

Section II

Essays on society and culture

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SOMALI FEMALE DOMESTIC WORKER'S SOCIAL AND HEALTH PROBLEMS IN ITALY

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1. Introduction

Migration from Somalia to Western European countries mainly started in the early 1970's during Siad Barre's regime (cf. websites [1], [2]). Most of them fled from this military dictatorship and ran for safety and for a better life in Europe, particularly in Italy where they had cultural ties. The majority of these immigrants were women from the big cities. They were mostly uneducated thus they started to work as domestic workers in Italy. Thereafter, they started to send money home to help their family members. This has attracted a great many more Somali women over time to immigrate to Italy and work as domestic-workers (*boyeeso*) particularly during the 1980's when the Somali political situation was deteriorating.

But the immigration of the Somalis became more dramatic in January 1991, after clan militia overthrew the military regime without a political program in place and as a consequence civil war broke out and the moral framework of society collapsed (cf. websites [3], [4]).

Since then hundreds of thousands of Somalis have been killed or died as a result of clan-warlords fighting as well as subsequent hunger and disease in both Somalia and in the refugee camps in neighbouring countries. Many more have drowned in the Indian Ocean, Gulf of Aden, the Red Sea and the Mediterranean Sea while trying to reach safe refuge abroad. During the civil war, over a million Somalis migrated abroad to Europe, North America, Australia, New Zealand as well as Middle East and Africa (cf. websites [5]-[10]).

The number of Somalis who lived in Italy early 1990's was estimated to be 20,000 (cf. [11]). The overwhelming majority of these were women. Data from ISTAT suggested that in December 1993 there were 10994 Somalis with residence permit ("permesso di soggiorno") of which 3954 were men against 7040 women (cfr. [12]). Many of these female immigrants who worked in Italy as domestic workers or family maids experienced restricted freedom, limited access to resources, racial discrimination, poor housing, isolation and the lack of interaction with local people due to mainly to language barriers and cultural differences. Some get lost between the two cultures, their own and the local one. Many others may not go along with the host social environment due to cultural and religious beliefs. Therefore, they have opted to create enclaves around the main Roma's railway station (Termini Station) and other Italian big cities. These hardships can combine with infections, unwanted pregnancies, alcohol and drug abuse (*khat* chewing), accidents, child care problems, violence and mental stress, all increasing the burden (Seminar Anonymous Report, 1990). Therefore, this study focuses on the exploration and description of Somali female domestic workers social and health problems in Italy. There have been

some gender-related studies focused on Somali women (cf. Aden *et al* 2004, Wiklund *et al* 2000 and an Anonymous Unpublished Report) however, we found a very few studies focused on the Somali females domestic workers in Italy (cf. [13]).

2. Method and Participants

A Cross-Sectional Survey with a standardized, semi-structured, open-ended and home-based questionnaire for individual interviews was designed (cf. Pope & Mays 2000, Patton 1990). The questionnaire was originally prepared in Somali then translated into English by the first author of this paper (Abdulaziz Sharif Aden). A total number of 43 study participants were successfully interviewed. With regard to the research participants residence area, 22 were from Rome, 12 from Milan and 9 from Padua. Since there was neither a list of their names nor their home addresses was not available for the sampling purpose of this study.

Thus, Abdulaziz Sharif Aden, in collaboration with Somali women friends, contacted all potential research participants with "rolling ball effect" in identifying the research subjects. The interviews took place September 2004. The questionnaire was tested with 7 women who inhabited in Rome and their interviews were incorporated to the 22 participants from Rome study.

Criteria for inclusion were being Somali, having been living in Italy for the last 12 months, working or having worked as a domestic worker in Italy, and willing to share her experiences with us on the issues of interest to this study.

2.1. Data management and ethical consideration

Almost all women who participated in this study were interviewed at their households however; there were 6 women who were interviewed at a friend's place upon their request. The

reason for this was simply that they were staying with friends at that particular time, thus they asked the researcher to come there for their convenience and interview them. All potential research candidates that we approached were very positive and collaborative. The research participants were requested by the principal investigator ASA to participate in this research but only on their own free will, and they were told that they had the right to quit the interview any time they wished to do so. They were also informed that both data collected and the identities of interviewed participants would be kept strictly confidential.

The basic information collected from study participants included age, gender, education, civil status, profession, occupation, employment status, type of job activities, housing conditions, exile situation related problems (social, health, and economic problems); monthly income, years lived in Italy and type of residence possessed, maltreatment experienced in Italy and elsewhere or gendered experience. The principal investigator, Abdulaziz Sharif Aden, carried out all the research interviews with full assistance by madam Halima Mohamed Nur, co-author of this paper. Data collected was entered into an electronic database EpiInfo6 Version 6.04b 1997 (cf. Pope *et al* 1999). Data analysis, interpretation, and first draft report writing and its revision were shared by the all authors of this study.

3. Findings

The participants interviewed came from different regions of Somalia such as Somaliland, Puntland, Central regions, Middle Shabeelle, Lower Shabeelle, Bay region, Middle Jubba, and Lower Jubba as well as the neighbouring countries where a large ethnic Somali population live such as Djibouti, Ogaden of Ethiopia and the Eastern Regions of Kenya.

Looking at the educational background of the female domestic workers it was revealed that 16 out of the 43 women interviewed had been to intermediate school, 12 had been to secondary school, 7 had been to elementary school, another 7

never went to school and only 1 had university degree. Describing the civil status of the participants, it appeared that 18 were still married, 9 divorced, 5 were widowed, 9 were still single, and 2 were engaged.

With regard to the participant's residence situation, it was revealed that only 5 (who had been living in Italy between 12-32 years) had Italian citizenship, 15 had permanent residence ("carta di soggiorno"), 17 had a residence permit ("permesso di soggiorno"), 5 were without it and 1 had political asylum.

The main reason that these female immigrants came to Italy was, for 30, to get a job and avoid poverty; 13 came for other reasons such as to study, health reasons, for tourism, to forget abusive husband.

In describing their professional background, it appeared that 26 were housewives, 4 were secretaries, 3 were students and 10 comprised of other occupations such as nurses, heads of government offices, shopkeepers, basketball-players.

With regard to the research participant's ability to read and write Italian, 33 could not read and write Italian though they roughly understood it and spoke it; only 10 expressed that they could read and write Italian. When asked how they had learnt Italian, 35 stated that they had learnt by hook or by crook (by sheer determination from the street); only 8 stated that they had learnt it at school. A female research participant underlined the importance of knowing Italian for both communication and orientation reasons and she commented:

"... First it was very difficult to communicate with others due to a lack of knowledge of the Italian language, and then there was difficulty getting back home due to orientation problems".

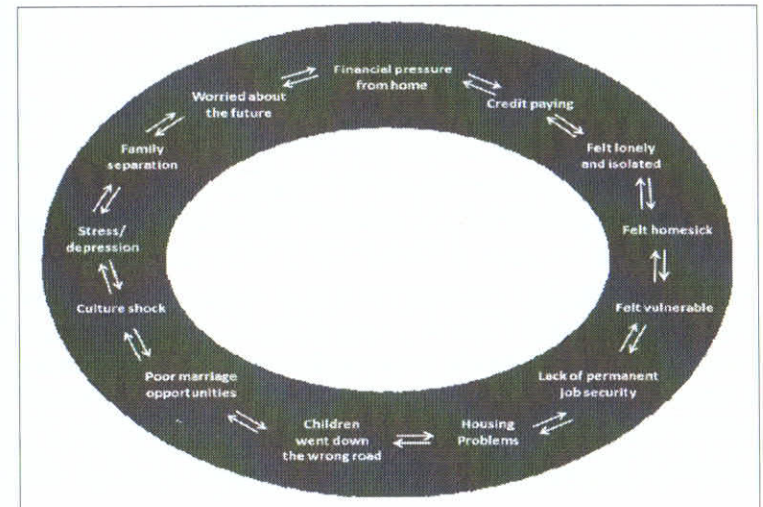
According to the participants the major socio-economic problems they had experienced in Italy were (in multiple responses): 40 had financial pressure from home (Somalia), 39 felt vulnerable, 38 felt loneliness and isolation, another 38 felt homesick, 29 lived with stress and depression, 30 were confronted with poor marriage opportunities, 32 experienced cul-

ture shock, 31 were very worried about their future, 29 were struggling pay back debts to Somali shop keepers and mobile vendors that they got in advance without paying items such as dresses, perfumes, gold accessories, and incense (Figure 1):

Table 1. Major socio-economical problems experienced by the female domestic-workers

Major Socio-economical problems	Absolute figures
Financial pressure from home	40
Credit paying	29
Felt lonely and isolated	38
Felt homesick	38
Felt vulnerable	39
Lack of permanent job security	25
Housing problems	21
Children went down the wrong road	3
Poor marriage opportunities	30
Culture shock	32
Stress/depression	29
Family separation	2
Worried about future	31

Figure 1. The cycle of major socio-economic problems experienced by the Somali female domestic workers in Italy



One of the women interviewed stated that she ended up in psychiatric hospital for treatment due to stress/depression (*islahadal*):

“... Due to stress and depression (*islahadal*) I was taken to psychiatric hospital by friends. After some treatment, I was transferred to another hospital where I stayed a total of two months”.

Regarding their present housing situation, only one female respondent out of the 43 women interviewed had her own apartment with a mortgage; 33 women lived in a room or an apartment that they had found through mainly the help of Somali friends; 9 women had used other channels to find a place to live. A common comment that we heard from many respondents was that:

“... renting a room or an apartment is a very difficult matter. First of all, most of the time it is not available to us due to we being strangers in the eyes of house renters or owners. Secondly, the rent is very expensive considering our monthly salary. For instance, monthly rent of one bed (sharing a room with another woman) in Rome costs around € 350; and the rent of one room (sharing services with others) costs between € 450 and 500 per month”.

In addition, they complained that since the introduction of the Euro, prices for shelter, foodstuffs, clothing, gas, electricity and so forth have been going up incredibly but their salary has remained as the same as when they were employed.

Enquiring the type of work contract they possessed, it emerged that only one woman out of 43 had a permanent job; 20 had a regular fulltime flexible or precarious job, 7 had a regular part-time precarious job, another 7 had irregular part-time job, 2 had an irregular full-time job, 2 were unemployed, 4 were pensioners. In examining the type of employment the participants had, it revealed that 27 out of the 43 women research participants were domestic workers, 8 were elderly-care assistants, 8 comprised of other occupations (such as baby sitter, stretch bearer, office cleaner, pensioner and factory worker). Turning to the female domestic workers' monthly salary, it was

revealed that 6 out of the 43 participants received a monthly salary ranging between € 140-390, 16 received € 450-690, 14 received of € Euro 700-900, only 4 received monthly earnings of € 1000 or little bit more, and 3 were unemployed.

Assessing the participants' opinion on the status of the female domestic worker job, it appeared that 28 out of 43 had a low opinion and they qualified their own position as “forced by the circumstances”, 4 even went further and described it as “exploitation”, although 11 did qualify it as “good” as they get from it their living. Somalis often have a low opinion about the status of the job of a domestic worker. A female respondents gave the following quotations and complained about the indignation surrounding the job of the female domestic worker:

“... female domestic worker's job is tedious. It is very bad when the maid assists an old and very heavy lady or man”.

When enquired the interviewed women experience of indecent behaviour committed by their employers; it was found (multiple responses) that 21 out of the 43 female domestic workers' reported to have personally experienced yelling, 11 experienced humiliation, 9 experienced verbal insults, and 16 experienced troublesome behaviour from their employers. The discriminatory terminology and segregation expressions experienced by the women interviewed were: “you nigger get out of my home”; “you cannot sit on my sofa as you are coloured”; “you black, you cannot use my cups”; “nigger, you are wild”; “You nigger, we civilized you”.

A respondent commented on the behaviour of some male employers in the following statement:

“When the man employer wants to have a sexual relationship with you, he tries to kiss you, he comes into your room almost naked while his wife is away or she is in the toilet, and puts money on your bed. Sometimes he waits for you outside his home when you are setting off on your off- days and offers a lift. If you do not comply with his wishes then he starts to shout at you saying the shirts are badly ironed, the food is full of salt, the toilet is not cleaned properly. When he sees you becoming nervous because you do not

want to lose your job, then he is back to encircling one and giving you a lot of excuses and hugs and some money. He often concludes, I do not want to dismiss you but I want you to understand me.' Thus, he lays down his black-mail and dirty-tricks".

Information on physical accidents experienced while at work at their employer's place, revealed that 31 out of 41 women interviewed reported "Yes" they had experienced physical accidents, and 10 had not experienced any and 2 were missing. Among those who reported to have had experienced physical accidents, 22 of them were women who worked as family maids performing activities such as cleaning, cooking, ironing and lifting heavy household furniture and similar items. The physical accidents experienced by female research participants were (in multiple responses): 20 out of 41 experienced burning, another 20 experienced eye, hands and body irritation caused by caustic substances, 17 reported breathing problems after handling caustic substances, 13 women experienced a nasty fall which resulted in injuries, and 3 experienced other accidents such as knee injury and miscarriage resulting from employer aggression. A woman interviewed described in the following quotation the tragic experience she went through after a nasty fall while washing her employer's office floor:

"I slipped and fell down while I was washing the floor at my workplace and I was taken to the hospital where I remained for 3 months due to a head injury. I am still continuously taking a follow up treatment for that accident which took place in 2002".

Another female maid complained about her suffering after she had handled caustic substances in the following quotation:

"... I went to hospital after handling caustic substances; first I was treated then I was given one month of rest to recover".

The Somali immigrant women sometimes get together and socialize, particularly when they organize a party for female friends who come from Canada, the United States of America, Britain and Northern Europe as well as Australia, and else-

where. They also meet and socialize when there are marriage opportunities, which involve their Somali followers. During these occasions they often dance and sing Somali songs and poems are written by some of them. These poems often reflect the Somali immigrants' sense of their own exile situation.

Major health problems reported (in multiple responses) by the respondents were workload related symptoms: 25 women out of 43 mentioned backache and foot ache due to workload and stress, 14 of them mentioned menstrual pain due to female genital mutilation (FGM) but aggravated dramatically by working in a standing-up position for many hours daily, 8 mentioned headache due to mainly to magic rites known in Somalia like (*zar*, *borane*, *sharax*), and 5 stated they did not know.

According to the women interviewed the types of medical and traditional treatment experienced in Italy were (in multiple responses): 8 women used traditional folk treatment, 20 women experienced *Qur'an* (Quran) healing, 40 women experienced modern medicine, and one young female never experienced any treatment in Italy. The traditional folk treatments experienced by the respondents include drinking milk or water with powdered black pepper or ginger or herbs (*xabatu-zowda*) or roots from trees (*diinsi*). These folk treatments are used as painkillers in general but in particular against menstrual pain. However, the side effects of these substances are unknown. Other traditional treatments experienced by the research participants were *zar*-type magic rites. The respondents expressed to have practiced the *zar*-type magic rites after they were possessed by evil-spirits (*jinni*). The processes of *zar*-type treatment consist of drums, group dance, incense fumigation and use of perfumes.

4. Discussion

The data that we discuss here is from the Somali immigrant women in Italy who resided in Rome, Padua and Milan. The general outline of the understanding of the Somali female

domestic workers' social and health problems in Italy is in general the same. Many of them have provided descriptions that may help improve our understanding of people's definition of their social situation according to their cultural meanings, experiences, social and power relations.

The meeting between Somali female domestic workers and their Italian employers in Italy was a multicultural event from the perspective of the former. Thus, the present study disclosed some interesting and relevant findings with regard to social, health, cultural, gender and communication problems. These Somali females were a homogenous group concerning their cultural identity, characteristics of immigration, and motives for exile. Though they came from different social and demographic backgrounds, their experiences, feelings and modes of expression were an indication that the internalised norms from their home culture are challenged by the Italian norm system and socio-cultural environment. Thus, they are confronted by a large amount of foreign attitudes, behaviours and basic values transmitted by different Italian actors and actresses in different sections of Italian society.

These research participants expressed that there have been a bewildering and immense array of culture shocks, and communication barriers with Italian people who they worked with and interacted with on a daily basis. A woman participant described in the following quotation the cultural shocks she had experienced in Italy:

"... There were some men with red lipstick on their lips and dressed like women called homosexuals; other men with body piercing and their hair tied in a pony-tail; naked women on television; people who kissed unhindered in the streets, and the snow fall were all terrifying cultural shocks!"

Somalis can be described as a traditional society and often everybody respects those who are older than themselves by calling him/her an appropriate title such as sister, brother, uncle, aunt, grandmother, grandfather and so forth. One of the female respondents complained that she had received a dis-

criminatory reply when out of respect she had called her elderly woman employer 'grandmother'. She commented:

"... Once I worked for an elderly lady employer and I used to call her 'grandmother' out of respect, but sadly she used to reply, 'how can you call me grandmother as my grandchildren are white skin coloured!'"

Another respondent was shocked when she saw her employers grieving desperately for the death of their dog, because in Somali culture dogs are religiously considered impure animals and are therefore not respected, and it is forbidden to touch them or keep them. She commented:

"I was shocked with disbelief when one day I assisted my employers, who were an elderly couple and grieving tragically for the death of their dog. However, their sorrow was so moving that they made me cry myself!!"

In the eyes of Bauman's (1993) analysis of *the stranger* as well as the host country people's perspective, the Somalis can be considered as strangers. These women being immigrants and seen as a burden and culturally unfitting, had to endure all negativity that is associated with them as new immigrants in Italy. This contrasted sharply with the fact that many of these women had come from middle class families and had had comfortable lives in their home country. However, this study's findings demonstrated that they arrived here with very limited work experience, limited language skills, no education and with a background of a lifetime of gendered segregation experience.

These female immigrants who worked in Italy as domestic workers or family maids experienced restricted freedom, limited access to resources, discrimination, lack of permanent job security and poor housing, isolation, lack of respect for their basic human rights, and the lack of interaction with local people due to mainly language barriers and cultural differences. Some of these women remain totally at the mercy of their employers if they lack immigration status. Most of them are facing a highly gendered labour market and in practice they are

exploited and even working as cleaners and doing other humiliating jobs. Some of them face sexual harassment and abuse by employers. Some of them are highly dependent and vulnerable to those who can hire and fire them at will. Working in this semi-feudal conditions and lack of regulations for this sector is downgrading the human rights of these female domestic workers.

In Somalia, among the many things that the civil war left as scars on Somalis are changes in the role of women. In traditional Somali culture men are known as the sole breadwinners of families; they are supposed to provide the basic needs of food, shelter and clothing for members of their families. But when the civil war erupted in the breakaway republic of Somaliland in late 1988, and in Somalia in January 1991, women's roles in the family and in the society changed for the worst. On top of grave social injustices like cultural, economic and legal discrimination as well as disinheritance, FGM practice, polygamy, domestic violence and illiteracy suffered by Somali women, most of them were forced to assume the harder economic role of providing for basic family needs. This new turnaround was necessitated by several factors that included deaths of their spouses due to the war, widespread use and abuse of *khat* a stimulant chewed by most men in Somalia, displacement and divorce (cfr. [14]).

We observed during the field work that many Somali women and men in Italy practice chewing the green-leaves of *Catha Edulis* Plant (*khat* or *chaat* or *qaad*) (cfr. [15]), whilst socializing and or trying to kill their evening time. Nencini et al (1989) reported earlier on the *khat* chewing of the Somali community in Rome.

Cathione (Scientific name of *khat*) is illegal in Italy (see the "Tabelle contenenti l'indicazione delle sostanze stupefacenti e psicotrope e relative preparazioni". Decreto Ministeriale 27 07/1992 - G.U. n. 189, August 12th 1992), like many other European countries, the United States of America and Canada. *Khat* is a natural stimulant and its effects include euphoria, extreme talkativeness, and inane laughing. Adverse side effects

can include dizziness, heart problems and anxiety. Other names for the drug include Abyssinian tea, *mirraa* and African salad.

Figure 2. Bundles of *Catha edulis* plants ready to be sold and chewed (Source [15])



Khat is a social enigma in Somalia (cfr. Odenwald et al 2005, Elmi 1983 and [16]). It is firmly associated with the following negative social aspects: family disintegration, high crime rate, waste resources, health risks. Many Somalis chew this psycho-stimulant for pleasure and while socializing at the expense of not only family resources but it is also cited as a cause of sexual violence which threatens the well-being of women and their security. A 24 year-old *khat* seller and mother with a family of 5 members in Somalia eloquently said in the following statement:

"... This is a paradox, because I earn my income from selling the same item whose effect is threatening my safety. I know it's bad but I feel I haven't got a choice. My husband is unemployed. He chews khat regularly and I have been supporting his habit for the past one and half years. Because of the limited profit I gain from selling khat, sometimes I can't afford to cover the food expenses for the family let alone buy his drug. But rarely does he understand our predicament, often accusing me of lying, becoming quite violent towards me, and taking the little hard-earned money that I have by force."

Both voluntary and forced migration may cause adverse

health condition due to administrative obstacles to care, a lack of awareness about available services, the stress of migration resulting from cultural shock, linguistic and cultural barriers, and the inferior social status of women. In fact these female domestic workers are experiencing a psycho-social process of loss and change that is known in the psychiatry of migration as a grief process. Financial pressure to send money to their extended family, unemployment and economic instability, socio-cultural and racial discrimination, and lack of immigration status eventually will contribute mental health problems. We did not examine specifically the psycho-social problems of these female domestic workers. Therefore, it is paramount important to design and launch a psychosocial study in the near future with regard of both women and men domestic workers in Italy from different countries. The following quotation highlights an interviewed woman's testimonial ordeal and why she ran away from Somalia:

"I mainly came here to forget jealousy, physical and emotional abuse resulting from my abusive husband who is still refusing to divorce me despite the fact that I have lived here in Italy for more than 14 years. He tried to blackmail me with a conditional offer in exchange for a divorce: if I give him a lot of money, he would agree to divorce me"

Another relevant research question for the future is to investigate the dynamics and interaction between the domestic workers from different nations or ethnic groups who roughly speak and understand the Italian language, and who are not trained to assist and handle a wheel-chair bound elderly woman or man who amongst others cannot defend themselves and express themselves properly. In this regard one has to bear in mind that Italy has the highest ageing population in the world thus need to rely the migrant work force to do jobs that the Italians do not want to do.

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Websites

[Note that, unfortunately, the links indicated in [2], [5], [7], [11], [13] and [16] are not online any longer. Nevertheless, we have decided to mention them in order to keep a record of their former existence].

1. http://www.inps.it/news/Il_lavoro_femminile_immigrato.pdf (Women in the history of immigration in Italy).
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3. <http://www.google.it/search?hl=it&q=Somali+refuges+in+the+1980%27s+meta> (The Somalis: Their History and culture).

4. <http://ijrl.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/content/abstract/9/3/365> (The Treatment of Somali Refugees in Ethiopia under Ethiopian and International Law).
5. <http://www.fmreview.org/text/FMR/14/13.htm> (Counting the cost: refugees, remittances and the “war against terrorism”, by Cindy Horst and Nick Van Hear).
6. <http://scholarworks.umass.edu/dissertations/AAI3027232/> (The socio-cultural adaptation of Somali refugees in Toronto: An exploration of their integration experiences).
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15. http://www.hiiraan.com/2005/aug/somali_news25_5.htm (MP Joins Fight to Ban Khat. This is Bristol in association with the Evening Post, 2005).
16. http://www.allpuntland.com/eng/news_item.asp?NewsID=1955 (Ismail H. Warsame (2005) *Khat threatens the very survival of Somalia as nation-state*).