Transnational Engagement: Return Migrant Women in Somaliland

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Introduction – Touching upon Return Migration

Amina, 23, was born in the countryside in Somaliland, but grew up in the United Kingdom, living with her aunt and other close relatives since her mother had passed away when she was young and her father had moved to Saudi Arabia for work. She had dreamt of returning to Somaliland for many years in order to reconnect with her country of birth and relatives still living there, with whom she and her family had remained in close contact over the years, mostly through phone calls and remitting financial support on a monthly basis. She wished to see her little cousins in Somaliland to whom she had sent money for dentist appointments, school uniforms and other necessities. Finally, in 2012, she returned to Somaliland on her own after graduating from college, leaving her family back in Europe.

I thought that returning is easy, since these are my people, this is my culture and language. But it's not so easy to be a young woman here; they don't always want to hear you, or even see you. And [at] the same time, everybody sees you and everything you do, and you get easily criticized by the people. It's tough sometimes. I want to make a change. I want to show everybody that a young Somali woman can do everything; she can do business, she can be in politics. We need that too. I plan to open a business soon, importing clothes and things. There's great opportunities here for people like me.

Return migration has become a keen subject of interest, not only in migration studies but in development studies and international relations alike. The focus has mainly been on return migrant contributions to development and peacebuilding. More recently there has been an increased interest in the complex relationship between return migration and conflicts, with notions of return migration in some cases promoting peace and in other instances adding to local tensions and conflict (see Laakso and Hautaniemi 2014; Kleist and Vammen 2012; Vertovec 2009).

The real-life experiences of return migrants have been a lesser point of academic interest, partly due to the long-lived assumption that return migration is a simple act of 'going home' – that upon repatriation the return migrants simply pick up their lives from where they left them prior to emigrating (Van Houte and Davids 2008, 1411; Nyberg-Sørensen, Van Hear and Poul Engberg-Pedersen 2002, 15). This assumption of an uncomplicated and simple act does not take into account the complex nature of return – not only for the individual returning, but also the returnee's familial and social network, as well as the wider community and society.

These overly simplified and straightforward notions have also framed return migration as a largely local process with little reference to transnational social, economic, political or cultural spheres. However, in more recent academic research, return migration has been shown to be an essentially *transnational* practice (Hansen 2013, 145). Diaspora members and migrants in general tend to take part in a multitude of familial, social, economic, religious, political and cultural processes that span national and cultural divides (Levitt and Jaworsky 2007, 130). The Somalilander diaspora is spread across the globe and an individual family might have members on several continents. Despite great distances, familial connections are often close-knit and work as comprehensive support networks for members which are rarely cut off upon return migration. On the contrary, they may become invaluable resources for return migrants when settling into their new surroundings, in finding a home, employment and starting up their social life (Hautaniemi, Juntunen and Sato 2013).

This chapter takes a closer look at one particular group of voluntary¹ return migrants – young professional Somalilander women – and the ways in which these returnees seek to open new social space for themselves in order to be able to take on active economic, political and social roles in their community and in society at large. In other words, this chapter seeks to map out the ways in which young return migrant women situate themselves in their community of return and what kind of agency are they able to claim for themselves through these positionings. The practices of return are often transnational in nature as the returnees pool their economic and social resources from their transnational networks to support their aspirations. Since these practices can often involve breaking with established norms and praxes, and even active resistance, they can cause societal frictions with a potential for opening new spaces of agency for other groups in the community as well. These can include the local youth and women, in particular.

1 As opposed to involuntary or forced return, that is not undertaken by the individual voluntarily.

This chapter is based on a seven-month ethnographic field research period in Somaliland in 2012, which included 24 interviews with a total of 28 interlocutors. The interviews comprised both individual and group interviews with different groups of return migrants and locals alike (Sato 2013). This research material has been further complemented with the author's participation in two subsequent projects, the European Return Fund research project 'Return migration to Somalia and Iraq' (Hautaniemi, Juntunen and Sato 2013), and the book project 'Diasporas, Peacebuilding and Development in the Horn of Africa' (Laakso and Hautaniemi, 2014), as well as interview material from a commissioned study conducted for the International Solidarity Fund (ISF) in fall 2014 (Sato and Hussein 2014).

A Land of Opportunities and Deep Divisions

The return of young Somaliland women today is taking place in a highly transnationalized society undergoing rapid economic, social and political change. Somaliland, the self-declared and unrecognized state in North-western Somalia has enjoyed relative peace and stability over the past two decades despite the prolonged civil war and conflict experienced in other parts of Somalia (Hautaniemi, Juntunen and Sato 2013; Lewis 2008). Somaliland is also a society highly influenced by migration – emigration and return migration – both socially and economically. The economy of Somaliland is highly dependent on diaspora remittances, which comprise up to 40 per cent of the annual income of urban households, and diaspora contributions to many basic services such as education, electricity, health care, garbage collection and telephone services (IBRD 2012, 44).

While the government has been relatively successful in fostering security and stable administration in a volatile region, the society suffers from social tensions, stark inequalities on different levels and hindrances to economic development. These on-going dynamics can be seen in the long-term breakdown of social cohesion and with “the differences between genders, classes and population groups diversifying into multifaceted and unequal social relationships” (Hautaniemi, Juntunen and Sato 2013, 53). The youth of Somaliland, and especially young women, still have a somewhat narrow space for social agency. Until quite recently women, especially young women, have had very few ascribed roles in public and institutional life within the society. Nowadays there are some female public figures, but nearly all of them are older women.

In the context of Somaliland, ‘youth’ does not necessarily refer to a legally under-aged person as one is generally considered to be part of the category until marriage which is the main signifier of adulthood in Somaliland; once

married both men and women take on new familial and public roles accompanied by different rights, entitlements and responsibilities. Therefore, youth in Somaliland incorporates a large number of people who may already have a degree and can be working professionals, but who lack many of the public roles and opportunities they may have learned to associate with adulthood while living in the diaspora (see Hautaniemi, Juntunen and Sato 2013).

The In-betweeners

Previously, most return migrants in Somaliland have been older men (Hansen 2008), but nowadays there are an increasing number of young migrant women returning as well. The diaspora and return migrants are vital for the national economy and return migrants form the highly visible social and political elite of the society (see Hautaniemi et al. 2013; Hansen 2008). They are closely involved in local politics, hold many central positions and lead some of the largest local businesses. Those belonging to the younger generation of return migrants have largely built up their expectations and subsequent strategies for return based on these experiences of former returnees. Young professional women return for various reasons: they wish to gain work experience, to reconnect with their former homeland and relatives, and to contribute to the state-building process in Somaliland. Often return is motivated by a combination of all of the above-mentioned reasons.

Many of these young returnees may find professional success upon return, but they also struggle to find their place within the society and to become accepted by locals who often view them as 'too Westernized' or as 'outsiders' of sorts – leading the return migrants to find themselves in the anomalous position of being an insider and an outsider at the same time. They speak the language and have valued the Somali culture in the diaspora, but are still perceived as foreign and strange. Their positioning in the community is further juxtaposed by their transnational links, professionalism and resources, which position them at the top of the society as privileged members of the elite, while their perceived outlandishness can push them to the bottom of the community, with their being seen as having 'abandoned their culture' or not being 'proper Muslims'. It is telling that even those return migrants who resettled in Somaliland *years* ago and have built their lives there are generally referred to as 'diaspora' by both locals and other returnees.

When I came here, I couldn't understand why the women were so horrible to me, why people were so mean to me, but [now] I understand perfectly well. They look at me and they think, 'You're the one that got

away; you're the one that had the options, the alternatives, and still has [them], and you want to come here and work and get a job. You'll get paid more in a month than I do in a year. You're just rubbing it in our face, the fact that you can fly out at any time. Why are you here? To mock us?"

Being an 'in-betweeners' is a highly precarious position for these young Somali returnee women. The strong urge they felt to prove to themselves and to others that they do indeed belong in Somaliland was also reflected in how they expressed themselves in interviews: it often required several informal discussions before they were able to discuss the hardships and prejudices they had experienced. Initially many wanted to emphasize their contributions to the society and to the development of the local community through their business and involvement with charities, rather than talk about how they were shunned by locals and found it difficult to find any local non-diaspora friends. Indeed, many return migrants exclusively socialize with other return migrants and expats working in the development aid sector and mainly visited 'diaspora' cafes and restaurants, which were owned and mostly frequented by other return migrants and visiting diaspora members. Gaining the trust of these 'in-betweeners' was a long-term engagement, but once attained the interviewees were willing to share in-depth insights into their, at times difficult and trying, experiences as return migrants.

The Returnee's Burden to 'Bring Development'

Another contradiction experienced by the returnees was related to the expectations they faced from the local community. The local community in Somaliland often holds high expectations of return migrants in terms of financial assistance to family members, support for charities, job creation and contributions to development. Many young return migrant women find these, at times unrealistic expectations, personally exasperating, as they experience difficulties in meeting the demands of relatives and the local community.

Return migrants are expected to 'bring something back' to the community, not to return 'empty-handed'. They are expected first and foremost to financially support their family and extended network of relatives – to invest in their cousin's business idea and help their friend build a house for his mother. Overall, the return migrants are all thought to be well-educated with a lot of work experience, and therefore to have something to contribute (Hansen 2008, 1118). For young female returnees fresh out of college or their first jobs in the

diaspora, the situation was quite different from that of many of the previous returnees, especially the older male returnees, who might be better connected locally and might have more savings to return with. This was not usually the case for younger female returnees, who might have arrived with just one suitcase and their professional degree, holding high hopes of being able to utilize their Western education for the good of Somaliland and their own careers. Not being able to contribute financially to the local community immediately upon return already put them in a disadvantaged position in the eyes of many locals. Local relatives might say that they should have stayed in the diaspora, at least then they would have been able to contribute to the wellbeing of the extended family by remitting financial support.

Practices of Resistance and Disruptive Processes

I used to ask my family, 'How do they know I'm not from here?'; and they said, 'It's your walk'; because I don't stare at people, I just go straight to where I'm going; I don't give a lot of eye contact. So, no matter how much you try to look like them or act like them, they will always spot you out, regardless. So it's difficult.

Extensive re-assimilation or reintegration is usually not even an option for the young return migrant women, as they deviate from the local norms not only in terms of behaviour, attitudes and practices, but also physically, such as in gestures, speech and clothing. Commonly, return migrant women are recognized on the street by their way of walking or dress alone and are at times subjected to public heckling. Many young return migrant women felt that they stand apart from return migrant men, or older female returnees, and felt that it was not as easy for them to re-assimilate into Somaliland society and, for instance, to take on established gender roles. Of course, no form of return migration should be overly simplified, and it should not be assumed that return migration is a straightforward process for men or older women either.

Despite experienced difficulties, many young professional returnee women have become successful in working life, where they are often employed in INGOS, as entrepreneurs or as CEOs of their own NGOs. And despite experiencing the status of 'an outsider' to some extent, they do experience differing degrees of belonging as well, although this belonging is often *transnational* in nature (see De Bree et al. 2010). They may have a fragmented sense of belonging – and not belonging – to several places simultaneously. One returnee

described how she feels more like a Somalilander when she visits her previous home in the United Kingdom and more like Brit when she is in Somaliland. She described herself as being “sometimes a Brit and sometimes a Somalilander and sometimes something in between”.

This notion of transnational belonging and experienced difficulties in re-integrating forces the returnee women to employ alternative ways of finding their place within the society – ways that do not require them to give up their established self-identifications. As this means going against some norms and traditional practices, these women’s attempts to find their place in society can lead them to either willingly or unwillingly take up practices of resistance. For instance, by using her transnational networks to find a high-paying job with a UN agency, which subsequently makes her a supervisor or boss to local male employees, a young woman might challenge traditional gender roles. Similarly, by renting a house from a diaspora friend, she might be able to live in a house alone, something traditionally unheard-of for unmarried women in Somaliland. Indeed, return migrant women often make use of their transnational resources, be they social or economic, to make their way in society.

These practices of resistance are by no means always successful – a woman can become completely rejected by local employees at the workplace, or be forced to move due to being constantly jeered at by neighbours and regarded as a prostitute just for living alone – but slowly return migrant women have also been able to open new spaces for agency. Some women also express this as an outspoken goal for their stay in Somaliland. They have been especially successful as entrepreneurs and revitalizers of the Somali culture by organizing book fairs and other popular cultural events. While these practices are not necessarily intentionally transformative in nature, they can nevertheless have wider ramifications as they challenge established social structures, including gender, class / clan and generational as well as familial relations (see Guarnizo 1997). For the local youth, return migrant women are somewhat contentious and contradictory figures as they are simultaneously despised, admired, coveted, emulated and envied. As return migration of young women becomes more and more common and the lives of these women begin to intersect more often with local youth and the community at large, the consequences of these practices of resistance and frictional processes may become more evident and consequential.

Modern Change-making or Opportunistic Tribalism?

While most return migrants tend to emphasize that they do not identify strongly with clan and tribe, and with many young return migrants claiming

to consider the whole clan system to be 'outdated' and 'unnecessary', the realities are often experienced differently on the ground. The clan system is still of importance in Somalia in general, and especially so in Somaliland, which has traditionally had stronger pastoral-clan ties compared to the more sedentarily inclined South-Central Somalia (Lewis 2008).

Many of the interviewed young return migrant women stated that they were not interested in tribalism. They explained that, coming from abroad with education and knowledge, they represented modern and democratic thinking, and expressed the desire to educate the locals to leave tribalism behind and to focus on merit and professionalism instead. A common narrative among young women was that upon arrival in Somaliland they had planned to keep their clan-identity a complete secret from everyone so as not to support the clan system. As one returnee woman said:

Once I came here, everybody kept asking me all the time: what is your clan, what is your clan? And I would never tell them; I kept that a secret; I did not want to tell [them]. But they would keep asking, always asking the same thing: what is your clan? When I would not tell them, they would try to guess and to ask other people who know me. I didn't want to tell, even though I am of a dominant clan here. But of course eventually they found it out somewhere. They always do. And when they did, they came to tell me: oh you are my sister, or: yes, I am your brother. They always find out, there is no way to hide [your] clan here.

At the same time, despite being critical of the local clan-based social system, many young return migrant women also rely on their clan networks to provide them with support. The same practice is common among all return migrant groups. Though none of the interviewed young return migrant women initially offered this information, it became clear that many, though not all, had had to rely on their clan relations to find employment or had used their familial connections to help their business or NGO. One explained how she had tried for months to find a job in one of the ministries but could not even manage to get a job interview. After trying on her own, she contacted an older male relative living abroad. The minister heading the ministry in question happened to belong to the same sub-clan as she did, and soon after she had contacted her relative, she managed to secure a position at the ministry – with no job interview required. She stated that she had not initially wanted to use her connections, which she knew would land her the job, but had wanted to get the job based on her merits. Since this had turned out to be impossible, and on her own she could not manage to meet the minister to explain her qualifications, she had relied on her transnational familial network instead. In her interview she did

not bring up the topic of how she found her job, and initially would have rather passed on the subject completely once it came up after several detailed questions about her job searching phase.

Another return migrant woman has a successful 'bag business' in Hargeisa, a popular type of import concern among Somalilander return migrants, especially women. They are usually clothing or accessories stores in which the merchandise is imported from Dubai or London by the owner on a small scale, sometimes even in suitcases. Hence the local name of 'bag businesses' for these kinds of enterprises. This type of import business highlights the transnational nature of the lives of return migrants as the owners tend to use their international connections to find goods and travel abroad regularly to stock their stores. They sell fashionable Dubai-made *abaya* dresses, make-up, perfume, scarves and the like. The owner of this particular 'bag business' store admitted, after discussing the ins-and-outs of her business, that the most important pre-requisite for her success had been that members of her clan are in control of the harbour in the port town of Berbera. This meant that she could import her goods swiftly and very inexpensively, and this gave her an edge over her competition among the local clothing stores. Others might have to pay high bribes or wait long periods of time for their merchandise to be processed at the harbour customs.

The kind of 'tribal nepotism' described in the two cases above, is without a doubt commonplace in Somaliland, which is traditionally more clan-centred than the South-Central parts of Somalia (Lewis 2008). Interviewed locals explained that unless they know to which clan a newcomer returnee belongs, they feel that they cannot trust them or 'really get to know them'. So while many young return migrant women wanted to find their place in the society based on their professionalism and other merits, they found themselves unable to do so. Instead they had to rely on their tribal, often transnational networks, to secure positions and opportunities. In doing so, they had to admit to the act of 'practicing clan', so-called, (see Lykke 2010, 73) for their own benefit, thereby reinforcing rather than renegotiating these social meanings.

Reluctant and Reactionary Revolutionaries?

Return migrants in Somaliland, young and old, men and women, stated that return migration is easiest for older men and most difficult for young women. According to them, older men usually found it relatively easy to find a 'natural' place within the community and society. They were perceived as being more easily accepted professionally, their international experience was valued, and they were seen to bring contributions to the community. This is, of course, a

simplification of sorts, as not all return migrant men were successful in their repatriation at all, but it was, nevertheless, how many young return migrant women felt.

Old returnees are known or maybe their father was famous to the community and has social status so they reintegrate in the community, but for us as young generation we face a lot of problems; we have to prove ourselves.

What is interesting here is the generational gap, the difference in perceived reception between older and younger return migrant women. Older women often returned with their families, or having left their adult children abroad to finish their studies or start their careers, and were therefore seen by locals to have returned for all the 'right reasons': to reconnect and assist relatives, to help local charities and to be motivated to become a 'real' Somalilander again after having spent years abroad. The young professional return migrant women, on the other hand, were frequently remarked to be 'selfish' in their motivations for return. Young returnees recounted that locals claimed they were in direct competition with them for higher-paying jobs, were not interested in assimilating into local customs and held on too tightly to their 'foreign ways'.

At the same time though, while the local youth may see return migrant women as competition in the job market and they may be chastised for 'not being good Muslims', they are also idolized, emulated and envied by local young people, and are also perceived as 'modern', 'international' and 'forward-thinking'. Many of the local youth wish to associate themselves with the 'diaspora lifestyle' – emulating return migrant women down to the dress style and way of talking, both easily recognizable among locals. Some return migrants have capitalized on this and cater to their needs by setting up boutiques with distinct 'diaspora fashion'. This admiration and emulation does not stop at the surface – many young locals become interested in other issues perceived as being 'diaspora' as well, such as women's careerism, women's rights and the right to participate in public life. How deep this influence may be or become is not yet clear, but it is apparent that it is not just people who move transnationally; ideas and attitudes move along with them.

Engagement as the Political

The transformative potential of young women's return migration to Somaliland remains an open question, but it is clear that the practice does hold a possibility

for change – and not only for the gender order, but other social orders and hegemonic practices as well. Increasingly, many young Somali diaspora women are showing an interest in the idea of return and, in fact, many are already returning or practicing ‘circular return’. Whatever the potential there may be in this quite commonly circular type of movement of young, professional and socially engaged women, it seems to be emerging within the transnational sphere.

The ability of these women to utilize different economic, cultural, familial and social networks and resources is rather extraordinary. While almost all voluntary return migrants in Somaliland seem to possess and make use of their networks to some extent, it is the resourcefulness of these women in seizing opportunities in every direction that is remarkable. They not only go to where the opportunities and resources lie, but they also work actively to transform and move transnational resources to their benefit, to wherever they choose to live and work – and in doing so, create new opportunities and openings for others as well. This simultaneous engagement with the local and the transnational, bridging the two, is an interesting avenue of activities of these transnational actors. By acting when and where they can, in NGO’s, businesses and cultural affairs, these women are forging ‘political niches’ in the un-political, and expanding local views on roles and agency.

At the same time though, many young return migrant women also rely on traditional tribal networks to find opportunities. While many of them criticize tribalism as an ‘outdated system from the past’, they may at the same time take advantage of it, like any other resource at hand, to gain positions through arrangements that they themselves categorize as nepotistic tribalism. In making use of these clan networks, they could be seen to be enforcing the very structures they often claim to oppose.

Some return migrants are not as critical towards the clan system to begin with, and may view criticism of it as Western cultural imperialism or a lack of understanding of how tribalism can provide social protection for some vulnerable groups. All in all, though, the great majority of the returnees interviewed by the author discussed the clan system with a rather critical undertone. The returnee women do not have the luxury of choosing how they are perceived by locals. When looking for a job, does the young woman emphasize her education or mobilize clan networks to obtain employment? Do employers see her first and foremost as a woman, a returning diaspora member, a member of an important clan, or something else? Or perhaps all of these simultaneously? Does she herself identify with and solidify these categories, or try to (re)negotiate their social meanings?

Overall, what is not clear is whether return migrant engagements will continue to expand and grow in the future, as many of these women do

become frustrated with the limited options of operating outside the socially assigned avenues of the third sector, often under the auspices of international actors. One could question whether such engagement has real meaning, if it does not provide women with a validation more official in nature. As long as women hold very few posts in official politics, governance or religion, can one talk about full participation? Certainly many young return migrant women would say no, they are still a far cry from full participation in public life.

The feelings experienced by the returnees of constantly 'fighting against the odds', leads many to seek better opportunities elsewhere. Of all the return migrant women interviewed by the author, none claimed to have a plan to stay in Somaliland permanently, even though many stated that to have been their original goal prior to or directly upon return. Some wanted to leave completely, while others wished to find their own way of moving circularly between Somaliland and another country or countries. Some returnees stayed for a longer period of time, even several years, while other re-emigrated after being in Somaliland for only a month or a few. Only one interviewed returnee woman offered not being able to find employment as her primary reason for wanting to re-emigrate. Others gave reasons such as 'not being able to change anything', 'feeling tired of always being diaspora', 'feeling frustrated and angry all the time' or 'having nothing beside work here'. One professional return migrant in her twenties fantasized bringing about change by starting a Facebook campaign for women's mass return:

I want to have thousands and thousands of Diaspora women return to Somaliland on the exact same day, for all of them to show up at Egal [airport in Hargeisa, Somaliland]. They will be smart women, doctors, lawyers, business people, everything. All of them arriving at the same time. So then they won't be able to ignore us, even if they wanted to, because then we won't be just like a needle in a hay stack, we will be the hay stack too, you see.

Amina, the returnee from United Kingdom in her twenties, who was introduced at the beginning of this chapter, came to the same conclusion as the other interviewed returnees. Despite originally having high hopes for her return, she decided not to stay in Somaliland permanently. She was, however, able to set up a successful business of her own in Hargeisa, and had grown closer to her local relatives. She also had many friends in the returnee-diaspora circle, but was unable to befriend locals. She expressed feeling disappointed about having to 'represent the diaspora' on a daily basis, and would have preferred to represent herself instead.

Indeed, it seems that though in our transnational and globalized world people may move with increased freedom and transform their multiple identities with amazing flexibility as they cross borders, external labels or identification marks are still given easily. Negotiating these externally assigned labels, such as 'outsider' or 'diaspora', might be quite a task, or even a burden, for an individual returnee, but each negotiation may have at least a micro-level effect on social norms and praxes. The labels related to clan and tribalism seem to be tied especially tight in Somaliland, and there is less space to negotiate these as they are also closely related to different entitlements, power and responsibilities. However, even these are by no means unchanging in nature and naturally evolve along with the people and the communities.

Time will show whether young women's return migration will fulfil the transformational potential that is visible as of now. One might easily suggest that since the experienced difficulties are pushing the returnee women to either re-emigrate or take on circular migration, there is no meaningful or lasting effect from their perhaps temporary return. And yet, incremental change is already taking place. The local community, especially the youth and women, are influenced by the returnees. Moreover, Somaliland society at large is affected by their activities. New business models have sprouted, cultural life has been reinvigorated and civil society revitalized.

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