

Somali American Female Refugees Discuss Their Attitudes toward Homosexuality and the Gay and Lesbian Community

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Abstract

Minnesota is home to the largest population of Somalis in the USA – most arriving as refugees from the civil war in Somalia. As Somali Americans adjust to life in the USA, they are likely to undergo shifts in their belief systems – including changes in their attitudes toward gays and lesbians. We examined the attitudes of 29 Somali American women in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area toward homosexuality via face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. Transcripts were translated, transcribed, and analysed using an approach informed by grounded theory. Three major themes were identified: (1) Islamic prohibitions against homosexuality; (2) homosexuals exiled to a hidden community; and (3) community members exploring tolerance. Participants’ attitudes toward homosexuality were heavily influenced by religious doctrines and cultural contexts. This is the first known study in the USA of Somali American attitudes toward gays and lesbians. As people mass migrate from nations with negative attitudes toward homosexuality to countries with more progressive attitudes toward varied sexual orientations, refugee attitudes about homosexuality will undergo change. Through research and education, we can better understand how to increase tolerance toward and opportunities for visibility among gay and lesbian refugees throughout the diaspora.

Keywords: homophobia, LGBT, African sexuality, religion, beliefs

Introduction

After Christianity, Islam is the world's second largest religion, with an estimate of 1.6 billion Muslims worldwide. Due to recent demographic and migration patterns leading to the widespread distribution of African Muslim refugees throughout the world, it has been predicted that by 2050 the number of Muslims will grow to approximately 30% of the world's population (2.76 billion). In North America, Muslims are projected to double from 0.9% of the population in 2010 to 2.1% by 2050 (Desilver and Masci 2017).

The official state religion of Somalia is Islam with almost 100% of the Somali population being Sunni Muslim. In 1991, the centralised government of Somalia collapsed and civil war broke out, forcing a large segment of Somalia's residents to flee their home nation for fear of violence, starvation, and death (Putnam and Noor 1993). Displaced Somalis spread throughout Somalia but also crossed borders migrating to other parts of Africa (e.g., Ethiopia, Kenya, Djibouti, and Yemen), the European Union, Norway, and the United States of America (USA). Between 1990 and 2015, the total number of people born in Somalia, but living outside the country, more than doubled from 850,000 to 2 million. Estimates indicate that the number of Somalis living in the USA has grown exponentially since 1990 – from 2,500 to 140,000/150,000 in 2015 (Connor and Krogstad 2016). The USA is now home to about 7% of the world's Somali migrant population (Connor and Krogstad 2016), with the largest population (nearly one in three) living in Minnesota (United States Census Bureau 2010). Most Somalis arrived in Minnesota within the last 20 years, primarily as refugees from camps in the neighbouring countries of Kenya and Ethiopia (Abdi 2015).

The process of Somali people leaving their war-torn homes, spending years in refugee camps, and resettling in the USA has parallels with the experiences of other refugee groups settling in the USA over recent decades. Migrants and refugees acculturate while simultaneously maintaining close ties to their native culture (Abdi 2014, 2015; Birman and Trickett 2001; Ghaffarian 1987). Since Somali culture is generally more sexually conservative than contemporary US culture (Connor et al. 2016b), these sexuality-related cultural differences likely necessitated additional adaptations by Somali families.

Homosexuality in Somalia and the Somali Diaspora

Religious beliefs frame the cultural context for attitudes toward homosexuality within Somali society. The Qur'an is usually interpreted as denouncing homosexuality as a sin (Dialmy 2010) and incurs the strongest condemnation of all prohibited forms of sexuality in the Qur'an (Bouhdiba 1985). Similar to other Muslim nations, homosexuality remains illegal in Somalia; punishment ranges from a three-year imprisonment to flogging, stoning or death (Bruce-Jones and Itaborahy 2011, Carroll and Itaborahy 2015). Enforcement of such laws regarding homosexuality differs considerably throughout the country.

The existence of gay and lesbian communities in Somalia is not well documented in academic literature. Alternative sources have documented male-to-male sexual relationships in Somali prisons (Epprecht 2008), the emergence of 'Queer Somalis' (a Somali gay rights group), and the existence of coalitions between scholars and activists who wish to protect gay and lesbian rights (Epprecht 2008; Jama 2015). We identified four websites featuring stories on the plight of Somali gays and lesbians; there were others, but they frequently disappeared – some

due to threats against those running the sites (Jama 2015). A published book recounts the narratives of 27 gay, lesbian, and transgender Somalis (Jama 2015).

Research examining Somali attitudes toward homosexuality is virtually non-existent. We found one qualitative study examining the mental health attitudes of Somali immigrants in New Zealand which found (as a side note) that Somali immigrants either did not believe there were many Somali homosexuals and/or they believed that gay Somalis were mentally ill (Guerin et al. 2004).

Acceptance of Homosexuality within the United States

Both legally and medically the USA has shifted over the past four decades to a greater acceptance of homosexuality. Until 1973, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) identified homosexuality as an ‘illness’ in its diagnostic manuals – adding to stigmatisation and discrimination (APA 1968; De Block and Adriaens 2013). This removal signified a shift in the psychiatric community toward depathologising homosexuality in the USA. Citizens of the USA are more likely now than ever to support basic civil rights and freedoms of expression for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer citizens. Just 27% of a sample of USA citizens reported acceptance of same-gender-sexual behaviour in 1996 while 60% approved in 2015 (McCarthy 2015). Laws and policies are often a reflection of these beliefs; in June 2015, the Supreme Court ruled same sex marriage legal in all states (Chappell 2015). Thus, Somali refugees find themselves in an environment quite different from their own regarding gay and lesbian rights and values.

The current study is derived from a larger research study – the Somali Women’s Initiative for Sexual Health (SWISH), whose aim was to explore sexual values, attitudes, and behaviours among Somali female refugees in the USA (Connor et al. 2016b). This paper explored attitudes of Minnesota Somali-born women toward gay and lesbian USA citizens and Somalis. Many of the women expressed strong feelings about what they described as the cultural acceptance of homosexuality in the USA; we explored their personal and cultural attitudes, values, and experiences with these issues.

Method

SWISH was a collaboration between the University of Minnesota Medical School’s Program in Human Sexuality; the Department of Community Psychology, Counseling, and Family Therapy at St. Cloud State University; and the Immigrant Women & Children Development Center, a Somali-led community-based organisation aiming to better the lives of Somali women and their families. A 14-member community advisory board, comprised of experts in Somali culture, HIV/STI prevention, and immigrant or women’s health (including eight community leaders of East African heritage) informed decisions made by the research team.

Community buy-in was particularly challenging given the focus of the interview on the sensitive topics of HIV prevention and sexuality, including homosexuality. Using a community-engaged research model allowed us to facilitate a culturally-appropriate and meaningful study. University researchers partnered with a Somali-based community organisation, regularly consulted with the 14-member community advisory board, and employed Somali American women for interpreting and translating, recruiting, and interviewing roles on the project. Somali

American team members were invaluable in successfully gaining community support and correcting numerous community misinterpretations of the project (e.g., rumours that we were studying Somali lesbians). The research protocol was reviewed and approved by the University of Minnesota's Institutional Review Board, Human Subjects' Protection (reference #1002S77212).

Participants

We recruited and interviewed 34 women through a combination of convenience and snowball sampling, techniques often used for hard to find and/or interconnected populations (Schutt 2004). Based on the recommendations of our community advisory board, only women, not men, were interviewed. Twenty-nine interviews were analysed for the current study; four interviews were pilots and one audio recording was missing part of the interview. The primary recruiter, a bilingual Somali-born woman, went to public spaces frequented by Somali women and approached strangers and women she knew. Women were also recruited in-person at a college student organisation, parent-education classes conducted by our community partner, by participants who told their friends about the study, and by members of the study's community advisory board. Inclusion criteria were Somali ethnicity, age 18-40, and female. Exclusion criteria were unwillingness to discuss personal topics or have the interview recorded.

Procedure

Potential participants met with the interviewer to informally discuss the interview process, learn about the research study, and develop comfort and trust. Each of the participants received a \$30 gift card for their time.

Participants chose the interview location and were interviewed in their homes, in the homes of friends or relatives, or at the offices of collaborating organisations. Before beginning the interview, participants selected the interview language – English or Somali. All interviews were completed in 2011 (February through July); 10 in English and 24 in Somali. The written consent form, with sample interview questions, was offered in English or Somali. If participants could not read (common among Somalis as the written language was not developed until 1972), the interviewer verbally explained and discussed the consent form with participants. Interviews lasted 36-71 minutes and were digitally audio-recorded. The interviewer was a Somali-born woman fluent in English and Somali in her late twenties with a bachelor's degree in community health and some experience interviewing for the U. census. She was trained to conduct the interviews, including how to probe for clarification and deeper responses through role-playing and live supervision of her interviews.

We identified a local medical transcription service that found a skilled translator who translated most ($n = 16$) interviews into English on a digital recorder; the remaining eight interviews were translated by three interpreters unable to commit the time needed to complete all the translations. Interviews were not translated verbatim; rather, words and concepts were translated as close to the original meaning as possible. A bilingual Somali American college student back-translated all interviews and found few corrections were needed. The digitally-recorded English translations were transcribed verbatim by a professional on-line transcription service [verbalink.com].

Measures

The semi-structured interview with prompts was based on the components of the Sexual Health Model. Derived from a sexological approach to education, the model is anchored in a holistic definition of sexual health and includes 10 key components posited to be essential aspects of healthy human sexuality (Robinson et al. 2002). The community advisory board reviewed the interview for cultural considerations and language barriers. For the current study, only questions pertaining to homosexuality (Sexual Health Model Component 2: Culture and Sexual Identity) were analysed and reported:

- (1) What do people in your community think about lesbians, gays, and bisexuals?
- (2) How do others in your community treat them?
- (3) Do you know any gay, lesbian, or bisexual Somalis? How do you know them?
- (4) How would you describe your sexual orientation or identity? To whom are you sexually attracted?

Results of the remaining interview components can be found in Connor et al. (2016a, 2016b).

Narratives around the topic of 'homosexuality' accounted for an average of 7% of each transcript. Participants offered in-depth and sometimes lengthy narratives on the topic. In fact, many participants spontaneously discussed witnessing intimacy between same sex couples in response to other questions. Even though participants were asked about gays, lesbians, and bisexuals, participants most commonly responded with remarks about gays and lesbians.

Relationship between the Research Team and Somali Community

The initiator of this project was a lesbian Somali-born programme/case manager concerned about the impact of increasing HIV rates and lack of condom use among women in the Somali American community. The original design included the intentional recruitment of lesbian and bisexual Somali American women. Before the study was launched, the woman who originated the project left, and another community member, the founder of the Immigrant Women & Children Development Center, took her place as the primary community collaborator. She assisted in the development of every aspect of the research project, including developing objectives and hypotheses, methods, translation, data collection and analysis, the review of findings and conclusions, and the presentation of oral and written presentations of the findings to professional and community audiences.

The exit of our lesbian Somali American partner opened the door for much debate among community advisory board members regarding continued inclusion of a wider range of sexual orientations. Some were against the notion, arguing that including lesbians and bisexuals in our study would alienate the entire Somali American community. Others felt excluding these two groups was discriminatory. Ultimately, we decided that recruitment of Somali American lesbians and bisexual women was not practical given our resources. However, we did not *exclude* them, and we decided to retain the interview questions about participants' attitudes

toward and experiences with gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and 'homosexuality'¹, which formed the basis of this paper.

Data Analysis

We conducted thematic analysis by coding transcripts for themes in NVivo10. Themes were developed without preordained concepts, within the grounded theory tradition, by the second author. Transcripts were reviewed multiple times for sections that pertained to participant attitudes, beliefs, and experiences with gays, lesbians, and bisexuals. Once these sections were identified, line-by-line open coding was used. The second author developed broad categories based on participants' narratives. For each category a descriptive code was written. After codes were defined, the second author coded all parts of the transcript again. To honour a reflexive process, the second author discussed the themes with the community partner to develop a richer understanding of the cultural context. The first author completed further analysis using focused coding to reach data that was more directed, selective, and conceptual (Glaser 1978). Representative quotes were selected to illustrate themes with identifying details omitted to protect participant confidentiality. Descriptive statistics were utilised to describe participant demographics and mean comparisons of age, education level, and years in the USA.

Results

Demographic Information

All participants identified as Somali, Muslim and heterosexual. The average time living in the USA was 12 years ($SD = 4.69$), with a range of <1 to 21. The average reported age was 32 years ($SD = 6.09$), with a range of 20 - 40. Over half were married and one-quarter were single. Two-thirds had at least one child, and two-thirds worked outside of the home. Education levels ranged from no formal schooling to a master's level degree.

Themes

We identified three major themes from our qualitative analysis, each of which is discussed below with supporting quotes, reflection on focused categories within the theme, and previous empirical evidence. Pseudonyms were chosen to represent participants' direct quotes in order to honour confidentiality.

Islamic Prohibitions against Homosexuality

Religiosity is a predictor of attitudes toward homosexuality (Adamczyk 2017; Olson, Cadge and Harrison 2006), and Muslims report higher homonegativity than those identifying with other

¹ Our use of 'homosexuality' references the more globally recognized term, which might be more fluid. Terms such as 'sexual minority' and even the male/female 'gay/lesbian' do not easily translate to some languages, including Somali. We are limited in how we translate terms and, at times, limited to those terms that are more recognizable/legible to the population in question.

religions (Adamczyk 2017; Adamczyk and Pitt 2009). Not surprisingly, study participants believed that homosexuality was unlawful and forbidden within Islam: 'In our religion, lesbians, gays, bisexuals...it's really forbidden. You're not supposed to be gay. You're not supposed to be lesbian. Forget about bisexual' (Binti, age 23). Virtually every participant spoke to this, sometimes condemning those who identified as gay or lesbian as cursed or evil: 'They are people that have the curse from Allah (God) and the person is doing something that Allah is not happy with it' (Roon, age 30). Corroborating research by Bonthuys and Erlank (2012) and Nyanzi (2013), participants explained that homosexuality is prohibited because God created man and woman for the purpose of marriage and procreation. Any sexual relationship outside of this sanctioned, heterosexual model could not be considered:

We are a Muslim community and we don't believe in homosexuality. We do believe that Allah created men and women for a purpose...to reproduce. But Allah doesn't create men and men or women and women to have a family. So, our religion doesn't allow us to engage in homosexual acts... (Timiro, age 36)

Despite the clear tension between Islam and homosexuality, four participants stressed the need to apply humanist beliefs to their view on gays and lesbians: 'The religion doesn't have gays or lesbian...because the religion is against it...That's why Somali people isolate them and they don't like them but as a human being they don't have anything against them' (Xaali, age 36). A few participants noted that while gay men and lesbians must answer to God, human beings cannot judge them, suggesting a more compassionate view. One participant stated: '...religion taught us tolerance' (Abyan, age 35).

Although the mainstream Islamic position on homosexuality may be negative, there is a growing belief that the unlawfulness of homosexuality has been exaggerated and/or misinterpreted. Numerous Islamic scholars have questioned whether the Qur'an has the anti-homosexual sentiments attributed to it and have written reinterpretations of the Qur'an and its teachings (Habib 2008; Hamzic 2011; Jamal 2001; Kugle 2003). Habib (2008) noted that the hadiths (texts used in conjunction with the Qur'an to identify behaviour acceptable for Muslims in all realms of life) that are most cited to condemn homosexuality were of questionable sources. These scholars suggested that persecution of homosexuals is neither explicitly enshrined in the Qur'an, nor is it found in hadiths that are considered authentic in Islamic scholarship. Jamal (2001) examined the story of Lot and discovered same-sex behaviours are barely mentioned in the Qur'an when compared to prohibitions against adultery. Similarly, Habib (2008) argued the word *fahsha*, used in Quranic verse Surat al-Nisa': 20-21, which has been interpreted as implying homosexuality, is really a broader term describing any non-marital sexual activity.

Religiosity is not the only variable associated with intolerance toward homosexuality. Individuals living in survivalist societies (e.g., such as the civil war in Somalia) have been reported to hold more intolerant attitudes about homosexuality than those from countries at peace (Adamczyk 2017; Adamczyk and Pitt 2009). American individuals who had more traditional gender roles and more mental health symptoms were more likely to be homophobic (Grey et al. 2013). Somali culture also operates under a patriarchal belief system with a high level of inequality between female and male achievements (Abdi 2011; Connor et al. 2016a).

Somali American refugees are also more likely to have symptoms of post-traumatic stress and depression likely related to exposure to trauma and torture, poor living conditions in refugee camps, and adjustment to a new culture and language (Kroll, Yusuf and Fujiwara 2011; Matheson, Jorden and Anisman 2008).

Homosexuals Exiled to a Hidden Community.

Our second theme pointed to how participants and the Somali community respond to and interact with gays and lesbians from the Somali community. We found that many participants denied that homosexuals ever existed in Somalia, yet they admitted that ‘...if they exist, they were hiding and nobody knew’ (Timiro, age 36). More women claimed that since immigrating to the USA, they were aware of gay and lesbian Somalis, but this belief rested largely on rumours and assumptions about people based on dress, mannerisms, and daily activities:

I’ve heard of it and I was shown in the Internet one guy...a woman showed him to me and said, ‘He goes to that college and he’s those types of guys’...and another one I was shown on the Internet, a man...I was told that his daughter is one of those girls that marry each other. Those are the two that I’ve seen that people talk about and that I’ve heard about. (Saafi, age 39)

We see girls who dress like guys and act like guys, and guys who’re acting like girls. They dress like girls, they act like girls, they’re soft like girls, they walk like girls. You see these people around the community in the stores, in the malls, in the city. So we do have them. (Gacal, age 37)

Literature suggests that African nations have long denied the existence of homosexuality. Epprecht (2008) argued that the persistent belief in a heterosexual Africa is based on social norms and a colonial ‘overdetermination’ that people of African nations are heterosexual. Ironically, Christian missionaries made concerted efforts to end same-sex relationships and practices in African nations. Epprecht also contends that pervasive homophobia, sexism, and racism made sexual minorities in Africa invisible – even so, a clandestine homosexual culture became more visible as leaders talked publically about homosexual issues and well-designed research on same-sex unions was conducted.

While most study participants believed same-sex behaviour among Somalis developed only after migration to America, not everyone saw it that way. One participant claimed to have heard of ‘hundreds’ of gay and lesbian people in Somalia (Madiino, age 32), and another spoke about an entire community in Somalia nicknamed ‘The Gays’ (Farax, age 38). One participant affirmed, when asked if she believed there were gays and lesbians in East Africa, ‘Oh yeah, everywhere now’ (Leymoon, age 37).

In any case, women maintained that someone who identified as gay or lesbian in the Somali community would not be welcomed, and their family would be ostracised by the larger community:

Oh, wow. It’s definitely a bad thing in our community, in our religion, and if they were to know there was someone who is of that group or those groups, they would definitely be

ostracised. They would be kicked out of the community. They would be just stayed away from as if they had a deadly disease and they would never, ever be looked at the same way before and their family, their mothers, their parents, they would be kicked out of the community as well. It would just be a nightmare (Astur, age 20)

Community isolation of gays and lesbians was enforced in a variety of ways. Many participants said Somalis 'run away' from a gay or lesbian person. Verbal insults and mockery were most often mentioned by participants. Some believed gays and lesbians were at risk for physical harm, although the majority said the danger of a physical attack was more imminent in Somalia than in the USA. All agreed that the USA offers protection (freedom was the term most often used) for the homosexual community in the form of policies or laws:

I witnessed in my own community a gay person who was stoned to death....I mean homosexuals is depend on, where they live, if they live in Somalia yes, they were isolated (quarantined) and they threw stones but if they are living in here (USA) then nobody could do anything to them... (Qamar, age 35)

The penalties for identifying as gay or lesbian may be less harsh in the USA, but participants made it clear that the expectation of exile remains. They asserted that Somali gays and lesbians know of the possible consequences and choose not to disclose their sexual orientation: '...but it is hard for Somali gays to come out the closet and be a part of our community because Somali gays know how Somali people feel about gay people' (Qamar, age 35). Or they self-isolate: 'After he came out of the closet, he never came back to where Somali people hang out at the [university]. So he's not really amongst us anymore' (Astur, age 20). In one unique case, a gay Somali man was open about his sexual orientation, but he tried to protect himself by hiding the fact that he was Somali:

...he's very open about it. Very, very open about it. And most people, he never tells them that he's Somali because he knows...and now it's like a lot of people trying to harm him, and sooner or later he's not going to live here anymore because he knows how our religion really feels about it, and our culture feels about it. (Binti, age 23)

This stigma causes gays and lesbians to conceal their sexuality to avoid family shame (Bonthuys and Erlank 2012; Minwalla et al. 2005), harassment, and violence (Lewis 2014; Minwalla et al. 2005; Zea et al. 2013). Yet, there is also evidence that Muslims may choose to not notice homosexuality within the community; some have theorised that this may be partially due to Sharia law requiring four witnesses in order to accuse someone of homosexuality (Bonthuys and Erlank 2012; Jamal 2001). This disregard may act as a protective factor for Muslim gays and lesbians who wish to remain hidden. One participant acknowledged that Somalis will talk or engage with someone who they believe to be gay (Yaryaro, age 34), insinuating there must be confirmation of a person's sexual orientation in order to shun them. Guerin et al. (2004) found similar beliefs among Somali refugees living in New Zealand. Bonthuys and Erlank (2012) referred to this phenomenon as 'the will to not know.' In our study,

a participant who maintained a friendship with a Somali gay man, although he had not come out to her, exemplified this behaviour:

I heard a rumour that a Somali is gay...and then we became friends...I never ask him questions about his personal life. I respect him, and to be honest he knows about his rumours, it was shame and he doesn't say anything about it. He never discussed or talk about it, which he really is. (Timiro, age 36)

Exile and isolation ensures that Somali community members do not interact with gay and lesbian Somalis, yet personal relationships with Somali gays and lesbians is one factor that could potentially reduce homophobia. Personal relationships with gay and lesbian individuals can affect the homonegative attitudes of people in a positive direction (Grey et al. 2013), even if they are very religious (Adamczyk's 2017). Thus, the hidden nature of homosexuality in the Somali community perpetuates homophobia.

Among participants, there was a distinction between USA-born gays and lesbians (more acceptance) and Somali American gays and lesbians (less acceptance). Muslims tend to be more tolerant of gays and lesbians outside the Muslim religion, less tolerant of those within the religion, and least tolerant of those within the family unit (Bonthuys and Erlank 2012). This familial tension adds to the forced isolation of gay and lesbian Somalis. Isolation can be physical and geographical, but it can also be mental and emotional. Our findings point out the isolation of Somali gays and lesbians, as well as the isolation of their families by the community.

Although participants talked about gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals when speaking in generalities, they most often mentioned gay men when talking about specific instances and individuals. This speaks to the relative invisibility of lesbians (and other sexual and gender minorities) in the Somali community. Muslim lesbians are rarely studied (Bonthuys and Erlank 2012; Siraj 2011; Sullivan and Losberg 2003). A participant discussed Somali attitudes toward lesbianism with a focus on the sexual act, rather than on the complex emotional and mental factors that contribute to relationships:

...for women to be lesbian, [the community] would say hey, what is this woman going to do to the other woman? Eventually they're going to use a dildo, which is sort of similar to the men's part, penis...they look at it as really bad, but not as bad as the gays. (Binti, age 23)

Community Members Exploring Tolerance.

Twelve women expressed differing levels of tolerance toward gays and lesbians ranging from curiosity to acceptance. Participants agreed that same-sex relationships are forbidden by Islam and culturally taboo; however, the range of thoughts and feelings on the subject were more nuanced than a simple regurgitation of norms and expectations. One participant expressed curiosity about homosexual acts and commented that she hears community members questioning aspects of homosexuality as well: 'What made them to be gay or lesbian? I wonder how they feel. I heard those kinds of questions...' (Dheeho, age 21). Curiosity does not signify acceptance, but it may presage a shift in more positive attitudes toward homosexuality.

Seven women expressed compassion toward gays and lesbians from the Somali and broader community. Some felt it was important for Muslims to ‘help’ or ‘advise’ gays and lesbians about their ‘choice’ to live a homosexual life. The debate around homosexuality as a choice is ongoing and contentious, even among USA-born citizens. In the USA, public opinion has changed over time (Pew Research Center 2012), and Muslim organisations around the globe have encouraged Muslims to recognise that homosexuality is not a choice (Jahangir 2016).

Two women shared that they did not believe that homosexuality was innate, yet showed compassion in trying to understand their gay acquaintances and friends:

I believe something happened to them. Sometimes when they were a child, you know. Cause some children get molested... Maybe that can change their identity or maybe that caused them a problem that made them become this way...it’s a devastating thing. It’s very sad that somebody, you know, was tortured. (Xanaan, age 33)

And one of the things he shared with me was...he was born with it... His family could have told him hey, that’s not the right, you’re a man. You’re supposed to go for a woman, and educate him sort of in a way. But I mean, I feel like even that maybe wouldn’t help because he was already kind of, and I can’t say born with it, but almost like something that he got used to from the time he was young. (Binti, age 23)

Others were sanguine: ‘But they are people that are alive – that are happy of what they’re doing. That’s how it is to me’ (Aniso, age 30). A woman who had had gay neighbours in Somalia provided a more sophisticated narrative explaining how attitudes differ and evolve:

As I said, people did not understand before...There’s ignorance everywhere. You can be American and be ignorant about lesbians, so it doesn’t have to be as a Somali. And as I said, if you come from village. And if you come from city, it’s totally different. (Idil, age 31)

One last subtheme that emerged in our examination of tolerance was acceptance, possibly due to acculturation. Two women maintained friendships with USA-born gay men (Binti, age 23; Leymoon, age 37); one of whom laughed ruefully when she recalled how upset she was when she first learned of gays and lesbians in the USA. Another woman claimed that she is now used to homosexuality after having lived in the USA for 11 years (Roon, age 30). Finally, one woman claimed to have no personal issues with gays and lesbians (Madiino, age 32).

Like other immigrants, Somali American refugees living in the USA will differ in the degree to which they maintain Somali cultural values (Connor et al. 2016b; Johnson-Agbakwu et al. 2016). Although some acculturation models see acculturation as a linear process (Berry 1997), others argued that immigrants blend their two cultures (Szapocznik, Kurtines and Fernandez 1980). In Minnesota, the official number of Somali American individuals is over 36,000, though some claim the number may be closer to 70,000 (Yusuf 2012). This large number allows for cultural enclaves, in which integration may be more limited than in smaller

immigrant groups. For example, one-third of Somali American children in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area attend charter schools that are primarily attended by other Somali American children (Boarini 2012). In addition, there are numerous Somali markets, shopping malls, restaurants, and media stations (Yusuf 2012). This may also have impacted the generalisability of our findings. On the other hand, some Somali American individuals incorporate Somali and USA culture into a more bicultural identity – an identity that may lead to greater tolerance toward gays and lesbians. In other minority groups, such as Mexican Americans, higher acculturation levels and contact with gays and lesbians have been associated with more positive attitudes toward gay and lesbian individuals (Herek and Gonzalez-Rivera 2006).

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations of this research should be acknowledged. The sample of 29, derived through convenience and snowball sampling methods, may not be representative of the Somali community in Minnesota or the USA. Possibly, women who agreed to speak to our interviewer held more open views on sexual orientation and sexuality than those who would not volunteer to be in such a study. Our use of a bilingual Somali interviewer both mitigated and added to limitations, as we have discussed in previous papers (Connor et al. 2016a, 2016b). Because studying attitudes toward same-sex relationships was not the primary goal of the study, only four questions were asked, leaving us with less depth than ideal. Participants may have felt it expedient to state the culturally sanctioned belief that homosexuality is unlawful – however reading the transcripts led us to believe the majority of the participants were honest in their reflections.

Only Somali American women were interviewed in this study. We have no way of knowing if Somali American men held different views than Somali American women. In US-born heterosexual populations, men tend to endorse more homophobic attitudes than women (Grey et al. 2013). Most participants also spoke most frequently about gay men; they may have held different attitudes if asked explicitly about lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender persons. Homophobia among Somali Americans may be reinforced by a desire to remain true to one's own cultural values – and resist the (more tolerant) values of the dominant US culture; other research has found Somali boys in California held on to their homophobic views, in part, due to their resistance to mainstream US culture (Mills 2012).

Conclusion

Our study is the first in the USA to address female Somali refugee attitudes toward same-sex relationships and the gay and lesbian community.. Our analysis revealed that religious doctrine prohibited the open expression of homosexual identity and behaviours. Women reported that gay and lesbian Somalis hid their true sexual identity because of their fear of being shunned by the Somali American community. However, even if community members suspected or 'knew' of a person's homosexuality, they continued to interact with them until they had definitive proof of their homosexuality. Some women held more tolerant attitudes toward homosexuality and attempted to understand the experiences of gays and lesbians. Our examination of acculturation theory and homophobia research leads us to hypothesise that future generations

of Somali American youth will have increased exposure to positive reflections of gays and lesbians in popular culture with concomitant increases in progressive attitudes. Additionally, numerous Muslim leaders have been advocating for tolerance and acceptance of gays and lesbians which will likely affirmatively influence community norms toward homosexuality (Jahangir 2016).

Cross-national attitudes toward homosexuality are quite varied (Adamczyk 2017). As people mass migrate from nations with negative attitudes toward homosexuality to countries with more progressive attitudes toward varied sexual orientations, refugee attitudes about homosexuality will likely undergo change. Currently, half of the world's refugees come from Syria, Afghanistan, and Somalia, respectively (Edwards 2016). Over 90% of the population in these countries identifies as Muslim (Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project 2010). Muslim refugees moving into more secular societies that protect gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer rights are likely to experience many of the same attitudes and attitude shifts that our participants reported.

Our research leads us to suggest areas for future work. Education aimed at increasing tolerance toward diversity could be integrated into refugee resettlement programmes. Exploratory studies might usefully focus on the deleterious effects of stigma and discrimination on gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer refugees as they resettle in nations where they are also an ethnic minority. Finally, research on shifting Muslim attitudes toward homosexuality as populations merge due to global migration is an important area of study. Through research and education, we can better understand how to increase tolerance toward and opportunities for visibility among gay and lesbian refugees throughout the diaspora.

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