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### Social Control in Transnational Families: Somali Women and Dignity in Johannesburg

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Transnational mobility often separates families and distances people from the kinship and social structures by which they organized their lives prior to migration. Movement has altered the dynamics of Somali households, families, and communities post-migration, reshaping social constructions as individuals manage their lives in new locations without the familial support that sustained them in Somalia.<sup>1</sup> While outcomes of these hardships are variable and often uneven in different settlement spaces, migration can offer new opportunities for people to pursue avenues from which they were previously excluded, such as by assuming roles and responsibilities their relatives once filled. These changes precipitate shifting identities and are challenging for women who find themselves self-reliant in the diaspora, particularly in the absence of (supportive) husbands and close kin.

This chapter draws on doctoral research conducted in Johannesburg’s Somali community from 2010-2011. The ethnographic study focused on the dynamics of changing gender relations among Somalis living in Mayfair, a suburb just west of the city center, where the Somali community established its base in Johannesburg and continues to grow with new arrivals in search of refuge and livelihood opportunities. Based on group and focus group interviews, in-depth qualitative interviews with women and men, and extensive participant observation in Mayfair, this chapter explores the assumption that migration provides an opening for women to challenge subordinating gender norms that limit their autonomy. It also questions whether migration loosens social rules for Somali women or if notions of respectability are redefined in settlement. In this context, respectability refers to cultural

understandings of being a ‘good woman’ – that is, chastity outside of marriage, associations with virtuous individuals, limited contact with non-kin males, commitment to household and family, obedience to male authority, observance of segregated social spaces, and above all, demonstrated devotion to faith through actions and appearances. I argue that while migration alters conceptions of appropriate behavior and women’s position in their families, they remain limited by social control within their families and communities.

The goals of this chapter are two-fold. First, I explore the nature of transnational familial relationships as women conduct their lives without the physical presence of close kin. Second, I consider the challenges women face not only from the geographical boundaries of space and location, but also through a transnational lens. The dynamics of diasporic life challenge customary arrangements, with women given few options in the absence of (supportive) husbands and close kin to provide support. While they must take care in maintaining their families’ respectability, the reality too is that women provide critical resources to their immediate and extended families, often ensuring their survival. This chapter questions whether this trade-off results in relaxing the rules for women, and if it is appropriate to redefine dignity and respectability as it pertains to Somali women. I argue that diaspora in all its forms influences perceptions of how women’s responsibilities are defined, challenges seemingly immutable structures, and as such (re)conceptualizes how Somalis understand and define acceptable standards of women’s behavior.

### **Transnational migration and networks**

The process of uprooting and exile leads to a restructuring of the sociocultural constructions that guided life prior to migration, culminating in unexpected challenges as individuals conduct their relationships under new circumstances. These adjustments are gendered, relational, and subject to the changing conditions in which people find themselves in space and time, even as they are structured around larger institutional domains (Castellanos and Boehm 2008). Such dilemmas inspire modes of

conformity, in addition to those of resistance, and often play out beyond the spatial dimensions of settlement locations. Webs of social networks that maintain linkages to the homeland are vital to transnational migrants. Equally important are what Engebriksen (2007, p.729) refers to as the spatial dimensions of 'cultural scripts'- symbols, structures, and processes - and the ways in which these negotiating processes shape life in exile. Empirical studies point to the value networks play in providing information and resources to those separated by the circumstances that led to migration, but access to resources may be uneven to individuals within networks (Ryan 2011). These connections benefit people in different ways, whether it is through remittances migrants send home, advice provided to aspirant migrants, or updates movers and non-movers offer to retain associations. While networks are advantageous to individuals in sending and receiving societies through the complex dynamics of exchange, facilitated in part by the ease of modern communication (see Panagakos and Horst 2006; Vertovec 2004a), they can also have adverse consequences (Wilding 2006). The multi-dimensional nature of kin and social networks requires an exploration of how these relationships change locally and transnationally to understand the ways in which geography, time, and the strength of connections evolve with migration. The degree to which change occurs depends on a multitude of variables, possibly limiting or accelerating change after migration.

Vertovec (2004b, p.972) contends that outcomes of migrant transnationalism are part of a much larger transformative process: "While not bringing about substantial societal transformations by themselves, patterns of cross-border exchange and relationship among migrants may contribute significantly to broadening, deepening or intensifying conjoined processes of transformation that are already ongoing." He argues further that because migrants often maintain transnational relationships, the nature of communication changes but the structure of networks resists permanent modifications. People invest in transnational relationships for myriad reasons. Transnational practices are influenced by state policies and social exclusion in settlement places, leading marginalized refugees to strengthen their attachments

to home post-migration (Cheran 2006). Tied to this is the value of social capital, of the benefits associated with investing in social relationships that enable people “to symbolically represent their social position, and allowing greater choice in social and personal life” (Anthias 2007, p.792). Refugee migration especially situates people in socially disadvantaged positions in their host communities, often serving to strengthen ties to home rather than to eliminate them. People may respond to these changes with divergent survival strategies: defending their position or pursuing new pathways (Anthias 2007).

### **Social control and agency**

Gender norms may be conceptualized as roles that are normalized and unconsciously performed, thereby linking to social organization (Portes 2010). It is through social norms that standards for behavior and ‘bargaining power’ are determined, but can change over time (Agarwal 1997). Research has shown that refugee women often respond proactively to uprooting, enabling them to negotiate their position post-migration (Essed et al. 2004). With new access to social and economic resources, women are empowered to effect change in family gender relations by making important decisions in matters from which they were excluded in the past (Kibreab 2004; Mills 2003). However, migration does not guarantee considerable changes to the social order and instead may reinforce core practices (Hays 1994; Portes 2010). The key to sustainable change may lie in the broader acceptance of social transformation (Agarwal 1997), a colossal challenge for women who are often “the central purveyors of a community’s ‘culture’ and ‘tradition’” (Rajasingham-Senanayake 2004, p.152). Furthermore, migration outcomes depend not only on migrants, but also on host communities and those who stay behind (Van Hear 1998). It is understandable then that change within transnational communities is an evolving process, one occurring over time and at different paces determined by the complexities of place. Shifting power structures enable women to contest gender norms, which may produce changes

within social systems over time (Hofmann and Buckley 2012), but the immediate effect can be negative for women who resist customary social norms.

Cooper et al. (2009, p.2) define social control as “an aspect of social conditioning” that is learned and shared within a society. For Nader (1997), social control is about power over groups or relations that leads to domination or resistance. It is one type of the ‘controlling processes’ that moves with people and institutions, leading to “diffusion and transculturation” (p.720). In transnational contexts, social control derives from homeland memories of norms and behaviors that are carried through migration and acted upon in host societies (Cooper et al. 2009). Movement often grants women greater freedom to make choices in their lives, such as in employment and personal relationships, yet they remain constrained by sociocultural expectations. Even with transnational migration and protracted separation, women are expected to act in ways that maintains their families’ dignity and reputation. These behavioral expectations are enforced to ensure honor within families or in broader society (Cooper et al. 2009). As family representatives, women are pressured to conform to culturally acceptable standards of behavior, taking care to uphold relatives’ respectability despite realities that situate them as self-reliant. Women remain under the watchful eye of their families through expansive networks and the widespread use of technology, which facilitate a new form of social control in transnational families as behavior is carefully monitored. These actualities raise questions about the degree to which transnational movement is a liberating force or rather a reconfiguration of social control.

How migrant women balance the potential to act on their agency with social control has been explored in other studies. For example, qualitative interviews with young, female Cuban and Haitian immigrants in the US revealed women’s association of social control with protection against “physical harm or social dishonor” (Day and Icduygu 1997, p.7). However, the authors found that controlling young women is more about preventing harm to a family’s reputation than it is a matter of guarding women. The research concluded that migration does not eliminate cultural expectations for women’s behavior

that conforms to customary arrangements; living outside of the homeland does not provide a sense of freedom to instate new forms of acceptable behavior. That all of the women included in the study lived with or near their parents helps to explain why they struggle with social control. Other research links destination to the ability to resist pressure from within an ethnic community – in settlement and from home. In their comparative study of Borșa, Romanian immigrants in Milan and London, Boswell and Ciobanu (2009) use systems theory to explain why transnational ties are stronger for migrants in Italy and weaker for those who settled in the UK. Their argument is rooted in analyses of state structures and the ways in which policies and experiences shape the connections migrants have with their hosts, and the degree of inclusion they develop as members in their adopted societies. They concluded that varying degrees of inclusion in host societies largely affect migrants' need for, and use of, their own ethnic networks and transnational ties to access employment, housing, education, and health systems.

It is through agency and the capacity for behaving in new ways that enables some degree of change. These processes must be examined by considering structural, institutional, or intersubjective limitations (McNay 2000, p.23). Ortner (2006) takes the position that social agents are so deeply involved in their social relations that a wholly free social actor is untenable. Agents operate within their social networks as well as in larger social contexts where power, inequality, and competition are everyday realities. While most people have the ability to act as agents, uneven power structures influence and sometimes limit agency (Moore 1994). In other words, actors use agency to influence social outcomes, to resist power structures in order to transform society, and to achieve their goals, but there remain sociocultural constructions of power that can and sometimes lead to disempowerment:

Whatever “agency” they [persons] seem to “have” as individuals is in reality something that is always in fact interactively negotiated. In this sense they are never free agents, not only in the sense that they do not have the freedom to formulate and realize their own goals in a social vacuum, but also in the sense that they do not have the ability to fully control those relations

toward their own ends. As truly and inescapably social beings, they can only work within the many webs of relations that make up their social worlds. (Ortner 2006, pp.151-52)

Using Sherpa women as an example, Ortner (1996) shows that while women have the ability to pursue their own interests and act (for the most part) freely, their agency is limited within society by gender disparities engrained in their cultural fabric, serving to weaken their agency.

While personal agency accounts for individual action in response to opportunities or circumstances, social cognitive theory explores the key role proxy and collective agency plays in how people conduct their lives (Bandura 2001). In the absence of direct control, people may turn to alternative modes, or proxies, to achieve desired outcomes. Those in positions of power are used to influence situations over which other individuals cannot control. Using social control as an example, proxies may be used to intervene on behalf of extended families that are unable to directly control women's behavior from afar. In doing so, they seek to modify behavior perceived as damaging to the family as a whole and accomplish this by ascribing others with the power to act. Building on this, collective agency demonstrates the strength of communities that can also influence outcomes by applying pressure, such as threats of social abandonment or punishment in the afterlife, to those who endanger their position in society by exhibiting poor, culturally inappropriate behavior. In the case of monitoring women's actions, collective agency serves to preserve cultural norms jeopardized by transnational migration and settlement in diaspora communities.

Gossip plays an important role in controlling actions by transmitting information that travels to family abroad, the consequences of which can be destructive to individual relationships. Transnational migration often necessitates reliance on social networks able to provide information and resources to a multitude of dependent parties. For women and men living in transnational communities, social support is fundamental to building new lives, making community perceptions of individuals crucial to



receiving support. Gossip is a powerful tool used to demonstrate power while manipulating the subjects of gossip (Isotalo 2007). It may promote community solidarity, but it also creates conflict and serves to punish those who defy cultural values and norms. As a form of social control, gossip teaches people how to behave and discourages people from acting in inappropriate ways, and it is used especially to scrutinize women's morality. Consequently, the stakes are high for those who have been separated by migration in terms of how gossip damages reputations within new communities and the emotions evoked by gossip to families separated by geography (Dreby 2009).

### **The Somali context**

Years of physical and economic insecurity in Somalia impelled as many as two million refugees to flee the country, prompting a large transformative process as families lost contact with missing relatives and those who remained behind or settled elsewhere in the diaspora (Boyle and Ali 2010). The disruption of uprooting contributes to the de-emphasis on family, but so do state institutions organized around different understandings of kinship and the value of extended families (Kleist 2010). The extended family was instrumental to managing relationships, from courtship to marriage, and controlled all aspects of social life. While arguments that social control has significantly declined in the diaspora certainly hold merit (see Boyle and Ali 2010), extended families remain an extremely powerful force in people's lives. Controlling processes within families are not simply dichotomous – that is, geography dictates whether it exists – but rather its complexity cannot be reduced to the physical presence or absence of family. Somalis globally transmit information through a dizzying array of networks in a remarkably expeditious fashion. Social control transcends location, and while the rules have loosened, they have not disappeared as Somalis carry their values and responsibilities with them in settlement.

Studies throughout the diaspora reveal divergent migration outcomes for women. In his research with Somalis in Portland, Maine, Allen (2009) found that women face enormous pressure from their

community to conform to customary practices, such as maintaining conservative dress, even if it limits their employment opportunities in resettlement. Interestingly, Allen discovered that pressure increases with family reunification due to extensive social ties and dependence on those networks within their community, the rationale being that it is riskier for women with strong social ties to abandon custom and face community ostracism. Conversely, Boyle and Ali's (2010) work with Somali refugees in Minneapolis, Minnesota shows important changes in family structure, namely a surge in female-headed households and the dissolution of strong networks that comprised social and family life in Somalia. Family dispersal implies less control over women and the choices they make in their lives, such as regarding marriage and divorce decisions without family interference. These personal matters were mediated by kin in Somalia, often culminating in family rather than individual decisions concerning marriage and divorce. This also extended to the ways in which women were treated in marriage, providing women with support systems should a husband abuse her (Affi 1997; Mohamed 1997). The authors argue that migration limits the application of social control from the extended family. Several studies corroborate this (see discussions in Affi 2004; Boyle and Ali 2010; Crosby 2008), but the power of family remains an impenetrable force in the lives of many women. Women's autonomy in the diaspora indeed grants them greater agency, yet they remain committed to the families they left behind, and this continues to limit their ability to fully realize their autonomy. Somali women in Cairo, for example, lead the charge in providing support to their families transnationally and invest in building a supportive Somali community (Al-Sharmani 2006).

### **Somalis in Mayfair, Johannesburg**

Johannesburg, located in Gauteng Province, is the largest and most densely populated city in South Africa (Statistics South Africa 2007) with about 3.8 million residents (Parks Tau 2012). Recent estimates suggest there are more than 450,000 forced migrants living in the city with an additional 417,700 asylum seekers and other migrants in dire circumstances (Women's Refugee Commission

2011). There is a well-established Somali community that is mostly concentrated in Mayfair (Jinnah 2010; Peberdy and Majodina 2000), a suburb just west of the city center, and neighboring areas including Mayfair West and Fordsburg, and to a lesser extent Brixton, Langlaagte North, and Newtown. A 2006 African Cities survey indicates that almost 89% of Johannesburg Somalis live within Mayfair (FMSP 2006), making it the uncontested heart of the Somali community while remaining the Islamic center of Johannesburg.

Data on the Somali population in South Africa are problematic. While population estimates range anywhere from 20,000 (IRIN 2007) to 40,000 (Jinnah 2010) people throughout the country, South Africa received 8,500 Somali asylum applications in 2008 (UNHCR 2009) and more than 3,800 of those were filed in the Gauteng Province (SCOB 2008). Somalis who came to South Africa during apartheid likely entered the country illegally or as contract workers, per South African immigration laws in this period that excluded non-whites from legal migration processes (Peberdy 1998). As apartheid fell in favor of democracy, influxes of Somalis migrated to the country starting in 1992, one year after the Somali state collapsed, and continued intermittently in the 1990s and 2000s. Most asylum seekers arrived after Nelson Mandela was elected president in 1994 – a common trend among other migrant groups as well (Buyer 2008; Castles and Miller 2009) – when South Africa admitted refugees legally (Peberdy 1998). Events in Somalia encouraged refugee flows since then, most notably when Ethiopia invaded Somalia in 2006 (Jinnah 2010). Census data are not available for Mayfair Somalis, and Somali community organizations could not provide population estimates due to the frequent mobility of Somalis who work in and out of townships, movement to and from other Somali communities around the country, and a lack of resources and mechanisms to count the population. Some community members suggest a current population of about 5,000 Somalis living in Mayfair, the same number posited by community groups in 1999 (Dykes 2004).

Mayfair is small – about one square kilometer (Jinnah 2010) – and yet there are dozens of Somali owned and operated shops in the area, ranging from restaurants, clothing shops, and small grocers to electronics shops, internet cafés, and guesthouses. Other migrants live in Mayfair and run their own shops, but Somalis are the largest and most visible ethnic community in the area. Somalis were drawn to the Mayfair area for its existing South African Indian Muslim communities that had established mosques, Muslim cultural services, and halal butchers (i.e., religiously permissible food shops) (Sadouni 2009; Vigneswaran 2007). Mayfair’s proximity to the city center was also important for developing successful businesses and trading schemes (Jinnah 2010). Many Somali shopkeepers who work in townships come to Mayfair to purchase bulk goods that are sold in their shops, and most of the Somalis who live in Mayfair work and interact within the confines of the community to maximize the use of their networks and employment opportunities (Moret et al. 2006).

South Africa has suffered severe growing pains in its young democracy. Class disparities have replaced racial segregation; high unemployment, inadequate housing, poor service delivery, and persistent corruption are among the most pressing issues South Africans face. Pervasive immigration—legal and illegal—in the wake of apartheid invoked xenophobic attitudes and behaviors from citizens who feel migrants, and especially black migrants from around the continent, threaten to take South Africans’ already scarce economic opportunities while aggravating the country’s high crime rates. Indeed, South Africa’s propensity toward xenophobia distinguishes the country as one of the most hostile environments for foreign migrants in the world, and for black Africans in particular (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001; Peberdy and Majodina 2000). These realities have serious implications for Somalis, and women in particular. Emigration from a deeply patriarchal society like Somalia to a constitutionally progressive country such as South Africa might assume women’s empowerment, defined as new possibilities for what women can achieve in areas from which they were previously excluded (Mosedale 2005). While changes can include greater freedom for women, discrimination,

crime, and xenophobia hinder women's ability to act on their newly ascribed rights and opportunities in Mayfair. Physical and economic insecurity draw women and men to live in a community where they feel protected and supported by their networks and ethnic kin. Women thus find it difficult to challenge their social position and effect meaningful change in their lives because of their limited mobility and pressing social and economic needs.

The Somali community is vulnerable to social and institutional discrimination and has struggled to acquire adequate living accommodations conducive to productive lives (Peberdy and Majodina 2000). Moreover, refugees in Johannesburg receive little, if any, humanitarian assistance, thereby forcing them to carve out their own economic niches to survive (Jacobsen 2005). While refugees and other migrants are legally entitled to the same health, employment, and educational opportunities as other South Africans, this is seldom the case (Harris 2001; Landau 2008). Xenophobia continues to threaten stability in South Africa (see for example Kamwimbi et al. 2010; Landau 2006; Landau et al. 2005; Lefko-Everett 2007; Misago et al. 2009; Wa Kabwe-Segatti and Landau 2008) as do high crime rates and deadly attacks on migrants, most notably the wave of violence that swept across the country in 2008, killing dozens of migrants including Somalis. In addition to the perception that Somalis are an economic threat to South Africans, they are also soft targets as "mobile ATMs" (Landau 2008). Hostility toward migrants has led to Somali shops being looted and burned by mobs, women and children being threatened in their homes, and Somalis generally being targets for robbery and other brutal attacks (Landau 2008; Misago et al. 2009). While the most abhorrent violence occurs in Somali shops in the townships, Mayfair residents face persistent threats or violations against their person or property. Research shows that more than 70% of the Somali population in Johannesburg have been victims of crime, and the same percentage have been stopped by police, resulting in interrogations, destroyed documents, and paid bribes (Landau 2008). Consequently, Somali women in South Africa limit their movement, dress in *hijab* or *niqab* when going out, and opt for private Somali taxi drivers

instead of public transportation as a way to protect themselves from the threat of robbery, (sexual) harassment, and rape. Most women live in Mayfair, where community solidarity provides them with a sense of protection. Not only does this limit their ability to integrate into larger South African society, but it reduces their economic opportunities.

Despite ongoing violence and discrimination, South Africa remains an attractive destination for migrants. Johannesburg hosts more male than female migrants in general (Jacobsen 2005; Landau et al. 2005), a pattern observed among Somalis. Early Somali arrivals were predominantly men who migrated without their spouse (Peberdy and Majodina 2000), but this demographic started to change around 2004-2005 as more women came to South Africa in search of husbands – or to reunite with their husbands – and to find opportunities. As the population has grown, so has chain migration as Somalis encourage members of their networks to join them. Others are enticed by South Africa’s immigration laws that grant refugees legal status in the country, an important distinction from most African countries, and to live freely rather than in refugee camps, which South Africa does not have (Jacobsen 2006). Most Somalis have travelled on land routes or use smugglers to transport them by boat from East Africa to Mozambique, followed by land to the South African border (Shaffer et al. forthcoming). They often pay bribes to enter the country and apply for asylum in Johannesburg. Once status is granted, refugees have the right to apply for an adjustment of status—a permanent residence permit—five years after being granted asylum and living continuously in South Africa (Lawyers for Human Rights 2009). As Western resettlement prospects wane with increasingly restrictive immigration policies, particularly to key destinations such as the United States and the United Kingdom, South Africa has become an attractive destination for those frustrated with refugee life in camps. The country also is a destination for some Somalis hoping to migrate onward to a third country in the West. While there are lucrative business opportunities available to entrepreneurs, those jobs generally are in townships and are dangerous enterprises due to the constant threat of robbery and

violence. Nevertheless, refugees desperate for a livelihood and security accept the risks or even refuse to believe that such perils exist at all and try their luck in South Africa.

### **Extended families and social control in Mayfair**

While women feel they have freedom in a country that entitles them to lead independent lives, there remains pressure from within the community, often through kinship and social networks established in Somalia, limiting their ability to fully exercise their newfound rights. The importance of women's family position as network builder and family representative raises questions about how women manage this burden as they find themselves in unfamiliar locations and with new, wholly different responsibilities from those they had in Somalia. Migrants generally remain invested in their families' lives and want to retain attachments to their households and communities (Cohen and Sirkeci 2011; Vertovec 2004b). The family unit remains critically important in the social, economic, and political world of Somalis even as the diaspora scattered families and dismantled leadership positions that previously ordered life, leaving people with less direct control over their conduct. Somalis lived under the shadow of their parents, elders, and the community, but without them they may accept greater risks. Nevertheless, extended families influence behavior from afar through network members, or proxies, who can report to an individual's relations. Cultural obedience to parents mostly prevents people from going astray, from becoming outcasts within their community and family, even as men and women have more freedom in transnational locations.

A common thread in cases of social control is how they are intimately and inseparably tied to sex, marriage, and building relationships through networks. Extensive social and kinship networks in Mayfair ensure that inappropriate behavior is reported to families regardless of their global location, leaving individuals feeling especially scrutinized. During a women's group discussion of the issue, one single mother observed, "No matter what you do, your family will find out. If you are dating another man, your family will know even if they live in east Africa. I don't know how people here get the

number but they will call and tell them everything.” This problem is exacerbated by the propensity for emphasizing negative behavior, or even interpreting rumors as facts to pass on to those eagerly awaiting information about others. The widespread use of gossip as a controlling mechanism cannot be overstated, and it is through rampant gossip and the constant fear of social damning that so few Somalis completely trust even their closest friends with secrets. This serves to control women’s behavior in Mayfair, effectively ensuring that some semblance of the old life remains in the midst of larger, uncontrollable processes extending beyond the community. Many Somalis suggest it also keeps people in check, on a level playing field, but is often considered a response to jealousy. Nevertheless, the need to protect relationships with people who may provide the only real sense of security to women often minimizes risky behavior.

The absence of extended families is paradoxically problematic and liberating, and the long-term cultural effect of family dispersal remains to be seen. For women who ventured to Mayfair alone, a loss of immediate kin grants them greater autonomy in personal choices regarding behavior, activities, spouses, and opportunities, but it may leave them vulnerable to abusive relationships and limited protection against insecurity and destitution. A negative outcome of transnational families is the perception that husbands can treat wives poorly without close kin intervention. Conversely, living in South Africa affords women the freedom to live without family interference, but it is a choice that those who covet their responsibilities as members of a household, family, and community seldom make. They challenge customary practices primarily when the need arises or when seeking a specific outcome (Stake 1995). Women feel conflicted about their social and family position in a place where the clan structure that governed Somali social organization is now largely dismantled. This is not to say that clan does not guide daily life in Mayfair – it certainly does – but rather geography, urban landscapes, and the realities of conflict have reshaped the physical configuration of Somalis who were often situated within their clan families in Somalia. This restructuring created an amalgamation of clan



families forced to co-exist in a foreign land, leaving individuals vulnerable to discrimination, gossip, and isolation once separated from immediate kin and merged with different clan groups.

### **The visible family flag**

Women are the underlying strength of the family unit, a responsibility intimately tied to their position as lineage perpetuators, as those who carry subsequent generations that comprise the growing family tree. A woman's role is to carry the family forward through procreation but more immediately to strengthen the reputation of the family and enhance their position within society. Women reflect virtuous rearing, family decency, and Islamic principles within a family, representing those from the past and present, while producing the children who will lead the family in the future. For these reasons, women are closely guarded not only to protect them against harm, but to secure the family's reputation.

Women who socialize with men who are not close kin risk gossip in the community regardless of their marital status. The primary danger is that a woman will bear a child out of wedlock, that she will carry an illegitimate child and bring shame to her family. Dunia, a single mother with six children in Mayfair, explained why women bear the brunt of sex outside of marriage:

They don't want the daughter to carry a bastard child. The man is not getting pregnant. If the man does something, it's finished, but the lady has the evidence. It will be shameful for the family. After five months, how is she going to hide a pregnancy? If she is not married, then who is the father? People will then question the rest of the family and say that maybe other members are like this too.

Roble, a single man, noted such shame would destroy a woman's life and that of her family, calling it a "life or death" decision. If she were pregnant and unmarried, she would have to leave and go where

people do not know her. Batuulo, a married woman who runs a successful business in Mayfair, corroborated Dunia and Robles's comments:

If you get the child before marriage, all the family will get the problem because of you. They say, 'Your daughter got the bastard baby and you, too, if you want to marry another man, you cannot.' The family leaders will lose everything because you are making the family name dirty.

In these cases, an illegitimate child has no place in any lineage, and membership within a clan is the basis of one's identity and positions them appropriately within the social structure. The importance of kinship cannot be overstated. When children are born, boys and girls alike are given their father's first name as a middle name and their paternal grandfather's first name as a last name. These names are carried throughout the lifecycle and the pattern continues with the next generation. Women never change their surname at marriage, for their birth name provides information about their patrilineage, which is used to determine kin and social relationships. This issue of dignity, therefore, is closely related to the problem of managing an illegitimate link in the family tree. If there is an illicit child, people do not know from where the child came and it spoils the family name, as it is a permanent mark on the family. Conversely, a male drunkard may be a social outcast, but the problem ends when he dies. A woman who becomes pregnant out of wedlock brings a stigma that endures through the generations, making sex sacred only for marriage. Men's actions damage the individual; women's actions destroy the family. The eternally shameful damage of illegitimacy is used to control women's behavior more vehemently than men's actions.

Related to private sexual behavior, public misbehavior injures the reputation of a woman's family and leaves a negative impression of the entire group. For example, men would not be willing to marry the sister of a woman who misbehaves because the entire family faces stigmatization. This potentially includes the families of women who simply socialize publicly with men, as people will wonder what

she is doing. This is tied to the fundamentality of kinship, which not only perpetuates a family's lineage but also serves as the basic foundation for organizing social relations and building networks. For these reasons, women and men seldom date openly, instead opting to see each other outside of Mayfair in other parts of Johannesburg. In contrast to Somalia, where men courted women via their families as a way to maintain a family's honor and ensure chastity prior to marriage, Somalis in Mayfair develop relationships clandestinely. I raised this issue during interviews, asking women and men if dating in the absence of family intervention is something that goes on in South Africa. Most people acknowledge that pursuing romantic relationships is common, but that it must remain hidden for if a couple is found to engage in an inappropriate relationship, the details of that encounter would be relayed to the woman's father or male siblings, resulting in enhanced scrutiny and vulnerability to gossip. While the nuances of time, place, and experience in Somalia limit any consensus on acceptable levels of courtship, it is generally agreed that dating in Mayfair differs from Somalia in that families guarded women, enabling immediate intervention should she cross the boundary of appropriate action. Interestingly, it was also acknowledged that family separation affords more freedom to choose partners and pursue relationships, but women still hide their relationships from society at large. This protects them from gossip and social exclusion in the community, where they might be called prostitutes, as well as in their families who may shun them for spoiling their name. While the rules have loosened in Mayfair, they have not disappeared.

### **A paradox in practice**

Women's burden to conform to social prescriptions for behavior comes from their families globally and from interactions with people in their everyday lives, such as those in their households and community. Women discuss feelings of being controlled in a variety of contexts, from how they dress, pray, and conduct their personal relationships to how they survive in Mayfair. Interestingly, women celebrate their freedom to do as they please in South Africa while acknowledging the incomplete

nature of their independence. They exercise their autonomy in new ways but with a degree of hesitation, wanting to satisfy their cultural responsibilities and live decent lives while aspiring to make their own choices to lead fulfilling lives. It is evident that women struggle with their position. Women have rights in South Africa that did not apply to them in Somalia; they know this and want to embrace new opportunities for self-improvement and to live as they dream. However, they also honor their background and respect the cultural nuances that comprise their Somali identity. One of the challenges all Somalis face is negotiating the colossal transformations that have occurred in the homeland. The changes throughout protracted conflict have culminated in uncertainty about (re)defining Somali culture, particularly in light of new Islamic conservatism and various clans living together in diasporic communities. The insulated nature of Mayfair's community especially encourages conformity for the sake of maintaining social inclusion critical for survival. Both real and imagined victimization for being unwanted refugees in the country fuels people's fears for personal safety, thereby exacerbating the need for community solidarity and protection (Stake 1995).

For most women, maintaining a favorable position in Mayfair is crucial to receiving community support, particularly for those without spouses or more immediate family members who would maintain them in Somalia (Shaffer 2013). To earn favor in the community, women's appearance, first and foremost, is used to judge their dedication to culture and religion. Starting in the latter years of Mohamed Siad Barre's regime, Somalis turned to conservative Islam and more women donned *hijabs* and *niqabs*.<sup>ii</sup> This has become standard practice, with women expected to cover their bodies fully to demonstrate their respectability. Women in Mayfair adhere to the new norm while wishing there were greater flexibility in what is considered decent or acceptable. Women who would like to wear jeans publicly or leave the house without a headscarf fear accusations of prostitution or promiscuity. One woman, a Kenyan Somali, noted her preference for jeans that she wore in Kenya before questions of her character pushed her into long skirts and headscarves. In another case, Dunia is often the victim of

gossip for wearing only a loose headscarf and was warned that her choices are not in line with Islamic practice or Somali culture. As one of the earlier migrants to Mayfair, she began covering her head only in response to criticism she received, citing comments that she was a bad person and would go to hell for showing her hair in public. She felt shamed, saying, “The more they [Somalis] point, the more you feel guilty.” For Dunia, and I would argue for many woman, what is considered right or wrong is confusing because change has occurred rapidly and defining what is or was Somali culture is problematic. The Mayfair community comprises Somalis who were divided under colonialism and experienced colonization differently.<sup>iii</sup> Furthermore, those who left Somalia did so at different times, meaning some people encountered the war and its outcomes more directly than others. Debating what is Somali culture or religion is thus left to interpretation. Instead, women in Mayfair follow paths that minimize their risk of exclusion and mostly adhere to the norm even as they sometimes test the boundaries.

The following case studies provide a context through which we can understand how social control affects individual lives in Mayfair. Because female dignity is intimately tied to family, these examples demonstrate the power of families and the complexities of personal relationships.

### **Case 1: Cawo**

Marriage to an appropriate partner is important for establishing ties and perpetuating lineages. It is difficult to gauge the extent of diasporic changes regarding arranged marriages versus unions founded on individual choice, though studies have found arranged marriages on the decline due to the dismantling of extended family networks (Boyle and Ali 2010). Nevertheless, what is clear is the emphasis on reciprocity, that bridegrooms provide resources for women including, in some cases, financial assets to a wife’s immediate family, while women offer children and the responsibilities that come with managing the household. While arranged marriages certainly continue in Mayfair, the general perception is that women choose their partners because family members are not present to

arrange them and women cannot be forced into a union, though coercion is frequently used to pressure women into compliance. For example, several people spoke of women being told that if they did not accept a marriage, her family would curse her; conversely, accepting a man would bring her blessings. One woman who received such a threat from her mother could not resist and accepted the marriage, but eventually secured a divorce.

The rationale behind arranged marriage is to benefit young women who lack life experience and cannot make such important decisions independently. Families seek responsible, good men to marry daughters as a way to look out for their best interests and protect them against poor choices. This argument carries some strength, but perhaps more important are the benefits promised through marriage, as well as the social stigma should two people marry in a union deemed inappropriate. For example, Cawo, a young, single woman in Mayfair, was summoned to Pretoria by her clan family to meet with a Somali-Canadian woman who travelled to South Africa in search of a wife for her son. Cawo was the most attractive candidate, and the woman promised her resettlement in Canada in exchange for marriage. Cawo adamantly refused, spending several days arguing with the woman and her family who sought to persuade her otherwise. Frustrated that they would not accept her decision, Cawo finally told them to stop wasting her time and that she would not see them again. While Cawo was hesitant to journey to Pretoria for the meeting, she felt unable to decline since they were family. She adhered to cultural practice before acting on the autonomy she gained in South Africa to resist interference in her personal life, but at the cost of having people in her life who could potentially help her later. Had she been in Somalia during these negotiations, it would have been extremely difficult for her to reject the potential suitor.

### **Case 2: Batuulo**

In another case, Batuulo and her husband Farah chose to marry in Somalia years ago, but Farah's family felt Batuulo was domineering and never warmed to her. Their marriage was strong early on,

though Farah turned malicious and abusive over time, which Batuulo attributes to Farah listening to his own family, who frequently berated Batuulo and encouraged him to leave her. By the time I met her in 2010, Batuulo, a successful businesswoman, wanted to divorce her unemployed husband whom she suspected was unfaithful. While Batuulo was respected in the community for her charity and work as a conflict mediator, she could not divorce her husband without his permission. Batuulo provided the only source of income for her family, making it advantageous for Farah to stay married to her. He agreed to divorce but only if he kept their children and Batuulo's business, effectively trapping her in the marriage.

As tensions mounted in the marriage, local elders and relatives from both families travelled to Johannesburg to mediate. Batuulo despaired at the intrusion, feeling it was a private matter that only she and Farah could resolve. Even her mother in the US and Farah's mother called regularly to insist that she remain in the marriage. Batuulo would emerge from such conversations in tears, saying she had to do as her mother said even as she confided to me that she considered drinking poison as her only escape. Members of the community also intervened, but Batuulo accepted there was nothing she could do about it and her family negotiated the divorce settlement that would give Farah the business and include financial incentives. Batuulo explained that women cannot divorce men, so securing a divorce includes intervention with her male kin who essentially pay the husband to leave her. Refusing to surrender her business, Batuulo stayed in the marriage.

Batuulo complained bitterly of dealing with elders, who she said would not listen to her argument and instead reminded her that children were involved and her responsibilities, first and foremost, are to her husband and children. When discussing the matter with me, Batuulo said, "Even if the elders ask me questions about why I want a divorce, they say 'You're wrong. You Somalian ladies say you're free women now and before you weren't free. That's why you think like this.' You see? It's abuse."

Batuulo reluctantly complied with the conclusions reached by the elders until Farah threatened her life

and she turned to the South African police for intervention, an option that would not be available to her in Somalia. It was this extreme action that tipped the balance in her favor as both families, community members, and Somali elders finally, albeit grudgingly, consented to divorce. For Batuulo, going to the police was the only option she had to protect herself and demand recognition of her position in the quarrel. As much as she tried to negotiate and resolve the issue through customary outlets, Batuulo could not manage the situation without assistance from the state.

Batuulo's story highlights several important points about social change and control in Mayfair. In point of fact, elders serve as judges, as revered leaders whose wisdom guides conflict mediation. Marital discord is often resolved through elders, comprising relatives from both sides of the family who want to maintain peace, solidarity, and dignity within families. The loss of the extended family pushes people to mediate using the broader clan family, who become the extended family in exile. While this is transformed in the diaspora, the rules and structure of mediation remain the same. This example also shows how personal relationships involve families and not just individuals in those relationships. Somalis turn to their families for resolution, and members on both sides negotiate to determine fault and solutions. Finally, Batuulo shows us how these customary arrangements are changing. The outcome would have been vastly different were Batuulo still in Somalia, but living in South Africa afforded her a new avenue for challenging conclusions reached by elders. Most Somalis value their cultural customs and wish to maintain those practices, but they also recognize their ability to realize different outcomes that favor them as individuals. Women can divorce their husbands, leave the house, or call the police to report domestic violence. Exercising autonomy in this way is problematic as it is perceived as revenge or a much larger power struggle. For Somalis, a good woman is one who solves problems the Somali way – that is, privately or through mediation with elders – but the problem with consulting elders is that women feel they favor men in such cases and do not listen to women.



### **Case 3: Waris**

Beyond women's natal kin, social pressure also comes from husbands' family, much like with Farah in Batuulo's case. A wife's behavior can adversely affect a happy marriage if her in-laws object to her actions. Waris, a twice divorced mother of two young daughters, parted from her second husband after she refused female genital cutting for her daughters. In her personal experience, cutting was a painful, traumatizing event that she attributes to the difficulties she suffered with intimacy and childbirth.

When Waris became a mother, she was adamant that her children would not undergo the cultural practice, much to her mother-in-law's chagrin. The mother-in-law, still living in Somalia, insisted on the procedure and advised her son to offer Waris an ultimatum: proceed with the cutting or accept a divorce. Undeterred, Waris chose the latter and her husband ended their marriage, leaving her to raise her daughters as a single mother. Waris recognized the hardship she would face without her husband, but she accepted the risk because it concerned what she felt was the well-being of her children and it was non-negotiable. It would have been extremely difficult for Waris to resist pressure from extended families had this incident occurred in Somalia, but being in South Africa and having distance from relatives provided her with the power to act on her wishes.

### **Cultural reproduction and shifting norms in Mayfair**

Women speak of honoring their culture and managing social control in contradictory ways. Sitting with Cawo one day discussing being a Somali woman in a foreign land, she said, "I think Somali women they prefer mostly to respect their culture, their traditions, not South Africa culture." The women I met generally abide by the guiding principles of what they understand Somali culture to be but challenge those that limit them, an ability they acquired through their migration experience and survival instincts. They feel South Africa affords them new rights that they cannot pursue in order to secure their position in families and communities (Shaffer 2013). After Dunia commented that she is free to do as she wishes, she admitted, "They [other Somalis] judge you, so of course they are

controlling us because we are still scared.” It is confusing to know how to embrace rights and opportunities in the face of economic and physical insecurity in South Africa. Women work to improve their lives and provide resources for themselves and even the families inserting control (Shaffer 2012). While transnational communication is crucial to building and maintaining social relationships, it paradoxically holds enormous power over individual behavior even in settlement places (Bandura 2001) and can be an unwelcome distraction to those who prefer distance from those relations (Wilding 2006). Women, therefore, resist domination by controlling aspects that may not threaten their position as a family or community member. The threat of abandonment limits deviance, but as demonstrated in the cases here women push the boundaries and effect change over time through their resilience, albeit with different levels of acceptance or condemnation from the broader community.

Portes (2010) reminds us that social change is a complex web of change and stability, of multi-layered, uneven processes that affect individuals, communities, and societies. It is through social structure that power is used to satisfy a multitude of interests. Even though new locations modify aspects of culture, “ideas and values that people see as expressions of ‘our traditions’, although no longer lived experience, still motivate people’s sense of belonging” (Engebrigtsen 2007, p.729). It is important to note that values and norms are different (Portes 2010), and women have modified the norm – that is, their roles – by using their autonomy to provide security for themselves and their families, thereby reflecting their values as dedicated to family. Nevertheless, protecting Somali culture remains a primary goal for those who fled their homeland. Social control signifies cultural preservation in a country where Somalis have little broader control, especially for men who find themselves disempowered in South Africa.

Nostalgia for Somalia ensures cultural continuity, but even as realities challenge core structures they ultimately do not eliminate them. The challenge for women, and all Somalis in the diaspora, is mitigating conflict between ‘producing locality’ in settlement and working to “repair or re-establish

continuity with the place of origin” (Day and Icduygu 1997, p.275-276), leaving women balancing the values they covet with restrictive customary norms that limit their autonomy. The risk of ostracism within an already marginalized community is a way to secure compliance with the old way. At the same time, exile has led to shifting gender norms and women assessing sociocultural demands locally and transnationally. When up against their extended families and the broader Mayfair community, women must demonstrate their devotion to family and culture, which most do willingly, in the face of collective influences guiding their behavior. Bearing in mind “while values motivate or constrain, power enables” (Portes 2010, p.1541), women submit to large forces of social control because it serves their survival interests in the long run (Agarwal 1997). The growth of subsequent generations (Vertovec, 2004b), time to form a diasporic identity, and Somalis’ position in South Africa will be crucial to loosening social controlling processes.

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<sup>i</sup> Some of the most important social changes include greater flexibility in choosing spouses and the absence of extended family (households), thereby affecting customary male intervention in times of conflict or negotiation processes. Moreover, mandatory dower contracts in Somalia established unions and granted men "full rights over a woman both as a partner and as a bearer of children" (Lewis, 1994, p.42). Husbands had rights to the children they produced with their wives, and those children remained with their father and lived among their patrilineal kin when there was a divorce. This has been replaced by widespread single motherhood in the diaspora. Furthermore, the sexual division of labor positioned women as primary caregivers and men as family resource and security providers. This also limited women's political participation in Somalia.

<sup>ii</sup> A *hijab* covers a woman's head but leaves her face visible, while *niqabs* reveal only a woman's eyes.

<sup>iii</sup> Ethnic Somali territory was divided into five parts during colonialism: Southern Somalia (Italy), Northern Somalia/Somaliland (Britain), Kenya (Britain), Ogaden (Ethiopia), and Djibouti (France).