali and translated into English or just transcribed and partially translated. Second leg and third leg discussions lasted about 30-40 minutes. In these latter discussions, some of the interviewed people voluntarily supplemented their previous version with more useful information. Since many research participants were interviewed at a place away from their ordinary location, we decided to give them some transportation incentives.

We also invited 20 possible participants (7 women and 13 men) to take part in follow-up

focus group interviews which were chosen of being knowledgeable of the Somali community in Gothenburg due to their work such as community leader, intellectual, interpreter, school teacher, mother, religious, university and other higher institutions students. However, there were only 10 participants (2 women and 8 men) who turned up for this session. Seven of those (3 women and 4 men) who did not turn up for the session said that they were not able to participate, however, we did not find out the reasons for the remaining three possible participants. The focus group session took place at Hotel Eggers in Gothenburg city centre and planned to last between 16.00-18.00, but it lasted 19.00 hours. The reason for this was that the participant found the discussion very exiting and requested for more time to continue the discussion. The moderator of this discussion was ASA (the first author) the principal investigator of this study and he was assisted by Jamila Said Musse, the Somali female research collaborator, who took notes. Lennart Engström (see the acknowledgement section) was the organiser of the meeting and he was present during the focus group discussions which were conducted in Somali. The focus group interviews were not tape recorded due to our assumption; namely not to disturb the free speech of the participants, but we wrote down immediately afterwards all that we remembered about the discussion, in addition to our notes from it. The fieldwork of this study was started on 25 May 1999 and it was reported -handed over -back to the City of Gothenburg Immigrant Services Administration on 14 January 2000 in a seminar open to the public at the Nordic School of Public Health, Gothenburg, Sweden.

### The process of data gathering

A thematized emerging design was used in this study according to Lincoln & Guba (18). Four major themes of the study were originally written in English and later were translated into Somali. The four themes were 1) Somalis

experiences' of sex education and sexual relations in Somalia and in Sweden; 2) Somalis perceptions' of HIV/AIDS/STDs and health action in Somalia and in Sweden; 3) Somalis attitudes' to use condom and other methods against HIV/AIDS/STDs in Somalia and in Sweden; 4) Somalis research participants socio-demographic characteristics. Often the first communication between the interviewer and the interviewed person was followed with a face-to-face (which means while they walked, cooked, ate, drove, window-shopped, sat in a room and relaxed) informal discussion about the issues of interest, with the intention of encouraging the latter not only to become acquainted with an interview situation, but also to refresh her/his memories about past experiences on the issue which the research was focused. Often this informal discussion was followed with making an appointment for the interviews. This process was valid for all subjects except three men who wanted to have their interviews on the spot after they digested the informal discussion with the interviewer. During the interviews the interviewer gave to the study participants a short introduction to each heading of the research theme before proceeding to the next question. Ultimately, this might have helped the research participants to follow the next communication and to have some understanding about it beforehand. For the purpose of triangulation a combination of three qualitative methods namely participant observation, in-depth interviews and focus group session were used in this study. We re-interviewed twice or more 10 of the research participants. We gave feedback information to the Somali community in Gothenburg, through focus group session about the research findings of this study and recorded their reactions.

### The presentation of the results

In the presentation of the findings, there are three main headings, namely, the interviewed people's socio-demographic

characteristics, sex education, and sexual relations. Under these headings, sub-headings will appear which are generated in the process of open coding. Table 1 shows which codes under each heading that generated the categories which identified the sub-headings. Our presentation of results follows this Table 1 and in the text the codes are marked out in italics and the categories in italics and bold. Under each heading we introduce our material briefly and give the quotations from our data collection, preferably in narrative form. After this we present brief comments based on the codes and categories presented in (Table 1) under each sub-heading. We will also come back to this in our discussion and conclusion.

## Findings

### The interviewed individuals socio-demographic characteristics

We held discussions with 13 individual study participants (6 women and 7 men) and one of the men was HIV positive as he confided to us. We also met and discussed many informal informants about the issue of interest and thus their views were included in the analysis of the data. These research participants came from very different regions of Somalia, however, they could be traced back to the same geographical areas, they shared the Maxaa dialect which is written

Table 1 - Codes and Categories in interpreting data

| Codes   | Headings & Categories  |
|---|--|
|   | Sex education and sexual relations   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Associations (<i>isku xirnaan</i>)*</li> <li>◆ Unmentionable (<i>mamnuuc</i>)</li> <li>◆ Hidden (<i>garsoon</i>)</li> </ul>  | <i>Sex – something invisible</i>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Obey (<i>u hoggaansanaan</i>)</li> <li>◆ Control (<i>xukumid</i>)</li> <li>◆ Degraded (<i>sharaf-dilid</i>)</li> <li>◆ Integrity (<i>kaamilnimo</i>)</li> <li>◆ Stick together (<i>iskaashi</i>)</li> <li>◆ Brothel (<i>xaafad-dhilloo</i>)</li> </ul>           | <i>Gendered experiences of conflict and co-operation in sexual relations</i> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ New demands (<i>baahi cusub</i>)</li> <li>◆ Self-esteem (<i>qab lahaansho</i>)</li> <li>◆ Respect (<i>ixtram</i>)</li> <li>◆ Homelessness (<i>hoy-la'aan</i>)</li> <li>◆ Property (<i>qaan, hanti</i>)</li> <li>◆ Powerlessness (<i>awood-la'aan</i>)</li> </ul> | <i>Horizontal conflicts in sexual relations: The exile situation</i>         |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Dreams (<i>riyo</i>)</li> <li>◆ Choices (<i>xulasho</i>)</li> <li>◆ Parents' authority (<i>awooda-waalid</i>)</li> <li>◆ Brain-washing (<i>maskax dhaqid</i>)</li> </ul>   | <i>Vertical conflicts between generations: The boyfriend narrative</i>       |

\* The words in bracket are Somali Maxaa dialect.

since 1973, they also shared the Somali sub-cultural modules of nomadic pastoralists. The age of women research participants varied between 23-50 years, and among the men it varied between 32-55 years. Three of the six women research participants were recently divorced, one was divorced in Somalia, another one was facing a divorce, and one married at the time of the interviews. Some of these single mothers had a family size between 6 and 11 members. One of these single mothers had 10 children and all of them were under 18 years of age except 3 of them. While five of the seven men were married, one was recently divorced, and one was divorced in Somalia. None of the last two men had children. But one of the married men had 15 children of which 10 were alive and 5 dead, and all had the same mother.

Three of the six women participants claimed to have been in intermediate school in Somalia and one in the secondary school, and the remaining two were in adult secondary school (komvux) here in Sweden. Three of the men had a university level education, two intermediate school, one elementary school, and one had never attended any school except Swedish For Immigrants (SFI). Among the women participants work experience in Somalia included being a housewife, an office clerk, private business-owner, while among the men work experience included of being a long distance driver, private business-owner, and a higher inspector of public schools. The participants' work for wages situation in Sweden seemed very low. None of the six women participants had a permanent job, and the same was valid for 7 of the men, except one religious man. Some of the women claimed to have previously worked as a nurse's assistant, hotel cleaner, and some of the men worked in the post office, in an industry, as a Somali language teacher, as well as interpreters. However, some of both groups never had a single job during their exile.

### Sex education and sexual relations

#### *Sex - something invisible*

In Somalia there was not a formal sex education institution for children. Apparently, the children seem to have learnt sex information through an informal socialising process. Both the Somali culture and the Muslim religion did not support the children being taught sex education in schools or the names of the sex organs being pronounced other than to be used as metaphors (*sarbeeb*) such as woman's piece (*cadka gabadha*) and man's piece (*cadka ninka*). This was described in the following two quotations by a woman and a religious man interviewed.

... often Somalis see the word *sex* as an *unmentionable* (*mabnuuc*) word to be used, and the parents do not give information about *sex* to their children. No, I was not told about it. *Sex* was not an issue to be discussed, the person who talked about it, was seen as an *embarrassment*. If you discusses *sex* with a 9 or 8 old girl they thought that you were showing her the evil road (*inaad dulleynesid*). But Somalis do not know that young children at the age of 8, 9, or 10 years have a body that is mature enough to feel *sex* instinct. (A woman's experience).

... children do not discuss these issues with adults, culturally. If they are caught while discussing *sex* they will be silenced and shouted at, it is kept *secret* from them. Even in some circumstances when they ask about *sex* it may happen that they are not given a proper answer but are told to be quiet. (A religious man).

Codes identified under this sub-heading were all mirroring something latent, not easily discovered, actively concealed or almost unconscious. Sexual behaviour is for sure something the Somali people do not speak to strangers about, not even to relatives of different ages or sex. Because of this, sexuality is *hidden* and the discourse of *sex* education is left in the hands of youngsters of a similar age. This process of *hiding* and not communicating issues on sexual relations has culturally created a situation in which people are not even able to mention sexual attributes and patterns of

behaviour. All this is taboo and the words possible to use are regarded as *unmentionable*. Instead, metaphors, paraphrases and associative terms and expressions flourish. The category given by these codes are *invisible*, and the consequences for the rising generation are ignorance and prejudices concerning sexuality and sexual relations.

#### Gendered experiences

Some interviewed people described that the Somali girl-child is being under social control physically, as well as psycho-socially and in her sexual development. Unlike their age group males, the girls might have grown up under humiliating, disrespectful and damaging experiences. The focus group participants agreed with the individual interviewed research participants that Somali girls experience a very painful and terrifying process during childhood in which their *self-esteem* is downgraded by means of serious *degrading* traditional active violence, such as female circumcision or infibulation or female genital mutilation (FGM), visible virginity control by her mother or her female caretaker as well as being treated like a temporary member in her family until she gets married and brings home the customary dowry. The reason for all this mistreatment is not only to control her sexuality but also to prepare her mentally to be *obedient* and submissive to her future husband. The following graphic quotations were given by two Somali mothers and a man interviewed, respectively.

When the daughter is a little bit grown up her mother faces waves of worries and she fears that... her daughter may follow the wrong path. When the girl is being circumcised and sewed or infibulated, and if a follow-up assessment concludes that the tiny hole left to give way for both urine and menstruation is a little wider than expected. Then her previous woman circumciser will be called upon and asked to repeat the infibulation, to correct it and she will be given a reference measure of the desirable vagina opening of the girl which should be equal to and not bigger than a match head. This is repeated as long as it is necessary! I know a girl who was re-infibulated up to three times. And I can say that

she was with me when we were first infibulated as a group. It is the Somali men's culture of which I know many examples. It happened that a good girl that had never been with any other man was married off by her parents. When she was brought to her husband, he suspected her virginity and said himself that someone might have used her before him... thus, he left the honeymoon's home... he hastily said it was over, ..."I divorced her". For her relatives this was worse than if she had been dead... Often, parents are too aware the background of this shocking social *stigmatisation* and *embarrassment*, thus they continue to infibulate their daughters and ensure their visible virginity until they get married.

(A mother's voice).

First of all my mother was very tough lady. We did not go to school on Fridays in Somalia because of Muslim tradition. So every Friday evenings I went to movie... and I was ordered to take off my pants and "show it" (by my mother). Because many mothers believed that every girl who went to movie or went down town was a bad one. Once there was a boy that we went together, and I was 18 years old. Unfortunately, the neighbouring women suspected that I had an intercourse with the boy. It was informed to my mother secretly, however, my mother never had secret from me she immediately called out a virginity-check up show (feedasho) in which all neighbouring mothers attended (A woman interviewed).

...as we mentioned before, boys are encouraged to check their manhood, a boy is always a free person and he does not have any responsibility and obstacles with regard to *sex* except his religious obligation which forbids him to have fornication or *sex* without marriage. (A man interviewed).

Codes identified under this sub-heading have all to do with relations between men and women or as we call them, *gendered relations*. A pervading characteristics in the interviews has been that many statements are paternal, especially when talking about the traditional way of living in Somalia. *Gendered experiences* is, therefore, our choice of category and there is a long list of codes supporting and indicating this choice. The narratives tell stories in which Somali women are *degraded* and expected to *obey* in situations characterised by their man's arbitrariness. They are subjected to a very extensive form of social control, which is especially pronounced on issues regarding

sexuality. Their *integrity* as women is, consequently, set aside. It is also possible to identify what can be labelled a male homosociality. They tend to *stick together*, for example, men only discuss with men about woman's private matters such as, arranging her marriage and divorce without consulting her. Similarly, male teenagers *stick together* when looking for *sex* stealth (dabagurid) or sometimes when they are looking for easy love in *brothels* testing their manhood. All this contributes to reproducing the patriarchal features of the traditional society.

#### Horizontal conflicts in sexual relations: The exile situation

Interviewed people described not only their experiences of men's and women's sexual relations in Somalia but also the apparent consequences resulting from the Swedish norm system on the Somali immigrants' sexual relations. The following three quotations represent some of the consequences of moving into a new culture and they were given by a man and two women interviewed, respectively.

When Somalis arrive here, the man loses his *power*, and the girl's modesty (*xishood*) is diminished, the *respect* becomes less, ...The reason for this is that she learnt this country's law, she new that what she was used to as normal in our interaction at home (Somalia) is not acceptable for her here, because of this country's culture. (A man's view).

I saw many men who treated their wives like slaves with regard to the bed, I mean like people who belong to someone. There is no *respect*, the way I see it... there should be willingness to have *sex* on both sides, but if a man decides to have *sex* and the woman just executes, it will not work. In Somalia, women were not respected and no one defended them, for example, if they were beaten, if they were denied their lawful daily allowance by their husbands who had enough money. Okay, today they are in Europe and they were brought here by Allah, if the governments here give them the basic survival needs, then their men must acknowledge their wives' human rights. Even the Somali women did not get this acknowledgement so far! (A woman's view).

...I did recall, when I was a child, the men that I knew, the men that I saw and their wives who were our neighbours, there was nothing about love, nothing about joy and kindness, and you never saw why they were together. ...Somali men force sex to their women. ...I have heard that to refuse sex to your man is *sin* in the Somali sense. However, I do not recognise it as *sin*. Because if my Swedish-man asks ...me to have sex with him while I am tired, and I tell him that I am tired, he does not handle me, he gives me a kiss on my cheek and fall sleep snoring within five minutes. (A woman's experience).

Another consequence of moving into a new culture was described by a man, who was disappointed with his wife's attitude, in the following statement during a street corner chat with us. Please note that we made some changes to the original quotation in order to keep secret the identity of the actor involved in this quotation, and we apologise about this.

When I and my wife argued, about changing the child's nappy as it is woman's business, she replied it is also your business. Then, I decided to look for a new wife. I travelled back home and got married to a 20 year-old girl who cannot read and write. She is illiterate, thus, she will only have ears for my word. I will invite her to come here and it will take 7 years before she learns the situation about Sweden. After 7 years I will not need her relations anymore, because by then I plan not to be interested in her due to my old age laugh! (A man's experience).

A research participant young woman who knew the above mentioned man's history reacted angrily to his attitude towards his innocent new wife and she said "A man like him, his penis should be cut off!"

Codes identified under this sub-heading also mirror *gendered relations* but now associated to the *exile* situation. When Somali refugees came to Sweden some of them came to adopt much of the modern lifestyle and cultural norm systems, preferably young people and some of the females. When adapting the Swedish culture *new demands* appeared which sometimes clashed with their traditional values. This conflict was expressed both internally and externally. It is external, for instance, when

young women have feelings of ambiguity between modern and traditional norms guiding them in different situations - perhaps especially in situations related to sexuality. Relating to a new culture with its new expectations on the norm *obedience* also creates changes in *self-esteem*. In terms of categories this *exile* situation tends to generate *horizontal* conflicts, among spouses and between groups of people. Much of the conflicts are about *respect*. From a traditional perspective these deviants lack *respect* for traditions and the original culture. From a male perspective this means more specifically a lack of *respect* for male dominance and superiority. For a deeply traditional Somali man, the emancipation process of Somali women means a loss of *property*, something extremely important has been lost and these experiences of loss (also in self-respect) tend to fortify his feelings of *powerlessness* and *homelessness*.

#### Vertical conflict between generations

There has been a consistent tales about Somali female teenagers harassment overtime by their parents. This include abduction and even forced repatriation for reconditioning trip to Somalia and other Muslim countries from many European countries (United Kingdom, Danmark, Holland, Finland, Sweden, Norway and so forth) by their parents or other relatives. The Copenhagen Post reported a Somali teenage girl desperate appeal to Danish authority for help after she was sent back to Somaliland for reconditioning and she cried "Please don't try to save me from circumcision. They have already done that to me. But help me come home" (14). The reason for this is that these teenagers wanted to behave like their European school mates i.e., have a boyfriend, put on mini-skirts and smoke cigarette. The interviewed people told us and backed-up these narratives with credible information about child's family, their locations at the time, and what happen to the child thereafter. These child

abuse narratives enlightened and indicated of widening perspectives between the Somali immigrant parents who are attached to their religious and cultural values and traditions, and their children who have grown up in a European socio-cultural environment and social institutions. The following is an example of these child abuse and we call it "The boyfriend narrative". Please note that we have made some changes to the original narrative in order to keep confidential the actors involved in it.

There was a female teenager who had grown up in the European culture and who lived in Geneva with her mother and father. She was one of the school teenagers who realised that there were some differences between the way she lived, and her friends and her school mates with regard to the Somali and religious culture. Through her observations she concluded that she had a different culture than her friends. Thus, one day she asked her father whether she could get a boyfriend (wiil-saaxiib ah). What happened? He asked. The father raised his eyebrows and looked at her with surprise! He kept his hand on his chin still surprised and watched her without giving her a response. For the mother, there was no big problem about her daughter's question, however, the father was horrified by it. He said that he could not sleep that night because he was troubled by his daughter's question which he did not respond to. The next morning, he woke up with a decision with regard to his daughter's future. He went to a travel agent and bought tickets for her and for himself. He decided to send his daughter back home to Somalia, there was not any other solution which was acceptable for him.

The father is an educated Somali man who is attached to the Somali old tradition and he might have recently become a more religious hard-liner. He had also become a clergyman (waddaad), thus, there were some differences between him and his teenage daughter. He saw this issue as an untenable problem in which he should teach his daughter a proper lesson instead of talking to her about it. Because he took for granted that if he give a negative reply to her question about a boyfriend which might not satisfy his daughter, that would lead to a daring consequence. So he booked the tickets and arranged everything. Then he came to her and told her that he planned to go with her on holiday to Somalia to visit the country, to meet their people, their relatives. She was excited about her father's idea and she asked, "Is it true?" "Yes," he replied. "Shall we go on holiday?" "Yes," he said. "That is fine I will go with you," she said. He took

her back to Somalia with every possible urgency. When they arrived in the country's main airport he drove her from there to a tiny village in the countryside where he had some relatives. He left her there after he had instructed his relatives that his daughter must look after their goats (ari), she must live like them, and she must not go anywhere else. He went back to the capital city.

There in the village, the female teenager experienced, a very harsh life, she looked after the goats of her relatives, as her father had recommended, in a rural, hot and thirsty environment which she never expected to end up in, and she had no idea how to handle it or even why she was there. She suffered immensely but she did not know what to do or where to go. She lived with constant surprises and distress! The girl lived there for several months and she disparately needed help when she knew that her father did not go back to Europe but was still in Somalia in the main city. Therefore, she managed to send him an SOS message in which she begged him and said, "Please father, I will not ask you to send me back to Europe but let me live in a town, the capital city where you are, let me live in a town whatever it be." He accepted the plea and he brought her to live in the capital city. Her general situation had improved little bit there but still she was grief stricken because she had never expected what she had experienced.

After he observed her attitudes and behaviour in the city for a period, he was satisfied. Then he started the second stage of the process. He set off to a neighbour country where he met a man who was a close relative and he told him that he wanted that him to marry his daughter. The man accepted the offer, and the girl was finally brought to this man whose wife she became, and a mother with children. But she missed her studies, her original family, and her *dreams* not to mention her *choice*. (An interviewed woman).

Codes identified under this sub-heading are categorised as mirroring *vertical* conflicts. Now generations stand up against each other and this is especially pronounced when it is about issues of sexuality and sexual relations. The young generation questions their *parent's authority*. They are now living in new social contexts and perceive risks, as well as possibilities. Their new *dreams* and *choices*, however, do not fit their parents' expectations, which sometimes leads to big problems. In some of these family situations, this clash between the parents and the children (most often a girl) will have drastic

consequences. At any price the parents try to change the attitudes and behaviour of their daughter and in some cases, like in the boyfriend narrative above, this action can take the form of *brain-washing*.

#### Negotiations over sex and condom use for heterosexual couples

The condom is seen as an anti-marriage or fornication tool by many participants. Some of them argued that the condom use by married couples would be difficult because the proponent will be suspected by other side as having a hidden agenda, i.e., that he/she is engaged in other sexual relations. Some others pointed out in the following quotation that a condom use is incompatible with proper *sex*. "...most people believe that a person who wears condom cannot have a proper *sex* ...many people believe that *sex* with a condom is not *sex*".

Some others argued that most Somalis may not accept the idea of condom use due to a misunderstanding of this technology. An interviewed man described that in the institutions where he interpreted and doctors explained about condom use and he translated it for the client, he wondered and said "I look around me and ask myself how I can pronounce the word condom and similar other words while girls are looking at me". He followed up and said "It is easy to educate the younger generations about how to use it. But it is difficult to convince the adult ones and they will not accept it". He reasoned the latter and said "They will not accept it, because there never was a girl who accepted that her husband put on a condom and approached her nor was there a man who has said, I used a condom with her". He concluded "It is an *embarrassment* for them".

On the other hand, the religious group may see condom use outside marriage as an anti-marriage or fornication tool. Thus, they might not accept its use systematically as a safe *sex* technology not only against HIV/AIDS/STDs

but also for family planning. This is emphasised by a religious interviewed man who said "I do not believe in the idea which purposes that, you know, fornication is free and people are allowed to use a condom as *protection*".

Some of the interviewed research participants discussed the possible link between polygamy and the spread of HIV/AIDS/STDs. This was also supported and emphasised by the focus group participants. One female focus group participant argued that the danger of polygamy in spreading HIV/AIDS/STDs was a real possibility and she backed her argument with the following statement.

When we interviewed men in Mogadishu in 1989 about HIV/STDs, 40% of the married men told us that they had been involved in extramarital affairs gogoldhaaf. In addition to this, some married women who participated in our research in Hargeisa and Bossasso in 1997 and who were HIV positive said that their husbands had been involved in polygamy situation with more than two women for each man. (From the focus group discussion).

## Discussion

The material that we discuss here is from the Somalis in exile who reside in Gothenburg (mainly from the area of Angered, the centre of Gothenburg, Hisingen, Frölunda). This paper attempts to explore and describe gendered experiences of conflict and co-operation in sexual relations of Somalis in *exile* in Gothenburg, Sweden. The general outline of their comprehension of this issue is, more or less, the same, though details may differ from one research participant to another. They have described this through narratives. Narratives may help improve our comprehension of people's definitions of gendered relations according to their cultural meanings, experiences, social systems and power relations (21, 23). This is what Meyer (20) terms ways people have been influenced by social structures and how have people, in turn, influenced those structures.

Somali men pay dowry for their wives, which gives them license to dominate the relationship. Thus, the very concept of marital rape doesn't exist in most Somali men culture. Even the traditional aunties tell young wives that they cannot refuse sex with their husbands.

The sexual subservient of women is inculcated during early childhood, i.e., female circumcision removes the most sexually sensitive part of woman's body, her clitoris, some or all of the labia minora are excised, and incisions are made in the labia majora to create raw surfaces which are stitched together leaving a small posterior opening for urinary and menstrual flow (5). This is to ensure visible virginity until she get married. However, real-life relation between men and women are complex. In theory man are entitled to have sex on demand but in practice woman may communicate and seek understanding from her man. The trouble is that such communication takes place in a patrilineal and patriarchal culture in which she's not necessarily on the same footing as the man.

Aden pointed out that both men and women in Somalia are fully aware of the existence of social inequalities and both recognise their distinct roles (3, Table 2). This is consistent with what we found in this study. In most situations the women's world is separated from that of the men and have their own information resource network. Women are engaged in activities throughout the day primarily looking after children and have little free time. Their social interaction generally takes place while carrying out their domestic duties and while going to and from shopping centres, markets and SFI schools.

One informant told us that a girl should be working throughout the day in order to be controlled her physical location "My uncle advised me to never give a girl chance to sit and rest in case this gives her to think about man or fornication. If you do not get a work to do for her tell her to dig a hole in front of the house and collect its soil into the house and consequently to bring it back into the original hole".

Table 2 - The division of labour and responsibilities by gender with respect to livestock, agricultural, household tasks and public office\*.

| Male  | Female   | Both  |
|---|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Camel grazing, rearing and milking it  | <input type="checkbox"/> Cattle, goat/sheep rearing and milking  | <input type="checkbox"/> Attending Qur'an and ordinary schools  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Slaughtering camel, cow, goat/sheep  | <input type="checkbox"/> Slaughtering chicken  | <input type="checkbox"/> Working in public, private offices and industries                              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Fishing, hunting   | <input type="checkbox"/> Collecting firewood and fetching water  | <input type="checkbox"/> Farm sewing, planting, weeding & harvesting                                    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Clearing fields, digging water-pond and channel  | <input type="checkbox"/> processing food, cooking & distributing   | <input type="checkbox"/> Harvesting farm yields   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Ploughing fields   | <input type="checkbox"/> Building nomadic hut; and plastering or mudding house   | <input type="checkbox"/> Running and working in a shop, teashop and local restaurant                    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Building house   | <input type="checkbox"/> Harvesting branches, grass and sewing materials for thatching hut   | <input type="checkbox"/> Making clay containers and pots for cooking and for carrying and keeping water |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cutting house pole/beams, lintels, windows and doors   | <input type="checkbox"/> Selling vegetables, salads, fruits, milk, ghee, meat, bread, fire-wood, coal, and grass. Women may own and sell women's shoes and clothing, incense, jewellery, cigarettes and other items in the open markets. | <input type="checkbox"/> Dancing for entertainment or during Zar-type treatment rites                   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Owning, buying and selling livestock, maize or sorghum, land and other assets  | <input type="checkbox"/> Carrying children, elderly, sick in the household   | <input type="checkbox"/> Weaving traditional cloths   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Participating in socio-political gatherings and entitled to hold community responsibilities                                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Providing material support to the woman giving child-birth  |   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Legalising and processing marriage and divorce, and be a single accountable as a legal witness                               | <input type="checkbox"/> Attending during child birth and carrying both mother and child   |   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Participating sport activities   | <input type="checkbox"/> Sewing baskets, mats, brooms and woven containers   |   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Performing male circumcision   | <input type="checkbox"/> Washing & cleaning household items  |   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Making wooden containers, dishes, spoons, mortars, pestles, head-rests, male/female combs and walking sticks                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Performing female circumcision  |   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Making hoes, axes, arrows bows and knives handles  | <input type="checkbox"/> Cutting, processing the traditional painting ( <i>asal</i> ) for wooden and woven articles  |   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Making metal tools like knives, arrows, hoes and axes  | <input type="checkbox"/> Processing animal hides and painting them for making leather  |   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Making sandals for men and women from cow and camel hide   | <input type="checkbox"/> Painting ropes with traditional paint ( <i>asal</i> )   |   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Practising traditional healing such as: religious, herbalist, Zar and magic rites, burning, scarification, bone-settler, etc | <input type="checkbox"/> Being victims of spirits from Zar-rites locally known: Mingis, Borane, Numbi, Bebe, Awdare, Hayaad, Nasaro, Ruhan ( <i>sharax</i> )   |   |

\* Source: reference (3) but this table is revised version.

In contrast, men are free between sundown and bed-time, and during afternoons when there is no work to be done in the offices or schools. Men spend their leisure time hanging around in the town squares, seeing relatives and friends,

going to community entertainment centres or men's public meeting places such as coffee-tea-shops-and billiard hangout, where they play a number of table games i.e. play cards, dices, draughts, etc or just discuss issues of interest

mainly clan politics and issues taken up by local radio or BBC London, Somali section. Men also gather in the mosque and have social interaction after religious duties. Some men also socialise while chewing mild-narcotic green leaves (*Catha edulis*) known as Khat or Qat. Men seem to becoming more religious here in Sweden than in Somalia maybe due to feeling of powerlessness and frustration related to their unemployment situation. Many of them have even influenced and convinced their wives, daughters and female relatives to use (xijaab) and veil their body from head to toes.

These Somalis belong to a patriarchal community in which gender inequality is often more acute and focused due to their social, economic, and political structures (3, 4, 5). This situation may trigger women to lose further to control their lives in both their home land (7) and their refuge country (27). Somalis may be characterised as a transitional society who have their own sense of the world due to their culture, gender and power structure which includes shared perspectives and generalised others. As a consequence, their actions and interactions may be guided by their culture and this seems to be challenged by the Swedish norm system. Therefore, they seem to be confronted with both *horizontal* and *vertical* conflicts, in general, and, in particular, with regard to sex and sexual relations. Thus, their present and future action orientation concerning these issues may depend not only on the outcome of this battle of negotiation with Swedes or the adaptation process, but also on

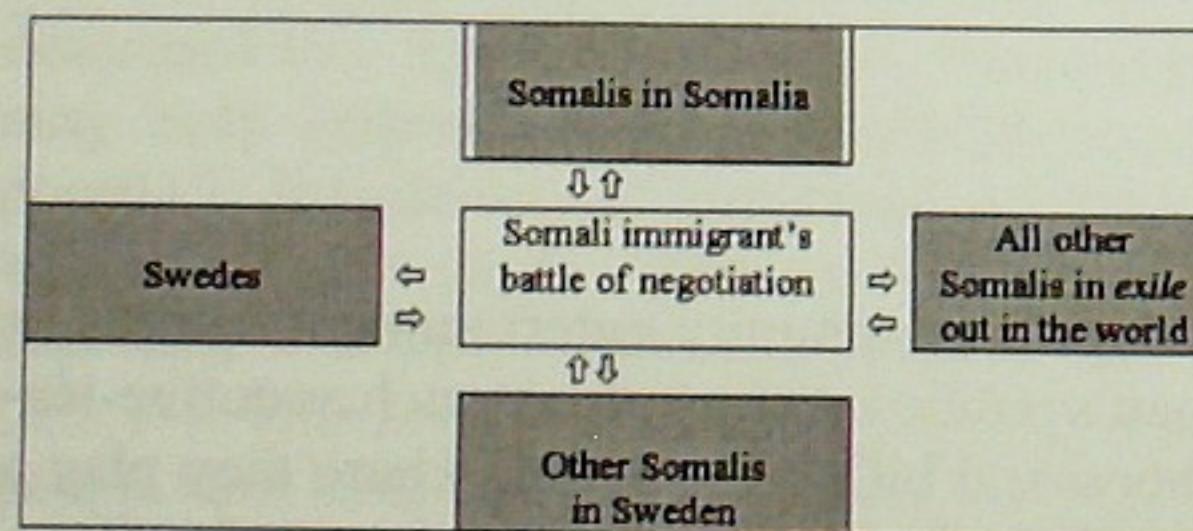


Figure 2 - Somali immigrant's battle of negotiation

the outcome of their negotiations with their follow Somalis in Sweden, those they left back home in Somalia, and those other Somalis who live in *exile* in different parts of the world, as shown in (Figure 2).

We have described that the main problem in the context sex and sexual relations is the *invisible* feature of sexuality as prescribed by the socio-cultural norms of the traditional Somali society (Table 1). This *invisibility* makes it difficult to implement preventive measures. It is simply difficult to talk about sex and sexual relations, and because of this, it may be hard to take action against sexual risk behaviour i.e. safe sex. We have also pointed out the paternal relations between males and females as one important root of the problems discussed here. Another important finding was that there are two basic conflicts embedded in the *exile* situation of the Somali immigrants; namely that between the sexes who sometimes take different positions on traditions and modernity, but also conflicts between generations. We labelled the first type of conflict *horizontal* and the second one *vertical*.

### Considerations and Conclusions

Our research results have pointed out that Somali parents have never had a modern culture of *sex* education for themselves, thus they are not equipped for educating their children in the proper way rather than giving distorted information about *sex* organs and human sexual development. Most of the time, neither Somali mom nor dad who came in Sweden as adult speaks Swedish well enough to carry on comfortably a conversation with native speaker, like their Swedish born children or teenagers who are grown up in Swedish social environment. For these reasons, the parents alone cannot cover this important issue for the development of child in modern society. Therefore, parents need to get support from the authority about how to give proper answer to

their children's questions related to sex education and the two norm systems (Swedish and Somali) that they are immersed.

The focus group participants condemned the unjustifiable inequality between boys and girls in Somali society. They blamed the religious groups for lack of co-operation and unwillingness to come out and condemn the Somali traditions which mistreat females systematically, when compared to males. Thus, the Somali religious leaders are urged to come out and tell their followers about the man-made unjustifiable nightmare of Somali females, for example, why they are without rights? Why they are oppressed at will by men? Why the females are under control and the males are not? Why they are subject to reconditioning trip to Somalia and neighbouring Muslim countries? Why they eternally bear the scares and the consequences of infibulation mentally, emotionally, psychologically and psycho-sexually? The focus group participants agreed that the pain of infibulation and its consequences are often little known by Somali men, because as it is a female culture they hide it for themselves. Therefore, the Somali men should be exposed to female circumcision or FGM through formal and informal education and culturally sensitive communication programmes. In addition, it is necessary to study the socio-cultural determinants, psycho-sexual and psychological consequences of female circumcision or FGM which little information is available.

Several informants told us that some Somali female teenagers who came in Sweden with infibulation have been opting deinfibulation after contacting, getting information and counselling from the health care services and social workers. Deinfibulation of the girls should be encouraged and appropriate information about its benefits should be provided and discussed with all involved individuals and communities.

Our study have described that many Somalis believe that condom use is a barrier to proper sex. In addition, the religious people that we

talked to are against the systematic use of condoms. Because they say that "it will encourage the spread of fornication or sex without marriage". Maybe for this reason, we have been told that some Somali adult women use IUDs for family planning to avoid negotiation over sex with their men due to their inability to confront religious traditions as well as gender and culture values. Therefore, there is a need to undertake deeper community studies on gender structure, and safe *sex* perceptions and condom use attitudes and to plan follow-up community intervention and its evaluation. Meanwhile we encourage the continuation of the ongoing health education projects on HIV/AIDS and mother and child health -FGM by the City of Gothenburg Immigrant Services Administration. Furthermore, we recommend a cultural meeting study between these Somalis in *exile* and the Swedish healthcare professionals which could describe the hidden dynamics of these cultural meetings, barriers and potential in the communication process.

Let us now conclude our analysis by returning to our theoretical frame of reference, the symbolic interactionism. In the case of the Somalis in exile in Sweden, the process of secondary socialisation is disturbed in an exhaustive way. The internalised norms from the home culture are challenged by the Swedish norm systems and on a more personal level, in the Somalis' daily life they are confronted with a great amount of foreign attitudes, behaviours and basic values, all these transmitted by Swedes in different positions; such as civil servants, teachers, authorities, but also as friends.

These confrontations with a new culture risk of creating conflicts on different levels. They can result in antagonism between immigrants and Swedish authorities. They can also lead to conflicts between people on an interpersonal level. Finally, and in this context most important, they can create inner conflicts and ambivalence in the individuals. The situation for the immigrants renders more difficulties because of fact that these *horizontal* conflicts which appear



as a consequence of the move from one country to another, are added on the *vertical* move which is a consequence of normal development. When the child grows up it can be seen as natural to find other significant others than the parents, or at least supplementing ones. This process of conflicts between generations is obviously more pronounced in countries like Sweden than in developing countries like Somalia. Nevertheless, these two processes of movement, the *horizontal* and the *vertical*, in interplay create many of the illustrated in (Figure 2).

Finally, we would like to acknowledge that neither this research project is desired or demanded by the Somali community in Gothenburg as their research priority need nor the study results justify interventions that show little respect for the culture on which the study was based. Ultimately, our motivation included a desire to improve the conditions of the people who were interviewed and their fellow Somalis. Thus, it would be an unwise move if decision makers and others design programs and services based on these findings with only their own agenda in mind, without further consulting the interviewed people and their community in this study. Because this may mean imposing goals, values, and practices that are alien to the Somali community own need and culture. Therefore, we encourage that the active participation of the community should be sought before any intervention based on the findings of this study is designed.

### Summary

Political upheaval and poverty at home has been forcing many Somalis to immigrate. These immigrants do not only leave their physical house, families, relatives, love ones, friends, but also familiarities, culture, customs, and often they do end up in no man's land being between their own and new home culture. Available reports suggest that there are about 15 000 Somalis in Sweden and their majority came here from late 1989 to 1996. About one third these immigrants live in and around the city of Gothenburg. This paper explores and describes gendered experiences of conflict and co-

operation in heterosexual relations of Somalis in *exile* in Gothenburg, Sweden. A qualitative sociological in-depth interviews with 6 women and 7 men was performed during May 1999 to January 2000. A follow up focus group interviews with 10 people (2 women and 8 men) was also carried on. The results show that both the Somali culture and Muslim religion do not support the children being taught sex education in schools or the names of the sex organs being pronounced other than to be used as metaphors. The girls, unlike their age group males, experience a very painful and terrifying process during childhood in which their self-esteem is downgraded by means of serious degrading traditional active violence such as female genital mutilation and visible virginity control. The narratives tell stories in which Somali women are degraded and expected to obey in situations characterised by their man's arbitrariness. They are subject to a very extensive form of social control, which is especially pronounced on issues regarding sexuality. Their integrity as women is, consequently set aside.

When Somali refugees came to Sweden some of them came to adopt much of the modern lifestyle and cultural norm systems, preferable young people and some of the females. Relating to a new culture with its new expectations on the norm obedience also created changes in self-esteem. Exile situation tends to generate horizontal conflicts, among spouses and between groups of people. It also tends to generate vertical conflicts because now generations stand up against each other and this is especially pronounced when it is about issues of sexuality and sexual relations. The young generations questions their parents authority. They are now living in new social context and perceive risks, as well as possibilities. Their new dreams and choices, however, do not fit their parents' expectations, which sometimes leads to big problems. From a traditional perspective these deviants lack of respect for traditions and the original culture. From a male perspective this means more specifically a lack of respect for male dominance and superiority.

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