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**LAURA CANDIDATU**  
Utrecht University

# Diasporic mothering and Somali diaspora formation in the Netherlands

## ABSTRACT

*This article addresses how Somali women from the Netherlands participate in digital diaspora formation. It specifically takes the lens of ‘diasporic mothering’ understood as a site where difference and belonging are negotiated through work of cultural reproduction, collective identity construction and stable homemaking. I first analytically distinguish between two generations of Somali women on the basis of their arrival trajectory and their socio-economic background at the time of their living in Somalia. Second, by foregrounding Somali women’s lived experiences, I show how their participation in diaspora formation is shaped by both mothering practices, and local and national Dutch policy approaches to migration. Last, I argue that the specificities of the local and national Dutch context favours rather physical and neighbourhood-based diaspora encounters, while de-centring the role of digital media in the initial formation of diaspora networks.*

## KEYWORDS

digital diaspora  
mothering  
Somali women  
Amsterdam  
the Netherlands  
migration

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the past couple of decades, scholars have been discussing the symbiotic relation migrant people have with digital media communication technologies (Brinkerhoff 2009: 12). This particular relation has been studied in analyses of digital diaspora formation and of the 'connected migrant' (Diminescu 2008). In the case of African diasporas, Victoria Bernal (2020: 2) emphasizes in this sense how Africans in particular – in diasporas and elsewhere – embraced digital media, by suggesting a strong connection between digitally enhanced sociality and African values and practices of sociality. Somali diaspora for example has been considered one of the paradigmatic cases of internet-mediated transnational communities, with Somali people from the diaspora being seen as early adopters of computer-mediated communication to keep in touch with each other or with the ones from Somalia (Issa-Salwe and Olden 2008: 570; Olden 1999).

Much of this digitally mediated transnationality has been furthermore studied with a focus on practices of remitting, with digital media having played an important role in Somali diaspora's involvement in projects of humanitarian support and development. While these practices have been met with criticism due to their involvement in perpetuating fragmentary and conflictual political views, Cindy Horst (2013) argued for the inevitable political nature of the diasporic involvement. She argues for the understanding of refugees and forced migration diasporas as inevitably embedded in the political transformation of their country of origin as diasporic transnational engagements, especially those enacted by forced mobility, are most likely to be joined by political transformation interests (Horst 2013: 235–36). Horst proposes to reframe these transnational (political) engagements as forms of civic participation that give way to societal concerns and forms of solidarity (2013: 240–43).

In a later intervention, Horst (2018) argues furthermore that civic engagement, together with belonging, are embedded in multiple sites as the Somali community can be located 'locally, nationally, transnationally or globally, and can be defined by a range of characteristics, of which national identity is but one' (2018: 3). The author critiques the often-assumed opposition between transnational engagement and local practices of diasporas, and she argues for the complementarity between the two dimensions. The concept of 'multi-sited embeddedness' is then proposed to capture people's engagement between and across locations, while analytically leaving open the possibility of integrating other categories of difference (Horst 2018: 1353). Horst's insights regarding the multi-sited embeddedness of Somalis from the diaspora supports the idea of a variegated Somali digital diaspora, with multiple local, national and transnational diasporic spaces connected via a diverse range of digital media. In line with this argument, previous work on digital diaspora formation (see Candidatu et al. 2019; Ponzanesi 2020; Alinejad et al. 2019) highlights the processual and heterogeneous character of diaspora, as well as its embedment in people's everyday practices. Building on this, this article considers situated lived experiences of high importance for the understanding of why and how people from certain locations come together. Correspondently, in this methodological approach, the foci of investigating how diasporas come into

mediated being are posited in the social significance and meanings that trigger and support the formation of diasporas on the online–offline continuum.

In this article, the Somali diaspora is thus seen as a meaningful community that is based on a shared identity, marked nevertheless by degrees of difference in local, national and transnational diasporic coming together. While the globalized dimension of the Somali diaspora can be seen in a variety of digitally mediated humanitarian-derived transnational practices, the same community fosters multiple forms of coming together. The multi-sitedness of Somali diaspora – enabled to a great extent by the use of a variety of digital technologies – is ultimately one of the pillars of this Special Issue’s comparative analysis. Here, I show that national and/or local mediated practices play an important role in how Somali-mediated diasporic connections take place in the Amsterdam-based diasporic groups of Somali mothers. I then show how their participation in diaspora formation is shaped by both mothering practices, and local and national Dutch policy approaches to migration. Last, I argue that the specificities of the local and national Dutch context favours rather physical and neighbourhood-based diaspora encounters, while de-centring the role of digital media in the initial formation of diaspora networks.

## **DIASPORIC MOTHERING**

Diasporas are strongly shaped by gender dynamics within families, politics, activism and the communities themselves. Locating and understanding women’s participation in diasporic community making remains highly important.

The gendered dimension of community maintenance and cultural reproduction has been discussed both in diaspora studies and migration studies. Furthermore, the role of motherhood practices has proven to be central to processes of diasporic cultural transmission and community maintenance (Tsolidis 2001: 206–07). As such, mothering while migrant implies often-times not only raising children and doing care work but also doing work of heritage transmission, identity formation and diasporic community building. In this sense, authors show how ‘cross-cultural’ mothering involves complex processes of renegotiation and re-evaluation of identities and practices in the context of cultural displacement (Yax-Fraser 2011; Holmes and Mangione 2011; Tummala-Narra 2004), with mothers often being the ones who make the choices and the efforts towards the diasporic transmission of their own cultures and mediate the acquisition of cultural elements of their host countries.

Irene Gedalof (2009) emphasizes the need to further research women’s and mothers’ role in diaspora-making processes. The author argues for bringing together feminist scholarship on embodied reproductive labour and feminist migration studies in research on women’s role in migration processes. She furthermore links gendered reproductive labour activities with the reproduction and maintenance of migrant communities and families for a better understanding of women’s role in diaspora spaces. In a similar yet different move, Eleonore Kofman and Parvati Raghuram point out how research on migrants and global care work has focused especially on the migrant as the provider of care for others, overlooking in this process the reproductive labour ensued in reproducing themselves and their own communities (2015: 56–57). Furthermore, the authors draw attention to how, even though both ‘reproductive labour’ and ‘care’ have been used in the literature rather interchangeably, care is just one of the many elements needed in the maintenance

of individuals, families and (migrant) communities. These two arguments suggest new locations from which to engage with research on women's participation in migration processes and especially that on migrant mothers' reproductive labour – not only from the domestic space but also from the diasporic communities themselves.

Literature addressing the role of digital media in the lives of migrant mothers and their building of diasporic spaces of belonging is, however, rather scarce. With a few notable exceptions (see Arnold and Martin [2016] and Veazey [2016, 2018] in particular for the discussion on digital diaspora, and also Meyers and Rugunanan [2020] on mobile-mediated mothering experiences among migrant Somali mothers living in Port Elizabeth, South Africa), scholarship addressing the intricacies between internet media (researched as ICT, new media or digital media) and motherhood focuses mostly on non-migrant women who tend to be located in the western part of the world. As such, some authors refer to the importance of new social media platforms, or digital media in general, in supporting mothers in their transition to motherhood (Madge and O'Connor 2006; Stamm et al. 2016) by means of online communities, websites, videos, message boards, etc. Other authors focus on the role of digital technologies in reproducing and intensifying ideological differences in parenting choices (Valtchanov et al. 2016) and, more specifically, the discussions on mommy wars and mommy blogging (Abetz and Moore 2018), on intensive mothering (Arnold 2016; Ennis 2014), or feminist mothering (Craig 2016; Loe et al. 2016), among others.

An important contribution to the topic of migrant mothers and digital media has, however, been made by literature from media and migration studies. Building on feminist migration studies literature addressing the 'feminization of migration' (Yinger 2006; Lutz 1997), different scholars have shown how media and (transnational) mothering practices interlock. A rich literature on the case of migrant Filipino domestic workers and their transnational mothering practices has, for example, developed over the past decades (Madianou and Miller 2013; Parreñas 2000, 2001; McKay 2012; Cabanes and Acedera 2012). The relation between diaspora, mothering and digital media is yet less discussed.

I propose the concept of diasporic mothering as a site where difference and belonging are negotiated through the work of cultural reproduction, collective identity construction and stable homemaking. I argue that in the context of digital media and its ubiquitous role in migrant people's social lives, understanding the workings of digital diasporas from the specific location of mothering experiences will not only explain and reveal new aspects regarding migrant women's lives; this research trajectory represents a step further in shaping and conceptualizing the complex matrix of a digitally mediated diasporic coming together.

## **FIELDSITE AND METHODS**

This article is based on a three-month fieldwork, from April to July 2018, with Somali communities in Amsterdam and its surrounding areas. I focused my ethnography on the work of the organization *Stichting Somalische vrouwen Amsterdam en Omstreken (IFTIN)* ('Foundation Somali Women Amsterdam and Surroundings') (translation added), an organization set up by Somali women that aims to support both Somali women and women refugees of other nationalities in adjusting to their lives in the Netherlands. I had the chance to conduct fifteen interviews with women members of the organization and

women that participate in the organization's courses on 'parenting between two cultures'.

Next to the interviews, in June 2018 I also had the chance to participate in one of the parenting classes organized by IFTIN. Even though the language of the workshop was Somali, the visuals accompanying the oral presentation were in Dutch. On this occasion, I thus had the chance to observe the interactions between the women and the general setting of the meetings.

The interviews from this group were audio recorded and the data collected were coded and analysed with the use of the qualitative data analysis computer software NVivo, on the basis of which the textual analysis was produced. All the women approached during the fieldwork consented to the use of the collected data for the purposes of this research. The names used in this article are pseudonyms.

### **LOCAL, GENDERED AND INTERGENERATIONAL DIASPORIC ENCOUNTERS BETWEEN SOMALI WOMEN**

This article focuses on the relation between two groups of Somali women in the Netherlands – one that came to the Netherlands during the first phase of Somali migration in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and one that came during what is to be considered a second phase, which started in the year 2006 – and highlights how experiences of mothering shape their diasporic coming together. The analytical distinction between the two generations is made in reference to their lives before they came to the Netherlands, with the members of the first group having had a higher socio-economic status in Somalia before the civil war first started, and members from the second group having scarcely benefited from formal education due to having lived under civil war conditions for many years. This understanding of migrant generation is built upon the conceptualization of migrant generations offered by Mette Louise Berg and Susan Eckstein (2009: 2) wherein they foreground the cohort dimension of the term. In this sense they highlight the important ways in which pre-migration socio-economic differentiations based on class, race, gender, age, etc., shape post-migration experiences.

There are indeed two important moments of arrival of Somali people in the Netherlands. The first moment is connected to the fall of Siad Barre's military regime in 1991. Following arrivals connected especially to family (re)unification procedures, it reached its peak in 1995. The second moment can be placed around the year 2007 and is related to the 2006–07 humanitarian crisis in Somalia (van Heelsum 2011: 12–13; Nijenhuis and van Liempt 2014: 22–23). This second moment was triggered by an intersection of factors that worsened the living conditions in the south of Somalia: the Ethiopian and African Union military intervention, the intensification of Islamist militias' activities related to the Islamist Union of Islamic Courts, such as al-Shabaab, and counterterrorism actions by the United States, among others (Menkhaus 2010: 320; Civins 2010: 123–24). Even though Somalia's first parliament in over twenty years was formed in 2012, Somalis continued to leave their country due to its volatile security situation, combined with climate-related issues such as drought and/or the desire to unite with family members who had already migrated (van Heelsum 2011: 13).

The organization IFTIN was set up in 2005 and it aims to support Somali women in processes of social by, among other, developing culturally sensitive projects that can support Somali mothers. Through programmes such as Opvoedcoach ('Parenting coach') for example, the organization supports

1. Interview with Najma, Amstelveen, 2 July 2018.
2. Interview with Idil, Amsterdam, 6 July 2018.

families of refugees in their first moments of settling in the Netherlands. The aim for this programme is, according to Najma, one of the founding members of the association, to prevent eventual crises that might arise due to the differences in children upbringing between the western and non-western countries.<sup>1</sup>

By using their skills, training, past experiences and knowledge of the community, the volunteers of IFTIN created a diasporic network that mediates the relation between state institutions and Somali migrants. Even more so, these types of diasporic efforts are seen as necessary in the current conditions in the Netherlands, as my respondents noticed a change in the last years with regard to the situation of refugees. On the one hand, they noted the changes in attitudes that people have towards refugees, which correlates especially with Islamophobia and the highly mediatized Syrian refugee crisis from 2015. On the other hand, the higher educated Somali women remarked the changes in terms of institutional support, with municipalities reducing subsidies. Below, in a touching way, Idil, one of the active members of IFTIN, portrays the specific location from which Somali women have to adapt to their new lives in the Netherlands, after having experienced political instability and violence in their own country:

In our time, we did not have any good support. We had to hit all the walls ourselves. Many depressive women that [had] many children. And the parents, it went a bit wrong because if you come here, the culture is different. The weather is different. Here it is cold, in my country is very warm. And it rains all the time, and it is going to snow. So, many things, many activities you are not going to be able to do them because of the weather. Then you look on the window: 'I am not going outside because it is raining' and 'Oh, it is cold, I am not going outside'. You actually do not have any chance: I do not know how to ride the bike; I do not know how to ride a car. I have to be dependent on my feet or public transportation. And it is a bit difficult to cross all the fences you are supposed to cross. And at the same time, you are looking for a better future. You want to have a better life. You just want to be a role model for your children, and you want to achieve something yourself. And at the same time, you have to do many things. But you are also tired yourself, you have fled, you have experienced many things. Some people experienced very strange things, their parents murdered in front of them, their sisters or brothers abused in front of them. And all that pain, pain, pain, you carry with you. And how are you supposed to process it? Here it is dark, dark, dark. It makes you depressive. It makes you crazy. And these people really cannot find any movement [to attach to]. We decided, a group of women, ok, we ourselves were not supported but we are going to support [other] people.<sup>2</sup>

Idil described the experiences of women who were among the first to arrive in the Netherlands at the start of the Somali civil war. She talked about their unique position: having to adapt to a new and different environment while, at the same time, carrying with them memories of pain and war trauma. It is within this particular experience that Idil placed the momentum and locus from which the organization was built, and its principles were derived.

The women who offer the classes and who are also behind the formation of this diasporic network are part of an earlier group of Somali migrants and most of them came to Europe as refugees between 1991 and 2000. Having been confronted with the hardships of a new beginning in a foreign country after

fleeing civil war in Somalia, they are now trying to offer information and guidance especially to the newcomers who arrived in the Netherlands over the last years.

3. Interview with Najma, Amstelveen, 2 July 2018.

The people who arrived during the first phase were mostly higher educated and higher positioned in Somali society, which made it easier for them to leave the country (van Liempt 2011: 257). However, the Somalis who came after 2006 have a lower level of education (van den Tillaart and Warmerdam 2010). Due to the civil war and the country's instability, this second group was precluded from taking part in formal education. This difference is used by Klaver et al. (2010: 12) and Nijenhuis and van Liempt (2014) to explain the decrease in level of education within the Somali community living in the Netherlands later on. This dimension can be related to the phenomenon of the onward migration of those from the first wave who, due to various push and pull factors (see van Liempt 2011), remigrated to the United Kingdom from the Netherlands. This context and the differences between the two groups are detailed below by Najma, one of the most active women in the Somali diaspora from the Netherlands and part of the first group:

Because the first group were actually the higher educated, who fled the first time. And who is actually left behind? The lower educated, the old people. People who could not flee or sick people, or people who. [...] And who have no work, no money to flee, they stay in the country. And in particular people from the countryside also moved to Mogadishu, to the capital city [...]. And this group is also (helped) by the families that live in Europe or America and give them chances to flee, they sent money [...]. And [people from] this group were raised or born during war times, twenty-eight years was the war. So, twenty-eight years without government, twenty-six years. Now there is a government, in the last two years. But twenty-six years without government, without a system. All that the former government built, all was devastated and destroyed. No rules. So, what kind of person does one become? And if you arrive in developed countries, then it is difficult. And then it's also difficult for the society in which you arrive because then you need a lot of help and a lot of support. Therefore, it is difficult also for you because you have gone through a lot of problems. So, that is the difference, the first group were the entrepreneurs, they wanted more. And this [new group], they do not participate anywhere.<sup>3</sup>

Here, a clear image of the second group of refugees coming from Somalia to the Netherlands is given by the ones who arrived earlier. The first dimension put forward refers to the lower level of education and its effects on the possibilities of participating in Dutch society. They also refer to the specific Somali context from which they came, that is, the condition of having lived in a war zone for a longer period of time, a situation that takes a huge toll on one's basic needs and possibilities of feeling a part of Dutch society. These conclusions are also to be found in a 2010 study (van den Tillaart and Warmerdam 2010) about the Somali newcomers who arrived in the Netherlands between 2007 and 2009 and their adjustment to the new, Dutch context. Similar to the women from my research, the study portrays the newcomers in terms of their low education levels, their experience of trauma, and their low participation on the labour market.

Secondly, mirroring the policy language, my respondents also emphasize the low labour market participation and the need to empower women in order to overcome their social exclusion. They relate this last aspect especially

4. Drawing from Diana Meyers, I chose to avoid both the term 'female genital mutilation' for its 'morally condemnatory language' and for how it 'prejudices the question of women's autonomy' and the terminology of 'female circumcision' due to its cultural relative dimension and danger of suggesting the risk-free dimension of the procedure (2000: 470).

to the experience of mothering when it comes to the ability to properly guide and support their children in their school and general education efforts. As fellow Somali mothers living in the Netherlands, they take on the responsibility of supplementing the state's and municipality's tasks in easing their adaptation to the new conditions. This is especially the case considering the populist agenda that dominated the political discourses related to migration, which started with the January 2003 elections, when asylum and residence procedures became stricter and integration approaches switched towards the individual responsibility of newcomers in managing their integration. For example, from 2004 onward, the once free of cost integration courses newcomers are obliged to take had to be paid from people's own budgets (Entzinger 2006: 130–31). This change was also brought up by some of the volunteers from IFTIN I talked with, as they also noticed the difficulties experienced by the newcomers due to public budget cuts.

As such, the more established Somali women from the first group fill in a much-needed role to support newcomers in getting to know the new society they arrived in and guide them in their navigation of various social settings. Mothering and parenting are especially seen as main topics to be addressed in this context as, in the past, this issue caused tense relations between the Somali community and Dutch public institutions, such as schools or the child protection authorities. In the next section, I address more in detail how these experiences in particular shape the inter-generational interaction and diasporic ties between Somali mothers.

## **MOTHERING AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY EXPERIENCES IN SOMALI DIASPORA FORMATION**

Difficulties of parenting and family management in the context of migration, and the role of the state within that dynamic, have been the subject of many debates, both in academia and in policy-making (see Hess and Shandy 2008). Worries are usually expressed towards the capacity of parents, and most of all mothers, to support their children in properly integrating in their new countries. Research has, for instance, investigated the role of mothers in the involvement of migrant youth in criminal activities (see van San 1997) or the general failure of parents in adapting to the new country's norms by focusing too much on reproducing cultural elements from their country of origin (see Renzaho et al. 2011 for a discussion on how Arabic-speaking migrant parents in Australia negotiate the preservation of their cultural heritage). Furthermore, assimilationist trends contribute to a growing scepticism towards the value and capacity of supporting migrant children's hybrid identities, which usually lead to intergenerational conflicts. The case of Somali refugee families has been addressed, for example, in the Finnish context by Filio Degni, Seppo Pöntinen and Muki Mölsä (2006). They show the difficulties Somali parents experience in raising children due to intergenerational conflicts, changing norms regarding gender roles, and cultural differences in child-rearing practices. A particular situation that arises in this context is related to the measures taken by Finnish authorities to control Somali parenting practices due to the belief that children coming from Somali families are being mistreated, with physical discipline being used upon them or with girls undergoing female genital cutting (Degni et al. 2006: 5).<sup>4</sup> Along the same lines, the *Somalis in Amsterdam* report (Nijenhuis and van Liempt 2014: 84, 88) addresses these issues in the Dutch context. As in the case of



Somali parents living in Finland, the report refers to a widespread fear within the community of having children placed in foster care. Deborah Boehm, in her study on Mexican migrant families living in the United States, shows how, due to the precarious legal position these migrants occupy, a tense relationship with the state and fears of children being taken away or placed in custody contributes to further fears around interacting with state authorities as well (2008: 796). In a similar way, the tensions between Somali parents and Dutch authorities, such as the Child Welfare Council, contributes to suspicions towards state support and difficulties in communication that can, in the end, feed into that already tense relationship. Ultimately, according to the study (Nijenhuis and van Liempt 2014), this dynamic precludes openness and support seeking on the part of the Somali community.

In the Netherlands, the issue of female genital cutting, a practice that triggered much attention on the part of Dutch authorities, occupies a particular place in this discussion. The practice has played an important role in the tensions built within Somali households in the Netherlands. While the practice is widely spread in Somalia, it is forbidden and punishable by law in the Netherlands. Since 1993, the Dutch state has taken a stance against 'female genital mutilation' (Nijenhuis and van Liempt 2014: 85). According to the penal code (articles 300–04, 307 and 308), 'female genital mutilation' is considered a form of child abuse and is therefore punishable with a maximum prison sentence of twelve years or a fine of a maximum of €76,000 for those involved in the process: parents, main care takers, or anybody who supported, gave instructions, paid for it, supplied means with which the procedure was carried out, and/or helped during the procedure.

The issue of female genital cutting has entered the public debates in the Netherlands from a wider discussion on multiculturalism and its so-called failure. Baukje Prins and Sawitri Saharso (2008) show how the discussions related to migrant women moved from the periphery to the centre of public debates after 9/11. They argue that public critiques of multiculturalism have been going hand in hand with issues related to gender and sexuality, such as female genital cutting, the wearing of the headscarf and homophobia, among others (Prins and Saharso 2008: 368).

Although no official studies are available on the topic of Somali families and child protection measures on the part of the Dutch state, some of the women from the first wave I talked with mentioned situations in which families, and especially families led by single mothers, were officially monitored by Dutch child care institutions in the past, leading, in some situations, to children being placed in foster care.

With regard to the issues of child abuse, childcare shortcomings and their potential consequences, most of the respondents from the first group portray the situation as being less dramatic than is perceived from the outside. Faduma, for example, who has lived in the Netherlands for fifteen years at the time of the fieldwork, mentioned a situation in which her children's teachers were asking the children inquisitive questions regarding the situation at home and their parents' behaviour. Additionally, she brought up how a social worker monitored her family for three months and how, fearing her children to be taken away from her, she threatened with contacting a lawyer. This, according to her, ended the monitoring.<sup>5</sup> The women leaders of the community believe, however, that these measures are sometimes too drastic and have strong negative effects on women's and children's lives. Amina, for example, mentioned how taking children away seems too

5. Interview with Faduma, Amstelveen, 3 July 2018.

6. Interview with Amina, Amstelveen, 5 July 2018.
7. Interview with Idil, Amsterdam, 6 July 2018.
8. In my Ph.D. ethnographic fieldwork next to Somali women, I also investigated diaspora formation processes in the Romanian and Turkish communities from the Netherlands. In these two groups, many women were part of Facebook groups dedicated to Turkish, Romanian or more generally expat mothers' groups that played an important role in the initial steps of diasporic coming-together.

harsh a decision, especially when advice and support could, most of the times, be more efficient and sufficient to solve the situation.<sup>6</sup>

When it comes to the practice of female genital cutting, the women from IFTIN provide information to newcomers about the risks involved medically and also legally if such practices were to be performed on underage girls. Idil is one of the people who offers information on the subject during the activities organized by IFTIN. She mentions how many women lost custody of their children because of this practice, with some of them even being sentenced to prison. In her view, it is a lack of knowledge that leads to these kinds of complications, people not being aware of the consequences and the context they find themselves in: 'It is pure lack of knowledge. They did not know [...] now you can tell people what the risks are'.<sup>7</sup>

Based in the collective memories of the diaspora, and remembered and narrated by women leaders of the community, this women-based diasporic network works actively to prevent situations that can affect the stability and safety of Somali families, and especially that of mothers and children. The issue of mothering therefore becomes central in diasporic formation processes via a form of preventive gendered support, born out of the collective remembering of the tense, past relations between the community and Dutch public institutions. Here, 'diasporic memory' (Lacroix and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2013) has a role of utmost importance for the cultural reproduction work that Somali women engage with to maintain the diasporic communities they are a part of. The materialization of the Somali diaspora via the events organized by IFTIN, especially the parenting classes offered to women, is based on memories of tensions between, on the one hand, the Dutch state, and authorities involved in child protection specifically, and, on the other, the Somali community living in the Netherlands, and particularly Somali mothers. Experiences of Somali women belonging to the first group of refugees coming to the Netherlands – such as difficulties related to parenting and the possible dire consequences in terms of child custody – are part of the collective diasporic memory of the community, shaping not only the type of inter-generational diasporic support offered by volunteers from IFTIN but also the form this diasporic network takes. The way in which Somali mothers from the second group talk about Dutch society, their lives in the Netherlands, and the parenting classes they attended further strengthens this argument: in contradistinction to leaders of the organization, the newcomers first declare being very satisfied with their conditions of living in the Netherlands, their social interactions, and the general reception in society. They do not mention any tensions with child protection institutions or schools. The preventive character of IFTIN's activities thus comes to the fore stronger when the two groups are compared. This dimension is then an illustration of how diasporic support is built based on memories of harm from the past that might be repeated, provided that newcomers do not benefit from the guidance of the community's 'elders'.

These inter-generational encounters however are not primarily based on digitally mediated diasporic networks that many migrant mothers living in the Netherlands make use of to support each other and share experiences.<sup>8</sup> Their encounters are rather mediated either by state institutions during the refugee status processes, or by family, friends and neighbourhood networks. This aspect will be addressed in the section below.

## THE SALIENCE OF THE 'LOCAL' IN SOMALI MOTHERS' DIASPORIC COMING TOGETHER

9. <https://www.whatsapp.com/features/>. Accessed 14 April 2021.

This section contributes to discussions related to the multi-sitedness of diaspora formation and especially how the local context (state and municipal policies, local institutions), as well as everyday experiences, inform diasporic media use.

All Somali women I talked with make use of digital communication technologies to keep in touch with family and friends from abroad, located both in Somalia and elsewhere. This mediated communication is also part of their everyday coming together, be it in the context of IFTIN's projects, local events organized at the neighbourhood level in *buurthuizen* ('community centres'), or more informal ones. The Somali women I interviewed are familiar with, and use in their daily communication, a variety of social media platforms and applications: from the more known ones in the Netherlands, such as Facebook and WhatsApp, to video-chat and video-call platforms such as Paltalk and Imo, or the instant-messaging platform Viber. This polymedia environment is congruent with the strong transnational dimension of the Somali diaspora's engagement across different nation states. The use of media platforms is dependent on the locations of those with whom people engage in communication as some platforms are more popular in certain areas around the globe than others. All respondents mention having family members not only in Somalia but also in the United States, in European countries, or in African ones. The women from my study are thus part of different digitally mediated groups (WhatsApp or Facebook) with family members who live outside the Netherlands but also with other diasporic groups where political issues are discussed, or where, in other instances, gendered topics are covered.

The strong transnational dimension of the digital media use of the women I have talked with is in sharp opposition to the national dimension of their digital media use for diasporic formation. Most women are not part of any digital media network or digital group dedicated to Somalis, Somali women or Somali mothers living in the Netherlands. What is, however, stronger in terms of diasporic coming together is the local context, especially at the neighbourhood level. Here, WhatsApp appears to be the most used social media platform, mediating local gatherings between Somali mothers I have talked with. Indeed, together with the specific use of WhatsApp groups to keep in touch with family, the same feature is used to create and maintain ties between smaller groups of women who interact on a more regular, everyday basis (groups with mothers from school, groups with women who participate regularly in activities organized at community centres, etc.). Through WhatsApp, small but more significant groups ensure everyday diasporic communication both transnationally and locally, supporting as such the platform's own stated purpose with regard to the group feature:<sup>9</sup> 'to keep in touch with the groups of people that matter the most, like your family or coworkers'.

How Somali women create friendships with each other and get to know other members of their community relies much on their neighbourhood and local interactions. A few women have described this way of expanding their social network, within the Somali community but also with other women of migrant background from the area, as 'via, via'. This expression is often used in the Dutch language as a way to describe how one got to know a person, obtained information, etc. It refers to meeting people through another person. Digital media platforms are thus not in themselves contributing to the expansion of diasporic networks but are rather used for the support and the maintenance

10. This approach has a history in Netherlands' approach to religious diversity. The pillarization system allowed different faith-based communities (catholic, protestant, etc.) to make up their own institutional arrangements – schools, hospitals and so on – via public funding (Entzinger 2006: 3).

of everyday communication. Unlike situations in which groups of newcomers built their own, new digitally mediated networks via digital media, the Somali women I have talked with seem to have a more localized, offline network of social connections that is less dependent on digital media in its formation.

In the following, I bring forth several possible interrelated factors that might have contributed to the more localized dimension of the Somali diasporic formation within the Netherlands and the weaker organization at the national level. The first explanation relates to Dutch public policy approaches to migrants' integration, and the subsequent development of an institutional support network via *stichtingen* ('foundations') or *buurthuizen* ('community centres'), inter alia. Even though the current approach to integration has, in recent years, taken a turn towards more individual responsibilities for integration, the institutions mentioned above still function, with some occupying an important place in the social life of multicultural neighbourhoods. Indeed, according to Han Entzinger (2006: 1–3), the Netherlands has been known for its public policy with regard to migrant's integration and its emphasis on multiculturalism by setting up a *verzuiling* ('pillarization') system. Since the late 1970s, a number of measures were taken to support migrant communities' self-organization and cultural identity.<sup>10</sup> Despite the turn towards assimilationist policies instated at the beginning of the 2000s, the institutional legacy and the sociality formed around it, facilitated encounters between 'ethnicized' migrants. In the context of diaspora formation and the role of digital media, I argue that these established institutional and social ties in multicultural neighbourhoods contributed in the case of the Somali community de-centred the role of digital media in diaspora formation processes.

The second factor influencing the localized and less digitally mediated diasporic coming together of Somali diaspora relates to the phenomenon of onward migration, which the Somali community in the Netherlands has been confronted with over the past years. From the early 2000s onward, many Somalis from the Netherlands have relocated to the United Kingdom (see van Liempt 2011). An important part of the community leaving to the United Kingdom affected national diasporic formation processes. As such, within the bigger institutional constellation, one of the important elements in the formation and maintenance of the (national) diaspora – the community elites – has become less strong.

Third, there is a high level of dispersal at the level of the community. In terms of geographical representation, the Somali community is relatively spread out throughout the Netherlands due to the Dutch policy regarding the reception of asylum seekers. The aim is to distribute the costs across multiple municipalities and reduce the imbalance between smaller and larger cities (Nijenhuis and van Liempt 2014: 72). Even more so, while asylum seekers from reception centres are intentionally discouraged from integrating (in case the application is rejected), for those who succeed in obtaining their refugee status, housing can be offered in any location in the Netherlands, with little control over this decision on the part of the refugees themselves. All these factors corroborated can then explain the salience of the local dimension in the diasporic formation of Somalis in the Netherlands.

## DIGITAL MEDIA ECOLOGY OF SOMALI MOTHERS FROM AMSTERDAM

The diasporic digital media ecology of the women who participated in this study consists mainly of two main sets of practices: everyday communication practices, with women in their physical proximity; and transnational communication practices, with family and friends in Somalia and elsewhere in the world. In alignment with previous research on the Somali diaspora, these two dimensions reflect the double spectrum the Somali diasporic identity and engagement is constructed upon: on the one hand, there is the dimension of integration efforts associated with the managing of life in exile, and, on the other, there are the strong transnational efforts diasporic Somalis put into supporting the country of origin development wise (Kok and Rogers 2016: 24; Kleist 2008a, 2008b). Contrary to beliefs that the two allegiances – both to the country of origin and to the country of residence – are incompatible, both dimensions are therefore part of the same process of multi-sited diaspora identity formation (see Erdal and Oeppen 2013 for the co-occurrence of integration and transnationalism in migrant people's everyday lives).

The digital aspect of Somali diaspora networks has been addressed by Saskia Kok and Richard Rogers (2016) in their article 'Rethinking migration in the digital age: Transglobalization and the Somali diaspora'. In their endeavour to explore the role of the web in identity formation processes and diasporic engagement through medium-specific methods, Kok and Rogers argue that Somali community formation is mostly shaped by their social integration practices in the host land. However, they continue, these processes co-exist together and alongside national and transnational diasporic engagement in a structure they call 'transglobalization'. They define transglobalization as 'the dynamic state of migration, traceable online, in which national networked formations exist alongside the local as well as the transnational, each operating with knowledge and awareness of the other yet acting separately' (Kok and Rogers 2016: 42). Basing their findings solely on their online explorations, the authors offer a more general understanding of how the Somali diaspora manifests in online spaces, at the local, national and transnational level. Their perspective, however, suggests an intrinsic quality within the Somali diaspora that favours preoccupations for integration in the host land, running the risk to locate diaspora formation outside hierarchies of power and in an ahistorical framework.

In this article I show however that the formation of the Somali diaspora in the Netherlands was determined not only by processes located within the community itself (efforts for integration, transnational ties with the homeland, etc.), but also by Dutch policy measures on migration, and the social and political views on diversity, racial, religious and gender differences in the host-land. The specific fears Somali women developed in relation to their children's custody, together with the institutional legacy of managing migrant communities contributed together to more intimate local encounters. At the same time, this context limited also the possibility for Somalis to come together in larger diaspora groups at the Dutch national level.

## CONCLUSIONS

This article investigated how Somali women from the Netherlands participate in digital diaspora formation. I firstly foregrounded mothering experiences for the understanding of diasporic coming together. I argued that diasporic

motherhood contributes to particular gendered ways in which women from the diaspora share knowledge and support each other. Diasporic mothering has been proposed as a site where difference and belonging are negotiated through work of cultural reproduction, collective identity construction and stable homemaking. I then analytically distinguished between two generations of Somali women in relation to their arrival trajectory and their living conditions in the pre-migration moment. Third, I showed that Somali women's participation in diaspora formation is shaped by mothering experiences together with Dutch policy approaches to migration. I finally suggested that these specific local and national practices and policy measures support rather neighbourhood-based and physical encounters as primary in diaspora formation. In this sense, the role of digital media in the creation of diaspora spaces has yet to play a determining role, as it is used mostly for maintaining already made diaspora ties. While digital media is used in everyday social encounters, both locally and transnationally, it does not have a primary role in how people bond in their everyday lives. In this sense, while digital and social media can enhance connectivity, it seems to work best in communities where people have limited to no physical encounters.

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## CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Laura Candidatu is a lecturer in the graduate gender programme, Department of Media and Culture Studies, at Utrecht University, the Netherlands. Her work focuses on the relation between diaspora formation, digital media and mothering. Parts of her Ph.D. research findings can be found in the journal *Global Networks* and the *Handbook of Diaspora, Media & Culture* (Wiley, 2019).

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4784-4940>

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