

Politics and Ethics of Marriage and Family Life among Transnational Somali Diasporas

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I. Introduction: Ethnographic Glimpses

In the summer of 2000, I spent three months in Ottawa and Toronto, Canada conducting research on the transnational family practices of Somali immigrants. I found myself first accidentally and then purposefully researching religion classes conducted by and for Somali immigrant women. The teachers and students were enthusiastically reading and discussing the Quran, Quranic exegesis, and Islamic jurisprudence. Religious learning was intertwined with discussions on the challenges of shielding sons from street gangs, overcoming economic marginalization and racism, and navigating marital conflicts with uninvolved, absent, and/or polygamous husbands. The women were both older and younger; some with formal education while others were informally educated. The teachers had diverse life trajectories, which also partly shaped how they became involved in these efforts. One teacher and her husband were members of a religious movement in Somalia. Other teachers and students took this path after moving to Canada.

Fifteen years later in Finland, while conducting research to investigate marriage norms and practices of Somali immigrants, I came across numerous female informants who were also actively seeking religious knowledge and virtues. Central to their cultivating Islamic knowledge and piety was questioning patriarchal norms on spousal rights, and seeking marriages that embodied Islamic virtues of *'adl* (justice) and *ihsan* (doing the good and the charitable). These women,

generally, were young and educated. Giulia Liberatore (2013), in her doctorate research on Somali women in the UK, reported similar findings. Also, similar processes have been reported in studies on Muslim immigrant women of different ethnic backgrounds in the UK, Germany, France, and Norway (Amir-Moazami and Salvatore 2003; Jouili and Amir-Moazami 2006; Jacobsen 2011).

In the Finnish context, efforts to reform marriages and families were also being undertaken by one mosque in Helsinki, through a program run by Somali immigrants and predominantly targeting Somali immigrant families. During my two and half year case study of this program, I repeatedly heard the men and women who were running the program reiterate that many Somali immigrants wrongly reduce religion to praying and fasting and fail to cultivate and embody Islamic virtues, particularly in their spousal and familial relations, as well as in the larger Finnish society. One of the main goals of the program was to help couples, parents, and youth tackle this gap.

In these above-mentioned pursuits of embodied Muslim piety, which I observed in past and present research, two issues are central: the importance of engaged and reflective learning of Islamic tradition and the necessity of reforming Muslim gender norms in marriage and family life. These diverse and interlinked diasporic Somali religious pursuits also share connections with other systematic and epistemological pursuits that I have also recently been studying, namely those of a number of women scholars who are based in the Global North and South and who have since the late 1980s engaged in knowledge building projects with the aim of reforming religious norms, state laws, and Muslim subjectivities regarding marriage, divorce, and gender relations (Al-Sharmani 2014).

The aim of this article is to examine some of these diasporic Somali efforts to reform individual subjectivities, married couples and families through the acquisition of reflective Islamic religious knowledge and the embodiment of piety. I link these efforts to two issues. The first is the politics of navigating transnational Somali family life. The second is diasporic Somali engagements with Islamic religious tradition, which entail revisiting the relationship between the ethical and legal. I reflect on the local, transnational, and historical dimensions of these processes. In addition, I highlight how gender is at the heart of these processes.

II. Research Contexts

My reflections are informed by past and present research. First, I draw on research conducted in 2000 in Ottawa and Toronto in Canada, studying how Somali immigrants navigated life in diaspora, and focusing on the religious roles and activities of women (Al-Sharmani 2001). Second, I draw on the research I conducted in Egypt for my doctoral work among Somali refugees and immigrants in the period from 2001 to 2004 (Al-Sharmani 2004). I am also informed by the findings of post-doctoral research I conducted from 2005 to 2010, with Somali immigrant families in Egypt and their relatives who moved onwards to the United States, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom (Al-Sharmani 2006, 2010). The overall focus of my past research was on transnational family practices of diasporic Somalis, and in particular the roles of women in navigating family and community life.

Furthermore, I draw on two research projects that I have been undertaking since 2013. One is a study that investigates marriage norms and practices of Somali migrants in Finland. It is part of a team project titled “Transnational Muslim Marriages: Wellbeing, Law, and Gender.” The aims of this project are twofold. The first aim is to explore how Muslim migrants, informed by both Islamic law and Finnish state law, understand and organize marriage as well as marital roles and rights in transnational space. The second aim is to study how the Finnish legislative system manages to respond to the needs of Muslim families and enhance the wellbeing of family members in the context of marriage and divorce.¹

In this project, I have been conducting interviews with women and focus group discussions with women and men about their norms and practices regarding marriage and family life, and how these norms and practices are informed by Islamic tradition, the context of living in Finland, and the trajectory of their diasporic lives. In addition, I have been conducting a case study of the previously mentioned mosque program, consisting of participant observation, interviews, and documentation of life stories. This program, which started in February 2011, seeks to promote Islamic knowledge and virtues as the foundation for stable and successful Muslim marriages and families. It also aims at helping families integrate successfully in Finnish society. The program’s objectives are pursued through multiple activities targeting married couples, newlyweds, and youth aspiring to marry. The activities include seminars, training workshops, family dispute resolution

work, matchmaking services, counseling and holistic healing through Quran-based treatment. The male and female actors who run the program are Somali immigrants and the participants are also Somali immigrant families and youth. The mosque is predominantly run and frequented by Somalis, but the program itself aims, in its upcoming second and third phases, to work with non-Somali Muslim families in Finland as well. The program also has ties with mosques, Muslim organizations, and a network of religious scholars who are based in other European countries, some of whom have been taking part in the seminars.

The second project is titled "Islamic Feminism: Tradition, Authority, and Hermeneutics."² It researches transnational reform-oriented knowledge building projects undertaken by selected contemporary Muslim women scholars/activists from a number of countries, who are working on Islamic interpretive tradition, driven by the questions of hermeneutical Islamic-based reform and gender justice. The most notable of these scholars are Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, Ziba Mir-Hosseini, Sa'diyya Shaikh and Omaima Abou-Bakr. In this research, I have been undertaking textual analysis of the works of these scholars and their engagements with primary Islamic texts, as well as a case study of Egypt as a context in which these kinds of knowledge building projects are being pursued and contested by state and non-state actors. I am also studying the overlaps and divergences between the ideas and discourses of such scholars and the ways in which ordinary Muslim women in both Muslim majority (e.g. Egypt) and diaspora contexts (e.g. Finland) engage with religious tradition and pursue a life that embodies Muslim piety.

III. The Politics of Transnational Somali Family Life

Recent literature has shown the centrality of transnational family-based networks and practices to the family lives of diasporic Somalis (see Horst 2007; Al-Sharmani 2010; Hautaniemi 2011; Tiilikainen 2011). In fact, I argue that diasporic Somalis inhabit *transnational social fields*. My understanding of this concept is informed by Peggy Levitt and Nina Glick Schiller's work, which uses the term to capture the ways in which the daily lives of transnational migrants are embedded in "a set of multiple interlocking networks of social relationships, through which ideas, practices, and resources are unequally exchanged, organized, and transformed" within and across multiple national contexts

(Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004: 9). Similarly, the daily lives of diasporic Somalis, their aspirations and challenges as well as their resources and life choices are embedded in and influenced by their close ties and interdependent relations with networks of relatives living in multiple countries. Furthermore, they often deal with the challenges of economic, cultural, and racial marginalization through transnational strategies.

These family-based networks function and reproduce themselves through three practices. One is managing movements of family members to meet different needs and goals. The other is sharing material and non-material family resources. The third practice is managing care work, not only of children but also of the elderly, the sick, or relatives in trouble. I call these processes *the politics of navigating transnational family life*. What is political about them is located in the bonds and hierarchies between family members, which are created through interdependent relations of obligations and uneven access to resources respectively; the management of the aspirations, needs, and goals of different family members and their underlying tensions; and how national and global structures of power and hierarchies shape the lives of the members of these family networks. These transnational lives and family relations are impacted, for instance, by the war on terror and the pathologization of Islam and Muslims, particularly of young Muslim men. They are also impacted by the mixed benefits and challenges of holding the passport of a western country on the one hand, and by the legal and socio-economic barriers and marginalization confronted by relatives who are refugees or illegal migrants in Africa and the Middle East, on the other.

Thus, there are benefits but also challenges for being part of transnational Somali family-based networks. We need to understand diasporic Somali efforts to reform marriages and families within this larger context. In Finland, for example, marriage norms and practices are being revisited due to overlapping factors. One of these factors is the absence of extended families that could help the couple with childcare. Another is the economic marginalization and barriers to social mobility that Somali immigrants confront. A third factor is the public discourses that depict Somali families as riven with problems (see also Open Society Foundations 2013). An additional factor is families' and communities' fear for their youth (Al-Sharmani 2015). This is in a context where Somalis have close ties with relatives living in multiple countries, where networks of friends shape ideas and values, and where religious

and diasporic discourses and knowledge are imparted through various sources and shaped by a diverse transnational group of Somali and non-Somali religious actors. It is due to these overlapping factors that the sharing of economic responsibilities by both spouses becomes an expected and prevalent practice among Somalis in Finland although the discourse of the husband's role as a provider is still maintained. In addition, the need for husbands to be involved parents and to contribute to childcare and housework becomes an important norm that is prioritized over the husband's financial role.

Thus, narratives of flawed spouses in need of reform circulate (by women and men), in mosque seminars, and in various community gatherings. There is the narrative of male drifters who grew up in Finland but are not doing much in their lives. Such men are depicted as spending endless hours chatting with other men (often about Somali politics) and as being uninvolved parents and husbands. Another narrative is that of the men who grew up in Africa or the Middle East and who fail to reflect on changes that the experience of migration and living in Finland brought to families and gender relations in terms of needs, available resources, and the surrounding environment. These men, again, are purportedly unwilling to do housework or childcare because they see it as culturally inappropriate. In the narratives, the key negative attribute of all these men is poor religious knowledge and misguided piety.

On the other side, there are narratives of undesirable wives, circulated predominantly by men but also by some women. These undesirable wives are depicted as women who uncritically embrace Finnish gender norms and abuse the privileges that state policies give to women. They are also pictured as negligent wives who spend too much time in wedding parties with other women. Again a key attribute of these undesirable wives is their poor religious knowledge exemplified in incongruence between outward and inward piety.

Reflecting on the collective reform efforts of the mosque program, one could argue there are local, transnational, and historical dimensions to their goals and underlying anxieties: on the local Somali-Finnish level, the impetus is to lead an internal reform to confront the real as well as the imagined problems of Somali marriages and families that which contribute to divorce. Examples of these problems are absent fathers, disempowered men, overwhelmed single mothers, and marginalized and alienated youth. The local goal is also to create positive and empowered image and realities of Somali immigrants

and to help them realize “positive integration,” which the program defines as active participation in the Finnish society while maintaining one’s religious and cultural heritage. The transnational impetus is to partake in larger European Muslim efforts (e.g. through collaboration with Muslim organizations and mosques in other European contexts and the federation of a European Muslim organization) to confront what is perceived as the breakup of the institution of family and family norms in Europe, and to strengthen Muslim families. The historical impetus is to partake in a transnational process of redeeming Somali identity following the destruction of civil war, through the institution of the Somali family as the locus where that identity is reproduced. The historical motivation is also to critically revisit Somali culture(s) by seeking not only religious knowledge but also new religious understandings and embodiments of Islamic virtues.

As for the Somali immigrant women’s individual trajectories of self-reform and piety, whether in Finland or elsewhere, they are to be understood as part of multiple diasporic paths that overlap with the pursuit of meaningful life both within the family and in the public sphere (Al-Sharmani 2010, 2015). For some women, this process started earlier, while they were refugees in East Africa or Egypt. For others, it unfolded while they were navigating the challenges of marriage in western contexts, where gender roles and relations had changed and created tensions, exacerbated by the multiple forms of racial and economic marginalization that women and their communities suffered. In these new contexts, patriarchal spousal norms were no longer working, not only because of the changes brought about by the experience of migration but also because they posed an ethical dilemma to those women’s new religious sensibilities, which were acquired through processes of religious education and embodying Islamic piety in private and public life.

For other women, these pursuits of pious lives took place through experiences of multiple movements. An example is that of a young woman and her family who moved first from Africa to the Netherlands and from the Netherlands to Britain, to seek opportunities for higher education and inclusive social citizenship that allowed for the freedom to practice outward forms of piety such as wearing a long veil. But this journey of multiple movements also witnessed how this woman’s understandings of piety and how it is to be practiced in marriage and family life evolved (Al-Sharmani 2006).³

IV. Diasporic Somali Engagements with Islamic Tradition

A common characteristic between these different diasporic Somali engagements with Islamic tradition is grappling with the relationship between the ethical and the legal. In the dispute resolution work of the mosque-based program I studied in Finland, one of the challenges has been how to deal with belligerent husbands who refuse to divorce their wives when the latter resort to the mosque to end the marriage. Part of this challenge was the issue of the authority of the mosque as a religious institution to issue an enforceable divorce within the structure of a secular legal system. I highlight, however, another dimension and a point emphasized by the informants, which is the need to cultivate a form of piety that does not stop at a literalist reading of legal rulings in Islamic jurisprudence but ties the legal ruling to its ethical intent. Hence, the argument was that husbands, lacking this ethically-based piety, abused divorce rights in Islamic jurisprudence, which are not based on equal access since men have the right to unilateral repudiation while women's access to divorce is contingent on negotiating with a husband or being secured through a judge applying Islamic law (Al-Sharmani et al. forthcoming). The link between the ethical and legal was also raised by one of the key teachers in the seminars through his call for men to rethink their understanding of *qiwamah*, a principle from Islamic jurisprudence which obligates men to provide financially for their wives and entrusts them with guardianship over the wives, but which also obligates the latter to be obedient towards their husbands. The message of this teacher was to stress that *qiwamah* is not divine-sanctioned male control but an ethically based spousal responsibility. However, it is very important to stress here that while the mosque actors are certainly concerned with reforming gender relations within marriage, they are not driven by the goal of gender equality.

The grappling with the relationship between the ethical and legal was also a central concern for the group of Somali female informants in Finland (Al-Sharmani 2015). Again, the central goal of many was not gender equality but reclaiming the ethical and cultivating a pious self, as a pathway to a meaningful and empowered life. For example, a twenty-five year old female informant argued that Muslim spousal roles should not be fixed but be renegotiated as part of a larger religious process of cultivating a spiritually refined Muslim self and to lead a life of *taqwa* (the Quranic concept/term for God consciousness).

In addition, a twenty year old university student critiqued marriage norms in her Somali community that marginalized, in her view, an ethically-grounded Islamic model of marriage. She based this on the Prophet as a role model husband, and drew on key Quranic values and terms that foreground love (*mawada*), compassion (*rahma*),⁴ and reciprocity, the latter value being conveyed by the Quranic description of spouses as being a garment to one another (*libâs*).⁵ Again adopting an ethically-guided Quranic framework, some of these women rejected polygamy and some even inserted stipulations against it in their marriage contracts.

I juxtapose the above-mentioned religious understandings, particularly of Somali women, with the religious discourse emerging from the efforts of a group of Muslim women scholars/activists based in the UK, USA, Egypt, and South Africa. These scholars, through individual and collective efforts, engage systematically with Islamic interpretive tradition to question patriarchal interpretations and to produce new religious knowledge on gender that is grounded in Quranic ethics. The starting point for these scholars is a faith-based position. They believe in the normative role of their religious tradition and they critically engage with it, seeking answers to ethical and hermeneutical challenges from within the tradition. For example, the Egyptian Oaima Abou-Bakr undertakes a genealogical study of the exegetical tradition on *qiwamah* over 10 centuries to deconstruct it as the basis for male authority or privilege (Abou-Bakr 2015). Abou-Bakr also undertakes hermeneutical studies of Quranic verses to shed light on the ethical principles in the text that are the guiding framework for egalitarian gender relations in marriage and family relations, and the relation of these principles to the overall Quranic ethical worldview (Abou-Bakr 2014).

The UK-based Iranian scholar Ziba Mir-Hosseini grapples with the relationship between Quranic ethics and Islamic jurisprudence's formulations of marriage and divorce doctrines (Mir-Hosseini 2013). Mir-Hosseini problematizes jurists' definition of the goal of marriage contracts, which makes sexual relations between the two contracting parties licit. Mir-Hosseini argues that jurists' construction of the marriage contract, its goal, and the particular rights and duties that they privileged, overshadowed the Quran's ethical and central understanding of marriage. Mir-Hosseini points out that juristic construction of marriage contracts stipulated a set of rights for both spouses, some legally enforceable, and others subject only to moral sanctions. The

rights and duties that carried legal weight focused on a husband's duty to provide versus a wife's duty to be obedient, and a husband's right to repudiate or take multiple wives. But the abuse of the right to unilateral repudiation or polygamy, for instance, was merely subject to moral sanction. While this does not mean classical jurists were not concerned about the welfare of women (e.g. they formulated legal checks and balances for husbands' authority and privileges), it resulted in a legal construction of marriage that did not privilege or always reflect the Quranic ethics on marriage and spousal relations.

Sa'diyya Shaikh, the South African scholar, also proposes a rethinking of Islamic law through the lens of Sufi concepts, which are grounded in the Quranic ethical message. Shaikh problematizes religious-based patriarchy through theological concepts such as: the existential and spiritual equality of women and men; spiritual striving and advancement being the locus of human worth rather than gender-based differences or hierarchies; and the ethical and theological incompatibility of patriarchy with the striving of men or women towards the spiritual realization of the latent divine attributes that God has placed in their nature (Shaikh 2015).

Whilst diasporic Somali women, Somali mosque-based reform actors, and the afore-mentioned Muslim women scholars have divergent goals, there are noteworthy overlaps in some of their concerns and religious language. The three groups share common concern regarding the relationship between the ethical and legal in Islamic gender norms. Furthermore, the ethical for the three groups is grounded in the Quran and the Prophetic example. But the divergences between the three groups are also relevant. The women scholars/activists are driven by the questions of regimes of religious authority and knowledge. They are concerned with hermeneutics, and with gender equality and justice from an Islamic perspective. The Somali diasporic mosque imams and program coordinators in Finland are not concerned with reforming the tradition but with individuals, marriages, and families. Still their efforts entail revisiting religious understandings and promoting new understandings and dispositions. The pursuit of an ethical life for individual Somali diasporic women is part of multiple individual paths of seeking meaningful lives within complex structures of power and challenges in transnational social fields.

I interpret the overlapping and traveling ideas that are echoed in the discourses adopted by the three groups as manifestations of "internal interventions" of modern Muslims within their Islamic tradition

(Talal Asad 1986; Amir-Moazami and Salvatore 2003). These interventions are situated within a longer history of internal debates and grappling with the tradition, which has both pre-modern and modern dimensions. For instance, the concern with the relationship between the legal and ethical on the part of the Somali informants in Finland or the transnational Islamic feminism scholars is interconnected with the question of the relationship between *shari'a* and ethics. This issue has been the focus of an important debate since the early history of the Islamic interpretive tradition, as exemplified in the works of medieval religious scholars such as Al-Ghazali and Al-Shatibi (Al-Ghazali 1898; Al-Shatibi 1884). In addition, the modern dimensions of this internal debate have developed (and changed) with the large-scale diversification of the production, dissemination, and contestation of Islamic religious knowledge since the late 19th century and early 20th century and onwards.

V. Conclusion

I presented some reflections on selected diasporic Somali efforts to reform oneself/individuals, marriages, and families through reflective religious knowledge and embodied Islamic piety. I traced the linkages of these processes to the transnational family lives (and their politics) of diasporic Somalis and their engagements with Islamic tradition. I examined how gender-based changes and challenges and the pursuits of empowered and meaningful life (on the part of Muslim minorities in Western societies) are at the heart of these processes. In addition, I explored the overlaps and divergences between the religious engagements of these diasporic Somalis and those of transnational Muslim women scholars who are undertaking similar reform efforts through religious knowledge building.

What needs further exploration are the local/national and transnational dimensions of these diasporic Somali reform efforts. That is, these efforts to cultivate piety and reform marriages and families could be further examined in relation to a modern Somali history in which Islam has been seen as a positive and redeeming aspect of national identity, particularly since the civil war, as well as the complex evolution of this perspective as Islam became politicized both within Somalia and internationally. Also, these Somali pursuits of religious-based reform can be further analyzed in relation to transnational Islam as a contested discourse and normative system that is ever more relevant in the present world.

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Notes

1. This Academy of Finland project (2013–2017) is based at the Department of Social Research, and directed by Marja Tiilikainen. It comprises of three studies. I am the lead researcher of the main four year study titled “Transnational Somali Finnish Families: Discourses and Lived Realities of Marriage.” I work with post-doctoral researcher Abdirashid Ismail. The study researches marriage norms and practices of Somali immigrant families in Finland.
2. This Academy of Finland project (2013–2018) in which I am the principle investigator, is based at the Faculty of Theology at the University of Helsinki.
3. Earlier, while living in the Netherlands, the informant was focused on choosing a spouse who observed outward expressions of piety such as going to mosques, growing a beard, etc. After moving to Britain, gaining religious knowledge, becoming employed and going through a divorce, the informant realized that embodying virtues of love and reciprocity were key Islamic virtues that she wanted in a spouse.
4. *Mawada* and *rahma* are two of the three terms used in the Quran in chapter 30, verse 21, to define the goal of marriage, the third Quranic term being *sakina* (tranquility).
5. This term is used in the Quran in chapter 2, verse 187, in the context of spouses being licit sexual partners to one another. But it also conveys the larger point of the virtue of a relationship of reciprocity between the spouses.

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