

# Reflections from the field: Entering the Women's World

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The entire country is run according to the *qaat* delivery schedule. *Qaat*, a leafy green stimulant recently banned in the UK, is delivered via truck three times a day from Ethiopia. The arrival of the trucks are sounded by a distinctive *toot-toot-toot* of the horn; children imitate it, women roll their eyes in disgust, and men laugh. Some men begin their day with a few sprigs on the bus, others wait for the capital city's daily siesta from twelve to four pm to chew, many sit all day in one of the hundreds of *qaat* stalls lining the city streets, and some stay up all night chewing with their friends.

On the surface, Somaliland is run by men and, according to many, their chewing schedules. This of course is not to say that all men chew; there is a fierce debate surrounding Islamic morality and health issues stemming from consumption of *qaat*. Many of my male contacts deride chewing, and, of course, some women chew, just not in public.

I knew upon embarking on my fieldwork the daily schedule of city life in Hargeisa was determined by *qaat*, or as many prefer to point out, the prayer schedule. I also knew that a majority of men chewed the bitter leaf throughout the day, and as a stimulant, meeting and speaking with men would be fairly easy. Not to mention the twenty plus men a day who call out to me, slowly drive their cars beside me as I walk, and the students who want to practise the English they recently learned (stemming from insults on the television to greetings learned in class). The real challenge is not being one of the only visible foreigners in Hargeisa, dealing with my many layers of clothing, or trying to navigate my world in Somali; the challenge has been following a commonly referenced onion analogy and peeling away the layers of society to access the intimate relationships of women.

My research is focused on the intimate lives of

Somalis and what that intimacy is "doing" in society. I am exploring the ways in which individuals negotiate morality within intimate relationships between families, the community, God, and between men and women. To understand the intimate lives of individuals I developed methods to enter the women's world and explore potentially sensitive topics with both men and women.

It's still early days of my fieldwork, but through



finding a routine the doors are slowly opening. People are recognising me from when I lived here in 2010 and visited in 2013, and the people I encounter on a daily basis have stopped asking me the question "when are you leaving?" because most foreigners are NGO workers, shuttled around in big cars who come for a few weeks then take their "R&R" outside of Somaliland. People have accepted that I ride the bus and walk freely around town. They have begun to protect me from the pestering gang of nine-year-olds who throw stones at me like I am a goat, and then, when I turn the corner, sheepishly ask, "lacag? Lacag?" or, "money? Money?"

I have established a routine that involves visiting the same women selling fruit and vegetables in the market, studying henna and Somali cooking at a nearby beauty salon, teaching basic writing and English, visiting the gym during women's hours, and now, sipping tea and having meals in the homes of



the friends I have made. It is in such spaces that the women I have met share intimate details of their lives and similarly probe into mine.

The moment I step off the bus and walk to the market people stare and gossip about me. It's been difficult accepting the amount of gossip but I'm learning not to take things personally. Luckily, the gossip chain has also spread my Somali nick-name, *Kahaa*, around the market. *Kahaa* means shining and brightness, both referring to my character and the fact that as a foreigner I "get red and sweaty." The women call "*Kahaa*" to their stalls asking endless questions as I bargain for my fruit and vegetables.

I'm learning to put my ingredients to good use in a cooking course with 15 other girls. All the girls are secondary school age but most have never been to school. The course is taught at a nearby beauty salon and the girls lessons are subsidised by a local youth NGO. We are taught to salt our food according to "our husbands' tastes" (or potential husbands) and the girls are constantly battling and crying over the teacher's insistence that they remove their hijabs (here understood to be the more "tent-like" dress) so they can safely cook.

Many of the girls also take henna classes with me. We've learned various designs and have "practicals" where we learn how to mix henna and then draw on each other's hands and feet. One day a friend in the class lifted up her dress, pulled down her underskirt, and lifted her sagging stomach to show me a fresh caesarean section scar. During labour she had to have an emergency caesarean, without pain medication, and her baby was pulled out already dead. She matter of factly told the story while allowing me to explore her scar tissue, her stretch marks, and her ripped belly button. It was only last week as I was leaving that she pulled my ear to her mouth and whispered that she was pregnant again. I worry because 98% of women here have undergone infibulation, the cutting of the clitoris, the inner and outer labia and then are sewn completely closed. One friend said her "hole was the size of a grain of rice" and when I asked about child birth she said "the woman is only fully cut open when the child's head is coming out."

Ideas of beauty appear to be changing, not only have rates of infibulation dropped in the last five years influenced a new government policy but women



from abroad are returning and bringing with them beauty standards unheard of here, including "losing the fat!" The women I encounter at the gym during women's hours (8am-4pm) are consumed with losing weight and their stomachs. They exercise for hours and have group exercise sessions to "lose the baby weight." In addition to ideas about size women have begun using dangerous skin whitening creams. Although these creams are common in many parts of the world they are relatively new to Somaliland. One contact told me "the educated women know of the health dangers and don't use these creams;" however from my teaching I've seen its use spans across all knowledge levels.

I'm teaching English to university students and at the same time I'm teaching writing and basic Somali to the girls in the cooking and henna classes. The disparity in knowledge is similar to other places but considering that the education system only resumed after the civil war ended in 1991 the gap in knowledge is sometime jarring. The girls in my writing class don't know how to write their names or the Somali alphabet. Many of them are in the cooking and henna courses as preparation for

marriage; it is not uncommon for girls in secondary school to marry 50, 60, even 70 year old men as second and third wives. In contrast the women in my university English course still struggle but engage in debates about whether or not a woman can be president or a judge (a resounding "no" to both).

Some of these women have invited me to their homes for tea or a meal but I'm still developing my relationships with women across different sectors of society. I'm still slowly being let into their intimate world of gossip, clannism, anxiety, and sometimes sex. I'm still developing common themes and threads that I could have never planned for in London. It is over the next year that I hope to probe deeper into the ways in which these women and the men in their lives balance intimacy and morality in their day to day.

