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Breaking Free from Tradition: Women, National Service and Migration in Eritrea

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Abstract

Drawing from ethnographic research with five young women living in Asmara (Eritrea), this article investigates the intersection between migration aspirations and the desire for gender –and sexual – emancipation. While an increasing amount of studies focuses on the effect of migration on gender roles and sexuality, this article aims to understand the gendered nature of migration aspirations at their outset. After a brief review of the role of women in Eritrean history, I illustrate how limited social and political freedom across the country specifically impacts on young women's education and life trajectories in Eritrea today. Then, through the stories of my research participants, I show that migration is a space not only to imagine alternative futures but also to conceive different forms of womanhood.

Keywords: *women; Eritrea; migration; aspirations; youth; gender roles.*

Introduction

Through the stories of five young women whom I met in Asmara in 2013, this article investigates the intersection between the desire for migration and the desire for gender –and sexual – emancipation. While an increasing amount of studies focuses on the effect of migration on gender roles and sexuality (Mastuoka and Sorensen, 1999; Manalansan, 2006; Ahmadi, 2003; Grabska et al. 2018; Cvajner, 2011), this article aims to understand the gendered nature of migration aspirations at their outset (Grabska et al. 2018). I analyse how non-migrant women are engaged in an active process of waiting (Brun, 2015), as they postpone crucial transitions in their lives, such as marrying and having children, with the hope to leave their country. Migration, here, is a space not only to imagine alternative futures (Bal and Wilems, 2014) but also to conceive different ways of realising one's own femininity and womanhood.

Eritrea represents an interesting case study for several reasons. In the last two decades, not only young men but also young women have left the country in significant numbers to escape the long-term political and economic consequences of war (UNHCR, 2018). Although the implications of government policies – i.e. national service (see later) - have been analysed in several studies, there is little understanding of the specific consequences of these structural measures on the lives of women. Besides the specific structural context, Eritrea represents an interesting instance to explore the complexity of women's roles in contemporary African society (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1997). The many significant roles that women historically played in the national formation –

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through war and migration – have produced a complex cultural and social context in which different ideals of womanhood and related sexual conducts coexist.

First, the article provides a review of Eritrean history focusing on the role of women in traditional society, in the independence struggle and in the diaspora. Then, I show how limited social and political freedom across the country – in particular, I address the issue of national service - impacts on young women's education and life trajectories. Finally, based on ethnographic fieldwork with young women in Eritrea (February - May 2013 and again October-December 2018) I analyse how my informants' aspirations for love and migration intersected (Mai and King, 2009). Sexuality, in this article, refers to all those gendered expectations and normative attitudes related to female conduct. Pulled between traditionalist ideals and more progressive sexual conducts, my female informants imagined life outside Eritrea as the only possibility to achieve freedom not only from government' policies but also from the social and moral control of their communities.

The many roles of women in Eritrean history

Women have played a crucial role throughout the last 70 years of Eritrean history. The 30 years struggle that brought Eritrea to independence from Ethiopian rule (1961-1991) saw the wide participation of women. Female fighters- tegadelti - coming from urban and rural areas joined the guerrilla movements starting from 1976, and by the end of the war, they represented over 30% of front fighters by the end of the war.

The Eritrean People Liberation Front- which then turned into the now thirty-year-long-ruling party PFDJ - had since its origin encouraged an egalitarian ideology. "No Liberation without Women's Participation" was the slogan of the front. Chastity, submissiveness and modesty are crucial values for traditional Tigrinya – the main ethnic group in Eritrea, overwhelmingly Christians - culture (Gebremedhin, 2002: 29-68). Until the introduction of PFDJ regulations, women could be repudiated by their husbands and family if they were not virgins at the time of the wedding. Genital mutilations were, and still are, widespread. Men are the head of the household and men are believed to be purer than women. Moreover, it is traditionally accepted that women are beaten by their husbands if they do not show respect.

Interestingly, the idea of womanhood represented by female fighters is completely different. Rather than weak, inferior and submissive, *tegadelti* showed strength and leadership attributes in the struggle. Their lifestyle was a break with the tradition of labour division, gender expectations and sexual morality. Relationships between men and women in the front were not simply based on husband-wife, father-daughter models and a reproductive logic, but were built on comradeship and shared experiences of hardship.

Although gender equality was an important principle of the EPLF Marxist ideology, real equality was gained and proven every day through active participation to all the military and social activities of the guerrilla. Women carried heavy loads, marched dozens of kilometres and sat in the front lines with their male comrades. Many of them gained a reputation as being braver, more committed and crueller than men. "Met started realizing then that women were making Eritrean history too" (as quoted by Dore 2002:76).

While female fighters were combatting in the front, female migrants were the backbone of the economic support that allowed to the struggle to persevere for three decades. They were usually single women employed as domestic workers in different parts of the world and tended to remit more money than their male counterparts to the household back home due to their stronger family commitment and sense of self-sacrifice (Kifleyesus, 2012). Their spirit of sacrifice gained them the common used title of "mothers of the nation".

Women were the pioneers (George, 2005) of Eritrean migration. Female domestic workers followed their Italian employers to Italy once the colonial rule was ended by Italians' defeat in the second world war (Marchetti, 2014). Many others sought opportunities in the Middle East in countries like Yemen, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia (de Regt, 2015). According to Kifleyesus (2012), female migrants were not only those who mostly contributed to the national cause, but also those without whom, family livelihoods would have not been possible in recurrent critical times of war and drought. Their role as breadwinners enabled them to be respected figures in the society and, sometimes reduced their subordination to male relatives in the family (Matsuoka and Sorensen, 1999).

Given the above considerations, it is not reductive to say that there are three main models of womanhood in Eritrean society. Besides the traditional ideal of the woman as a wife and mother who takes care of the children and the elderly, female fighters and migrant women also populate the Eritrean imaginary of possible female conducts (Dore, 2002). However, none of these above models seems to fit aspirations and desires of young Eritrean women today (Muller, 2004; 2005). Their morality can somehow be defined as "transitional", to convey the idea of a co-presence of different kinds of historically established and contemporary ethical standards influencing Eritrean women's lifestyles.

Many of my friends in Asmara remained somehow caught in between the model of the traditional housewife and the one of the warrior: they did not feel comfortable with old fashion patriarchal morality, and, at the same time, they felt far from the model of the female fighter. They were too independent, educated and aware of other possible worlds to comply with traditional values of submissiveness; they were also not comfortable with the ideology and the lifestyle associated with the *tegadelti*. The distance between female fighters and young girls nowadays is not only a question of time and different circumstances. Although *tegadelti* could have represented a model of female emancipation, in practice they are not admired but considered as unsuccessful. This is partly because the large majority is economically unstable, because they did not have enough children. Moreover, their life-style is believed to be unconventional and not adequate for women[2]. Moreover, the model of *tegadelti* is inevitably associated to government propaganda, which is usually not popular among young generations.

The model of the migrant women, often unmarried and with no children, giving their lives for the homeland and the survival of their families back home seem equally outdated to them. Although obligation towards families and the commitment to improve left-behinds life conditions remain a key driver for female as well as male Eritreans migrants (Grabska et al., 2018: 231-235; Belloni, 2019), personal aspirations of self-realisation and of a more egalitarian family life with a partner also play a part in the desire to move outside the country. As part of my informants' "transitional morality", their aspirations of freedom and love were often projected into an outside world where different models of femininity seemed to be achievable. However, before moving on to describe

[2] Although female fighters' courageous and self-sacrificing spirit is often celebrated in government rhetoric and broadcasted by the national media, Eritrean society remains strongly male-dominated and female fighters have remained an anomaly in the notions of womanhood held by the majority. After being demobilized in 1991, *tegadelti* had several problems reintegrating into civil society. Going back to civil life has meant once again being submitted to the control of the men in the family and carrying out duties, such as cooking 'njera and collecting water, which, ironically, were used as punishments during the struggle (Bernal, 2001: 136). Moreover, many female fighters were later rejected by their former partners during the struggle, who preferred to marry civilian women (Bernal, 2001:137). As a female fighter explained to Bernal "Eritrean women are valued according to their degree of fertility" and *tegadelti* could not compete with civilians. Many were infertile because of the wounds or the hardships they suffered in the bush; others had sacrificed many years of their childbearing age for the struggle.

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their migration aspirations, it is necessary to understand the specific gendered implications of government measures in contemporary Eritrea.

Young women and national service

In 1998 a new conflict broke out with Ethiopia, allegedly over a border dispute (Tronvoll&Negash, 2000). This two-year-long war led to the death of many soldiers, the displacement of over a million people – mostly Eritrean forced returnees from Ethiopia and vice versa – and the restructuring of the Eritrean civil society (O'Kane&Hepner, 2009). The fear of a 6-million-people nation, such as Eritrea, to be attacked by Ethiopia – a country inhabited by over 80 million people – has justified the progressive introduction of several measures restricting political, social and religious freedom. Since the last conflict, thousands of Eritreans have remained mobilised in national defence, and periodic military training has become compulsory for everyone. This has also become a fundamental part of education (Muller, 2008).

Since after the border conflict with Ethiopia Eritrean education system has been reformed to ensure the necessary human resources for national defence and the country's development in times of crisis. Boys and girls spend their last year of high school in Sa'wa military camp, to complete not only their curriculum but also learn the basics of combat. At the end of the year, those students who pass the examination for college will proceed with their education and those who do not will typically be sent to join the army, mostly to carry out manual labour or patrol border areas with extremely limited salaries (Kibreab, 2013). Even those who finish their college education must then serve the nation under a specific ministry with a similar salary.

This is the bulk of the widely discussed "national service", which crucially defines the experience of younger generations in Eritrea. Although this service should last 18 months for both men and women, this often protracts for years and sometimes decades depending on several personal and family circumstances. In general, men and women can obtain the release from national service only if they can prove themselves to be suffering from a severe sickness. However, women are also granted release even if they get married and have children.

National service could normally represent a rite of passage to adulthood establishing a link between the values of previous generations of patriots and young Eritrean citizens. However, its undetermined duration produces a situation of socio-economic and existential limbo, which has specific gendered implications. For men, whose social status hinges on the possibility to become family providers, national service represents a trap into adolescence (Treibner, 2009). For women, national service tends to push many into a very traditional model of womanhood, this being an opposite result of what egalitarian government gender policies are aimed to (Muller, 2004). As the release from national service is easier for those women who get married, it is common for girls to consent to marriage, even at a very young age (but above the legal requirement of 18 years old), to avoid conscription. Many girls, especially in rural areas, drop out from a school when they are already 14-15 not to be enlisted among the next round of recruits for Sa'wa. Then they hide for years while carrying out household tasks and waiting for the time they will get married and have children. These tactics to circumvent government requirements have severe implications for the educational development of young generations of women. Ironically enough, it is arguable that instead of inspiring the same ideals of female strength and independence typical of female partisans during the struggle (Bernal 2000), national service has led many young girls to relapse into the most traditional forms of arranged marriages and womanhood to find refuge from state expectations (Belloni, 2019).

However, many of the young women I met rejected the idea to get married to avoid national service. They felt that would be another prison for them as the role of traditional wife would have not allowed them to pursue their dreams to study further, work , help their families, and see the world. In a way, we could say that they were actively delaying their transition to adulthood, by postponing marriage. As suggested by Grabska et al. (2018), a life trajectory approach is crucial here to make sense of the intersection between migration -in this case, simply the aspiration to it-, widespread gender norms and individual strategies to delay or go towards crucial life transitions.

Bad girls? Traditional female models, and beyond

My closest female friends in Asmara were five young women (from 25 to 28 years old): Salam, Lwam, Johanna, Hellen and Valentina.[3] While I was in Eritrea, I spent most of my time following them in their daily domestic tasks – I was living with two of them - or hanging out in their homes as well as in cafes and bars of downtown Asmara. The time I spent with them was not finalised to collect "data", but to share my free time with those whom I consider "friends". Friendship then for me was not a method (Tillman-Healy, 2003), rather the inevitable result of long-term interactions with women whom I found inspiring in many ways. Nevertheless, our friendship enabled me to gain important insights into struggles and aspirations of young women in today Eritrea.

This group of five women is not representative of all Eritrean female young population, which is deeply stratified along ethnic and religious lines and the rural/urban divide. However, frustration for patriarchal gender norms and suffocating government rhetorics have also been documented among university students in Eritrea (Muller, 2005) and among female adolescent Eritreans in Khartoum (Grabska *et al*., 2018). Their uneasiness with what they perceive as the traditional Eritrean society can be analysed as the result of general social dynamics -such as the influence of social remittances and international media on local lifestyles and aspirations- which characterise urbanised youth. In parallel with the more studied young men's feelings of social immobility and existential stuckness (Treibner, 2009), my female informants' stories can enrich the understanding of "immobility" from a gender perspective (Grabska *et al*. 2019). While being caught between the national service and the expectations of their families, these women were buying time to find ways – usually out of Eritrea – to pursue their aspirations for self-realisation and freedom. As theorised by Brun (2015) for people in protracted displacement, *waiting* was, for my informants, not only the result of immobilising structural forces, but also an active process in which they could imagine a better future while trying to achieve it.

All of them had different personal stories and came from different socio-economic backgrounds but, except for Lwam, they had all been raised in the city and belonged to the Tigrinya ethnic group. They were single and highly educated. All of them deviated from traditional female norms to some extent: Hellen had had a child out of wedlock, was outgoing and resided alone in Sudan; Johanna and Lwam were 28 and unmarried (usually Eritrean women marry in their early twenties, although this trend is rapidly changing in the cities); Valentina and Salam, the youngest, were outgoing, often showy in their ways of dressing and held open-minded heterosexual attitudes. They all found traditional values suffocating somehow and in different ways: Johanna often complained about the pressure her father put on her to get married; Valentina did not agree with her mother's old fashioned ideas about cohabitation with a man before marriage; Hellen hated being judged because she liked smoking and drinking.

[3] All names of people and places have been changed to protect the privacy and safety of research participants.

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These five women were determined, entrepreneurial and, to some extent, progressive. Johanna loved playing volleyball and was part of a famous volleyball team for a while. Moreover, she couched teams of young female and male basketball players. Salam wanted to become a business woman to support her family and was ready to face all the hurdles of exile for that sake. Valentina was very clear in her intentions of not being submissive to her future husband and was looking for an egalitarian relationship.

Although my friends dissociated themselves from traditional values to some extent, they were conservative in other regards. Salam wanted to have at least five babies. Johanna and Lwam were openly against contraception because they believed it was against religious teachings. Moreover, they did not complain about the division of labour in the house. Although Johanna and her brother were both working long hours, all domestic activities, such as washing clothes manually, carrying water, cooking and cleaning the house were carried out by Johanna.

My friends' "transitional morality" can be evidenced in the way they perceive leisure activities such as drinking and clubbing. Although Tigrinya women traditionally have their own exclusive moments for relaxing and enjoyment, going out in bars and dancing in clubs are morally sanctioned behaviours. My friends mostly found this mentality suffocating, even if they agreed with some gender-based norms. Lwam, Johanna, Valentina and Salam thought that smoking and drinking was not good for girls. However, Lwam and Johanna loved suwa, the traditional alcohol and Valentina did not mind having a cocktail sometimes; Salam regularly went clubbing with her male friends and Johanna loved dancing.

Hellen was the most out-going and progressive of all. She loved smoking cigarettes and sipping a good glass of local gin, but she felt free to do these things only inside her favourite bar, the Gothic, a fancy place mainly frequented by local middle-class young men and *beles*[4], Eritrean expatriates coming back home for holidays (Arnone, 2011). "People here judge you if they see you smoking… - Hellen used to tell me while sitting in the safe darkness of the gothic- here girls are so boring. They do not drink or dance. They only stay at home cooking and cleaning. It is not like in Europe or America".

Hellen's remark is an instance of common imaginaries about the "West" as a site where a different model of womanhood - modern, free, independent - can be achieved. Similarly to their male counterparts (Belloni, 2018), my Eritrean friends' narratives mirror experience of feeling stuck in a country which does not offer, in their eyes, any possibility for positive transformation; however, their migration projects entailed also the hope to be freer and more self-realised women than they felt Eritrean society was allowing them to be.

Neither wives nor fighters: The migratory aspirations of five girls

In 2015, two years after I left the country, all of my female friends have managed to escape, except Johanna. By exploiting their local and international networks they manage to mobilise the resources needed to leave the country in a regular and, most often, in a un-authorised way. Salam managed to get a release from the national service for a medical condition. She is now working in the Emirates. Valentina paid a big amount of money to be smuggled to Sudan where she stayed 4 years before moving to Egypt. She still hopes to reunite with her father who lives in United States.. Hellen and Lwam chose the hard way. Thanks to her boyfriend's support – he was working in Israel- Lwam paid the necessary money to cross the Sahara desert and the Mediterranean Sea and she now

[4] This expression literally means "prickly pears". It refers to the fact that expatriates usually come back to Eritrea in the summer holiday, the season when prickly pears ripen.

lives in Switzerland with her husband and two kids. Hellen also managed to gather the necessary amount to arrive in Sweden through the desert and the sea. She now lives in Sweden with her daughter. Johanna's decision to stay was the result of the limited availability of resources as well as her ongoing patriotic commitment to her country- something she had inherited from her two ex-fighters parents. She still works as a public officer in one of the Ministries.

Hellen's and Lwam's dangerous journeys are interesting counterparts of the most common account on male high-risk migration. As a matter of fact, many of those Eritreans arriving to European Southern shores are women. According to the data of the Italian Ministry of Interior about 14,000 Eritrean women (about 20 percent of the total number of arrivals from Eritrea for those years - approximately 70,000 people) reached Italian shores between 2014 and 2015. [add footnote with the reference as follows: "The data are drawn from https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/46429". Media and in the humanitarian agencies mainly portray these female migrants as followers of male partners. However, many of them are pioneers for their own families (Belloni et al. 2018) and their motivations to move may differ from those of men. As illustrated by Hellen's and Lwam's cases, these motivations are shaped not only by structural conditions but also by their community gendered expectations. Migration -even if highly risky- represents a way to resist and navigate these different expectations while carving a place for one's own desires. These desires mirrored not only the general aspiration among Eritrean youth to have a better life and help their families back home, but also their struggle to find different models of womanhood.

Lwam, for example, wanted to become the breadwinner for her family. When we met first, she had finished her degree 3 years before and since then had been working for the Ministry for 450 nakfa a month (less than 10 euros). She was living in Ester's house with me while doing her periodical military training with her colleagues from the Ministry of Agriculture. She used to wake up every day at 4 am to reach her training centre. Lwam was dark-skinned tall and extremely thin. Once she showed me her picture a few years before: she was whiter, smiling and relaxed. Lwam explained: "Can you see how white and fat I was? I became so black and thin now… life is hard".

She was one of the youngest in the family, but she felt extremely responsible for her parents who were farmers and lived in a village in the Southern area of the country. Her brother, Gabriel, had migrated to Italy five years before but he had never sent money back home. Her brother's behaviour increased the weight of her responsibilities. But Lwam was very determined: where he had failed, she would not. She told me that she wanted to leave the country. She dreamt of making enough money to take her father to Massawa:

> "My father would like to see Massawa once before dying—Lwam told me once—when I have some money in my pockets, I'll take him there; you can be sure about that. Can you imagine? My father has never even seen the sea. Everyone comes from abroad to see Massawa and my family has never been there."

To be the pioneer of her family Lwam was now intentioned to get married with a local. Instead she was often on the phone with friends living abroad, gathering information to leave the country.

Johanna often thought about going to Italy. When I met her she was a teacher in a secondary school with less than 10 EUR a month for salary, but she had dreamed of studying art in Florence one day. Johanna´s face shone as she was narrating some episodes of Michelangelo's life, but she suddenly grimaced ironically when I proposed her to come and visit me in Italy:

> "When I was younger, I was obsessed by the idea of leaving this country. All my friends left and I asked my relatives for some help to go abroad, but they refused. I suffered so much

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> and sacrificed so many things thinking that one day I would escape from here. But I am still here. Now I do not want to go away anymore, I will keep being a teacher in Asmara."

Among the things that Johanna sacrificed for the unrealized project of a life elsewhere, there was love. As she told me, before becoming disillusioned, Johanna was systematically avoiding any romantic commitment. In her opinion, a love relationship may have hinder the possibility to leave the country .

Valentina wanted to join her father, who owned an apparently successful company in the US. She was proud to say that she was 25% Italian. She went to the Italian school in Asmara and spoke Italian perfectly. Valentina thought that she would be able to get an Italian passport to leave the country, but the passport never arrived. She began weighing alternatives ways to migrate. In the meanwhile, she was working as a secretary, but she felt that her youth was going to waste. She was 25 years old and stunningly beautiful. Once she told me:

> People used to tell me "ah you could be a model if you were in Europe!" and I used to get so angry... I am losing a lot of opportunities staying in this country... since I did not go to Sa'wa I was not even able to study at University. It will be too late to start studying if I don't leave the country soon.

Valentina wanted to be a flight attendant or a business woman, but that was not possible for her in Eritrea. Since she had avoided to go to Sa'wa, she was excluded from the possibility to study further and get a public employment in the country.

My friends' desires to migrate were intertwined with the desires to emancipate themselves from patriarchal society and from suffocating Eritrean moral codes, as shown in their preference of partners. As all of us were single, with the exclusion of Salam, so how to find the right partner, where to meet him, and when to settle down with him, were among our favourite topics of discussion. Not only their self-realisation as women were often linked to the possibility of having a respectful partner, but also the actual possibility to migrate was often linked to the possibility to find a partner living abroad. Lwam, for instance, managed to leave the country thanks to her boyfriend living in Israel. Hellen and Valentina were also looking for someone who could realise both their aspirations for love and freedom abroad. The choice of an open-minded and sincere partner who could facilitate a better future outside the suffocating atmosphere of Eritrean society was crucial to achieve independence and fulfil their lifestyle aspirations. Unlike the models of the virgin migrant or the one of the female fighter, often single and deemed less "fertile" (see before), my informants dreamed of getting married and having a happy couple life.

Valentina was very romantic. She told me about her first passionate relationship with a boy:

> "My first boyfriend was so beautiful. He was half-Arab, half-Eritrean. He was my neighbour. He chased me for 6 months... I was not interested at first, but little by little I started trusting him. We were madly in love with each other. I use to escape from the window of my house to go and meet him. We used to plan our future together: "Where would you like to live my love? I like Scandinavian countries and other peaceful places like the north of Europe and Canada... Who would you like our children to look alike? Like me or like you?"

The two finally broke up due to religious incompatibilities, but Valentina's narrative is interesting to observe how migration imaginaries and romantic dreams intertwine. A happy future with the loved one is imagined to be possible only outside Eritrea in places like in Canada and Europe, characterised not only by their deemed wealth and safety, but also for their social and moral

freedom. However, that freedom could be found, in Valentina's eyes, only with a partner, ready to respect her personality and her independence..

When I met her she mostly seemed to like foreigners—"I like white men..." she told me once—and did not think very highly of Eritrean men:

> "Eritrean boys very rarely fall in love… usually a guy starts dating a girl only because he wants money or wants to marry her to leave the country. They are not sincere. Anyway, after you marry them they transform and they want you to be their slave".

Probably for these reasons, Valentina usually wanted to hang out in places which were mostly frequented by *beles* and foreigners. Likewise, Hellen preferred the company of expatriates, as she thought that Eritrean men were too judgemental and unreliable.

Hellen had already suffered the consequences of finding the wrong man at the wrong time. She was 20 years old when she got pregnant. The father of the child left to the US when she was expecting. He told Hellen that he would send the visa for her and the child, but, somehow, it never happened. However, Hellen had not renounced her dream of going to "the developed world". And finding a *beles* represented the easiest way to realise her dream. As she told me, Eritrea and local Eritreans represented backwardness to her. Not only in terms of material comforts.

The desire to migrate for Hellen was mainly connected with the aspiration to pursue her personal liberty in a foreign world that she imagined as more favourable to her independence as well as for the wellbeing of her daughter. Sat on a stool of Aiba, a famous club in Asmara down town, Hellen used to scan the room with her expert eye searching for good-looking *beles*: "Now I tell you – she said - these guys at the counter are local boys, those beyond them come from outside, these others behind us are local rich Eritreans, and those on the table beside are musicians. Ah, do you see that guy? He was a judge at the highest court in Asmara. Ah! Have you seen those two tall guys who entered now? They are brothers. They live in America".

Notwithstanding their romantic dreams, all of my informants with the exception of Lwam are not married yet. This points to the difficulties of combining their long-standing desire for independence with the ongoing requirements for wives in Eritrean society. While they viewed migration as a site to break free from traditional female roles, the young men I met in Eritrea and abroad perceived migration as a way to achieve traditional manhood, becoming family providers. There seemed to be a wide gap between the expectations of modernity expressed by my girlfriends and those, arguably more traditionalist, of their male counterparts.

Conclusions

By exploring the narratives and life of five young Eritrean women, this article has analysed the intersection between migration aspirations and desires for gender emancipation. Starting from the role of aspirations in shaping possible futures (Bal and Wilems, 2014), this study feeds into the study of how migration enables or hinder women's agency and shapes gender expectations (Cvajner, 2011; Hoang, 2011). As this paper illustrates, it is not only the act of migration, but also the simple aspiration of it that can influence life trajectories. The imaginary of a possible life elsewhere created the space for my informants to circumvent government and family expectations, while they were trying to leave the country. Caught in between government demands and traditional family expectations concerning marriage and childbearing, my informants were pursuing their ideals of self-realisation and romantic relationships abroad. None of the female models inhabiting Eritrean history seemed to fit them. They did not identify in the traditional image of the wife and mother fully focused on her family. They did not aspire to emulate female fighters who were

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considered not feminine and too much aligned with government ideology. They also did not aspire to be like previous migrant women often unmarried and solely dedicated to supporting their left-behind. Their aspirations reflected their search for alternative forms of –socially acceptable rather than revolutionary - gender and moral conducts. Marrying a respectful partner living abroad, and for that matter more open-minded, represented in their mind a way to be realised women while pursuing their dreams as painters, flight attendants, and businesswomen away from Eritrea.

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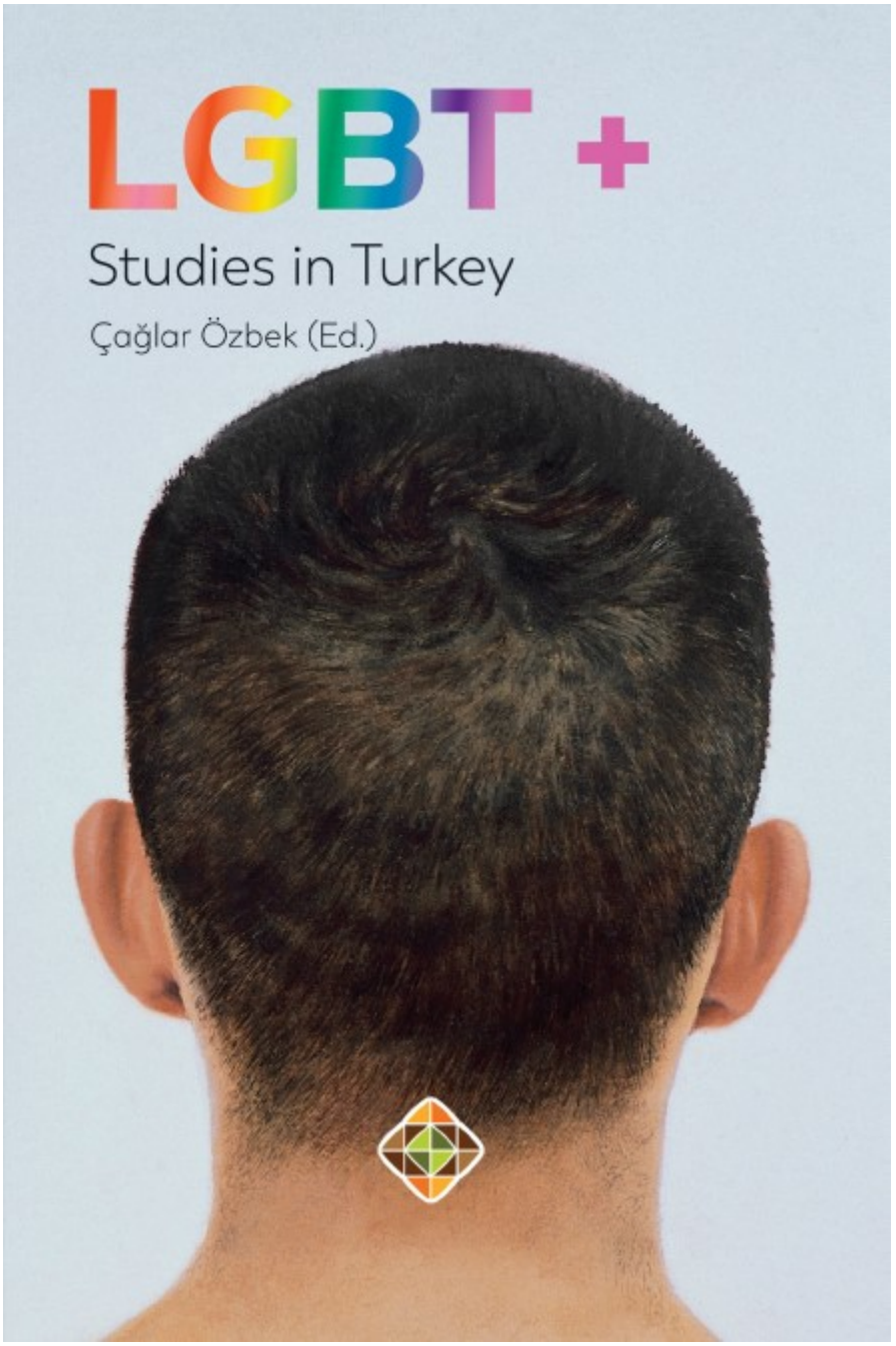

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