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## **“Women in Groups Can Help Each and Learn from Each Other?”: The Role of Homosocial Practices within Women’s Social Networks in Building Local Gender Contract**

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# **“Women in Groups Can Help Each and Learn from Each Other?”: The Role of Homosocial Practices within Women’s Social Networks in Building Local Gender**

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## **Abstract**

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Feminist scholars struggle to articulate gender relations in different contexts. Using the concept of local gender contract – a place specific agreement of gender relations, we explore how women’s networks challenge or shift gender contracts in their communities. Based on two empirical case studies of women’s groups from Eastern Africa and Thai migrants in Sweden, we show gender contracts are challenged through women’s homosocial activities. We highlight tensions between gender contracts and the women’s goals revealing a complicated process of assent and resistance. This study expands gender contract theoretically and provides a way to understand vulnerable women’s activities.

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**Keywords:** local gender contract, homosociality, women’s social networks, East Africa, Thai migrants, Sweden.

# **“Las Mujeres en Grupos se Ayudan y Aprenden entre Ellas”: El Papel de las Prácticas Homosociales de Construir Contratos Locales de Género en las Redes Sociales de Mujeres**

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## **Resumen**

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Las académicas feministas tienen dificultades en articular las relaciones de género en diferentes contextos. Utilizando el concepto de contrato local de género – un acuerdo de relaciones de género específico a un lugar, analizamos como los grupos de mujeres desafían o cambian los contratos en sus comunidades. Basado en dos casos de estudio de grupos de mujeres en África del Este y de mujeres tailandesas en Suecia, demostramos que los contratos de género han sido desafiados a través de las actividades homosociales de las mujeres. Resaltamos las tensiones entre los géneros y los objetivos de las mujeres revelando un proceso complicado de acuerdo y resistencia. El estudio amplía de forma teórica el concepto de contrato de género y presenta una manera de analizar las actividades de las mujeres vulnerables.

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**Palabras clave:** contrato local de género, homosocialidad, redes sociales femeninas, África del Este, inmigrantes tailandesas, Suecia

**O**n a dark cold windy November night in Stockholm, Thai women gather from across the city to celebrate Loy Kratong, the Thai festival of light. A Thai community organization has rented a hall to celebrate the event and share their community with family and friends. The event is open to all and approximately 100 people mill inside and outside the facility. The hall is organized in long tables to allow large groups to share meals while watching a showcase of Thai cultural events; dancing, boxing, among others performed on a stage. The highlight of the evening is a beauty pageant where ten women compete for the title. The event is interspersed throughout the other performances of the evening. The women are dressed beautifully in traditional Thai clothing, their hair is coiffed and their movements are graceful. They move across the stages elegantly and ‘wai’ the audience in a feminine and graceful manner. The audience, primarily Swedish men clap and cheer for their favorite women. They buy roses, at 5 kronor (0.6 USD) a piece, to cast their votes towards the winner. The MC, a Thai man, brings humor to the evening by pretending to be a contestant as well – as elegant as any of the woman on stage despite his well-fitted suit. The music is loud and the mood is festive! Friends and families are gathered to eat while gossip is exchanged. Events like these are not uncommon within the Thai communities. Many groups gather to raise money for such causes across the country by having such events.

In a small town, a few hours from Stockholm, a similar group of Thai women gather together to raise money to build a temple. For them, the nearest temple is at least three hours away by car. Their need for the temple is highlighted in particular this evening. A dear friend has passed away of cancer, the first Thai woman to die in the community, one woman told author 1. We want a temple to celebrate her life, and we do not want to have to have the funeral party in a shop, she went on to explain. The shop with its bright orange walls is a sharp contrast to the importance of this event. The women are happy to come together to honour their friend. They each bring dishes and set up a large and generous buffet. The women sit bare-footed and listen to the monks, who were driven to the small city by a network of volunteer as they chant sitting under large pictures of the store’s products. There is sad and happy conversation all around. Outside the shop, approximately 10 -20 Swedish men chat and smoke in the dark night. The

men stand separate from their wives' community and yet an integral part of the evening.

Meanwhile in East Africa, women gather on a Sunday afternoon for a *harambee*, a weekly meeting where they gather their savings and distribute it rotationally to a member of their group. It is 4 pm and as the typical breeze of the dry season is starting and the light is starting to dim, women, on their way back from the fields with their hoe on their backs and a small pouch with savings, gather in the backyard of Margaret's house. This week she is the one assigned to receive the group contribution and she has invited everyone for a dinner of millet *ugali*, *sukuma wiki* (vegetables) and *chai*. As women greet each other, they are given a plate full of *ugali* and they sit on the mats placed on the ground outside Margaret's mud house, Lydia, who has been elected secretary for this meeting, gathers money contributions and notes everyone's name and the sum they have given. Their contribution can vary from 20 KSH (0.2 USD) to a maximum of 50 KSH (0.5 USD). During the dinner Margaret's explains that the money will go to pay the school fees of her son who is in secondary school. Margaret's husband is not supporting her, so she covers school fees are paid through *harambees*, and through petty trading of vegetables from her plot.

From the outset these stories, set in very different contexts, seem to have very little in common and appear to be worlds away from each other apart from shared patriarchal structures. Yet, they are similar in as both show how groups of women come together to achieve goals that they need as individuals and as communities. One way to understand these groups and their relationship to the social structures is through gender contract theory, a system of rules and regulations guiding gender relations. Local gender contract theory links gendered power relations, place and daily practices yet it remains unclear how individuals, working collectively, can ease the tensions of gendered power relations. We ask the question: How do groups of women challenge gender contracts? And how we can understand women's groups as a means to explore how women create or sustain gender contacts?

Using two case studies, this paper argues that gender contract is useful to understand tensions within gender studies regarding individual autonomy and social structures. By examining homosocial groups, we distance ourselves from unequal power relations between the genders and instead

examine the ways in which women engage with gendered activities in order to achieve changes for the communities and hence within the gender contracts. We show gender contracts both serve an important purpose in women's resistance and provide a framework for subtle and complicated shifting of gender practices over time and through flexibility. Our examples reveal how a gender contract lens brings to light the context of locality in order to understand tensions between individual and collective women's experience. Finally, by revisiting gender contracts we contribute to understanding the role of temporalities, localities and maneuverability when analyzing gender power relations.

### **Background to Our Case Studies**

Ethnographic data was gathered through qualitative methods stemming from two empirically different projects. Despite stark differences in our project aims and geographies, we discovered each project empirically informed a shared theoretical backdrop. In this sense, we emphasize the importance of locality in generating different kinds of gender contracts, yet, through the difference of locality – East Africa and Sweden – we can see shared characteristics of producing gender contracts. Despite vast differences in context, both groups of women were vulnerable, oppressed and stigmatized. In response to these conditions, women gathered and worked together to gain leverage to renegotiate the imbalanced local gender contracts that shaped their daily lives. The purpose of these case studies is not to provide an in-depth account of gender contracts in each of these locations; rather they are used as a springboard to concretize our theoretical exploration of how homosocial groups contribute to understanding the concept of gender contracts.

In Kenya and Tanzania Martina Angela Caretta carried out circa 100 in-depth interviews with both men and women and 25 focus groups with the help of local assistants (for a more in-depth analysis see [Caretta, 2015a](#)) during a total of nine months resident fieldwork. Ethnographic material was transcribed and categorized according to the four analytical variables of locality, negotiation and power. This project comes from a larger interdisciplinary project focuses on irrigation practices.

In Sweden, Natasha Webster completed 16 narrative interviews with Thai migrant women. Interviews often coincided with daily activities, cooking together or attending social events. She conducted participant observation in community and cultural events hosted in different locations in Sweden. Interviews took place with other stakeholders in Sweden such as religious leaders. Material is drawn from transcribed interviews, field notes and observations. This research was part of a larger project focused on rural migration.

### Women's Harambee in East Africa

Since 2010 M. has been carrying out research on gender and environmental issues in East Africa. Her research explicitly focuses on how women's microcredit groups actively adapt to climate variability (Caretta and Börjeson, 2015), while carrying out her current research in Kenya and Tanzania, she observed women groups engaging in shared activities: saving, self-help, mutual support in agriculture, traditional dance and beading of decorations. Traditional networks of mutual support have long been present in Sub Saharan Africa. They function as safety nets in times of emergency – burial, hospitalization or school fees payment. During the 1970s and 1980s, they grew in number fuelled by the *Harambee* ideology (Johnson, 2004). Literally “pulling together” in Swahili, *Harambee* refers to a call for communal work which any member of the community can make whenever in need of assistance.

While widely spread throughout East Africa, it could be said that these networks are particularly crucial for women living in the sites that M. studied. Several communities in the dry-lands of East Africa would not be able to survive without the historical irrigation systems that have been dug by local groups in the last 400 years at least (Tagseth, 2008). In several of these communities women are excluded from the praxis and the management surrounding these systems (Caretta, 2015a). They are considered dirty because of their periods and cannot touch water to irrigate or are not allowed to partake in meetings deciding how water should be allocated. Water control is an expression of masculinity which hinders women's access to resources, especially if they are widows or their husbands is absent. Often they might find themselves in the situation where they have to pay a man to

be able to keep their crops from dry up and dying putting in jeopardy the wellbeing of their children (Caretta and Börjeson, 2015). Through these activities, *Harambees* are truly a life saver for women.

In this remote community in the Kenyan dry-lands the local livelihood is completely dependent on the gravitational irrigational system that has existed at least for the last 400 years. Women have ever since been excluded from the management of this irrigation system and are not allowed to water fields as local taboo has it that they will poison the water. Women's situation is not however one of pure subordination. They resist to these ties of dominance. *Harambees* are one means to achieve this. By saving money women can administer personally the sum of money they get and hence they can gain a certain level of independence from their husbands. Most importantly, those women who are alone can afford to pay a man to water their plots for them. Women and men are greatly interdependent. Men are in control of water, but women are responsible for subsistence farming and for the whole reproductive work require to sustaining a small farming community.

Local languages define *Harambee* with different terms: *embesi* for the Maasais of Tanzania and *ēēruun* – cooperation among neighbors – or *sukōōm* – between women when one in the family delivers- among the Marakwets of Kenya. When money saving is involved, this practice is called *eng'ibati* among the Maasais of Tanzania and either *chepkormen* (literally “something you put in your pocket to be used later”) or *cherutoyo* (literally “visiting one another” – as meeting take place in different people's home every week) among the Marakwets of Kenya.

Homosociality materializes through savings and collective work carried out in the fields during sowing, weeding and harvesting. By working together in the field women carry out tasks more quickly than alone, thus ensuring each other's families' food security. *Harambees* that support money collection for an emergency are defined as *Merry Go Round* to signify that happiness and opportunities rotate among members. These rotating saving and credit associations meet monthly or weekly to gather and distribute funds on a rotational basis. During fieldwork in the Rift Valley of Kenya, M. was invited several times to take part in women's *Harambees*, which appear to be more prevalent than men's, indicating the influence of a local gender contract. In fact, it is socially acceptable for men to travel to



urban centers; they can more easily access formal financial institutions and so do not need to form informal saving groups. *Harambees* are called once a month on a Sunday afternoon – the only free time of the week – by women spreading the word while in the fields.

*Harambees*, as a homosocial practice, are the bricks through which local gender contracts are built. They are joint enterprises for collective action which share the vision of improving their individual and their families' livelihood through a joint routine of saving and farming (see also Singh 2015, Andersson and Gabrielsson, 2012; Anyidoho, 2010). Labor pooling is at the basis of intergenerational learning. While sowing, weeding and harvesting, older women share knowledge with younger women. This happens while men work in groups to repair and maintain the irrigation systems, which is a clear indication of the interdependence among genders and the character of the local gender contract. Self-organized saving groups are a learning opportunity for women who cover different administrative roles within these groups as secretary, treasurer or head whose responsibility is to keep track of attendance, to gather money and to summon meetings.

### **Migrant Thai Women Networks in Sweden**

Approximately 26 000 Thai-born people live in Sweden of which 80% of these are women; most are marriage migrants; thus the group is geographically dispersed across the country (Webster and Haandrikman, 2016). While this trend sets the Thai community apart from other immigrant groups in Sweden; it is not an unusual trend globally. In the United Kingdom, the majority of new British citizens from Thailand arrived due to intermarriage (Mai Sims, 2012). Thus, Thai migration to western countries as a feminized and heterosexualized flow can be understood as a type of global gender contract (for more see Parreñas, 2011; Piper and Roces, 2003).

Buddhism remains a widely practiced religion in Thailand. Several Buddhist Thai temples are peppered throughout Sweden but the distances between them are great. Buddhism and temple life are a central part of daily activities for many of the women who migrate to Sweden and this geographic challenge has led to the formation of social networks in order to fulfill spiritual and social gaps. As Simla explains “We need monk or temple

too, so we make *Tak baat* (merit) or donate for next life, that is what we believe in” (14th October 2011).

Temples provide religious support and disseminate information from the Thai embassy in Stockholm; for example, information on Swedish migration laws, social services and even in some circumstances temples become ad hoc women’s shelters for those escaping domestic violence (Interview with religious leader; September 21 2011). Malee, whose Swedish husband died suddenly found herself without money or supports in Sweden; it was an existing temple she turned to, she explains the importance of community resource:

And I is too tired. I have no power. The thing is, [I] just want to throw everything away. I don’t want anything. So I have to stay in temple ...I lived in temple to make everything away, cool down a little bit. (13th May 2013).

The demand and need for the support a temple provides cannot be underestimated. However, without formal implementation directives from Thailand, Thai migrants must create and build these resources themselves and by doing so engage in their local gender contracts created through their migration story. Due to the gendered character of Thai migration to Sweden, women’s networks inherently address issues specific to women’s lives in Sweden.

In one region, an informal organization was formed to initiate a temple and, in the meantime, provide a space (a small rented room) for spiritual needs. This group provides a forum for regular interactions through meetings for meditation as well as problem solving, sharing experiences and providing integration support. In more established Thai migrant communities in Sweden, for example in urban areas, more formalized cultural groups work to raise funds and supports temples. Fundraising activities are generally homosocial activities which are mobilized through gendered practices. Women raise funds aligned with their needs for example a future temple in the future or a forum for their children to practice Thai culture. Through these activities, new migrants learn from more established migrants representing belonging and a new type of intergeneration learning where more experienced migrants teach new arrivals. Women’s networks play a central role in helping women adapt to life in Sweden. They are become

forums for challenging and maintaining gender contracts through homosocial practices. This case highlights the complexity tensions within community and marriage norms.

### **Local Gender Contract**

Gender is a social structure created in and by society, which has both controlling and transformative effects on individuals (Risman, 2004). Feminists, across disciplines and locations, have struggled with understanding how gender relations can be understood universally (Charrad, 2010; Maitra, 2013) Yet it is clear that within diverse social structures, women and men are entangled in complicated power relations. These dynamics, according to the Swedish historian Yvonne Hirdman (1991), can be analyzed through a gender system theory, which she calls the ‘gender contract’. Gender contracts are a set of rules created and governed through conflict and cooperation at the societal level (Hirdman, 1991). These rules are not arbitrary as outlined here:

[Gender contract is a] pattern of implicit rules on mutual roles and responsibilities, on rights and obligations, and it defines how the social relations between women and men, between the genders and generations, and also between the social production and reproduction are organized in our societies (Raintalaiho and Heiskane, 1997, p.7)

Gender contracts are understood as a tacit agreement between the genders; it is a constructed process rooted in the materiality of sexed bodies (Lindeborg, 2012). Gender contracts are performed and regulated by individuals in a society but they are not agreements made by two people – rather gender contract is a term given to the societal process of gender relations. The contract, despite its rigid sounding name, is the result of collective consent and resistance of gendered practices in both the productive and reproductive spheres. Homosocial practices reify the gender contract through practices within a same gender group.

Homosociality and negotiation are key to producing gender contracts between gender groups. Hegemonic masculinities persist through male homosociality which are relational to women and built upon their subordination (Bird, 1996). Hirdman argues men are perpetually shape the contract according to a gendered division of labor which leaves women in

the reproductive sphere, while men occupy the public and productive spheres. Male dominance in economic networks privileges masculine practices (Forsberg et al, 2012). Women are allowed into the productive sphere only when it facilitates men's tasks and does not threaten their authority (Hirdman, 1991). Homosocial norms are a manifestation of an ordering process within society stemming from gendered norms (Lander, 2013). Thus, a contract regulating activities and gendered norms take shape and permeate throughout daily practices. Generally, gender contract theory has relied on the level of structural analysis of "institutional" (Forsberg, 2001, p.55) and "gender and generations" to explain how gender contracts are formed (Raintalaihho and Heiskane, 1997, p.7). Gender contract literature to date has relied on state to individual structures in order to identify gender contracts and to track how they change.

In more recent developments, gender contracts have been studied at the individual level for instance research regional variations of gender contract in Sweden (Forsberg, 2010) and local gender contracts in Norway (Grimsrud, 2011; Gerrard, 2011); housing conflicts in Southern Africa (Larsson and Schlyter, 1995); women's self-help housing in Botswana (Kalabamu, 2005); the renegotiation of the LGC in Laos due to the rubber boom (Lindeborg, 2012), gender adaptive capacity to climate change in Kenya (Caretta and Börjesson, 2015) and landscape formation in East Africa (Caretta, 2015b).

By bringing the concept into geography, Forsberg (2010) shows gender contracts are specific to areas and are embedded to localities. A gender contract is dependent on a specific local cultural and resource setting and so Forsberg (2010) redefined the concept as a local gender contract (LGC). This conceptualization responds to earlier sociological questions on the role of gender in shaping and transforming society in relation to the element of space (i.e. Rose, 1993). A local gender contract is sensitive to the specific resources and practices in a given place and so addresses complexity of understanding gender relations across diverse geographies.

Forsberg states: *To study gender contracts is thus to: a) identify the sex/gender distinctions in specific places, b) analyse the gendered actions of institutions and individuals, c) characterise the structure of power relations in the construction and maintenance of the contract as well as the resistance and tendencies to weaken the contract* (Forsberg, 2001, p. 55).

Thus, gender contracts are not universal; notwithstanding they share an embeddedness to their unique local context. Gender contracts emerge from shifting contexts and so are not static or immutable. Nonetheless, inequalities between the genders remain constant (albeit to different degrees depending on location) and significantly local gender contracts respond to changes and shifts in the local space. Gender contract, as opposed to other gender-related concepts such as `gender regime` (Nordenmark, 2013), `gender structure` (Risman, 2004), and `doing gender` (West and Zimmerman, 1987), assumes the modification of power dynamics stems from negotiation (Forsberg, 2010; Raintalaho and Heiskanen, 1997). All societies and social groups follow a set of spatially and socially tangible and temporally specific gender contracts. Given that the presence of gender contracts are universal (not the type of contract), understanding the processes of gender inter- and intra-relations from contrasting groups, like our case studies, may give unique insights to feminist scholars.

However, questions of how to operationalize gender contracts remains a strong critique of the concept. Identifying negotiation and understanding the process of gender contract formation is a theoretical challenge. The repertoire of strategies for resistance and manipulation of contracts is under discussed (Gemzöe, 2002). An emerging body of work (Forsberg and Lindgren, 2015; Forsberg et al, 2012) shows gender contracts are present in regional homosocial networks. However, there remains a need to understand how homosocial groups create, resist and/or renegotiate gender contracts in small groups. Additionally, the link between spaces and places and adoption, adaption and resistance to gender contract is in need of further explanation. We use our cases to explore how homosocial practices are an important part of the production of gender contracts, something previously not explored in depth.

## **Discussion**

Having presented the backdrops to our research projects, we now turn to exploring the ways in which gender contracts can offer a new lens to understanding gender relations.

### ***Temporality***

Normally LCG is analyzed from a structural perspective and is, one could argue, outcome oriented. LGC are grounded on the idea of negotiation between genders as a way to move from one local gender contract to another one. However, when we turn to looking at small community homosocial groups, a shift in perspective reveals that gender contracts are continuously challenged on different temporal scales. Certainly the literature on gender contracts suggests change is occurring but because of its large reliance on structural outcomes, for example labour participation, the process of negotiation is missing from the analysis of changing gender relations within women's groups. The case studies take on a different time-scale to gender contracts which highlight the tensions found in everyday gender relations. Thus, while gender contracts are agreed upon as a social structure, different individuals respond to these challenges in a variety of ways.

Our case studies reveal that shifts in gender contracts are a slow process with small scale wins (and losses) accumulating over time (Leira, 2002). For example, as a Thai shelter, temples provide supports in a context that is comforting to women yet systematic violence and abuse remains (Fernbrant et al, 2014). Negotiations are not necessarily associated with substantial marked changes in gendered power structures as they are manifested through small changes found in the working arrangements of everyday practices (Webster, 2016). Instigated by small negotiations at the family level, which in turn influence societal working arrangements, overtime these negotiations yield changes in the shared understanding of femininity and masculinity and so new gender contracts emerge (Caretta and Börjeson, 2015; Hirdman, 1990). Group dynamics can create a safe place for practicing negotiations and even testing new forms of engaging in gender power relations before applying to the broader social structures. There is a temporal aspect to these changes as they are marked over time. Shifts in meaning and practice take time. By incorporating a time aspect it is easier to see how tensions in gender contracts are acute in different stages of the life course, for example post-migration or seasonally such as during the harvest.

In Marakwet, Kenya, women's tasks in farming and their participation in traditional celebrations– weddings, burials and circumcisions- are mediated through local communities of practices, all of which are time-based in an

individual's life course. Women's identity is tightly related with their membership in these joint enterprises, and specific time life events – e.g. circumcision, childbirth - as they learn from other members and can count on each other for assistance. *"Women in groups can help each other on how to bring up small children and women learn from each other about health and small business, for instance"* (Lilian, 25<sup>th</sup> August 2013). These groups embody their role as mothers, food producers and homemakers. Women decide autonomously from men how to manage their farming practices, how to ensure the irrigation of their plot when a man is not around, and the arrangements of saving groups. Women participating in saving groups and labor pooling during harvest time, a seasonal time scale, discuss how to sell their maize and black beans and how to generate profit from reselling sugar and tomatoes. Thus, their identity is materialized by their membership through learning in timed joint enterprises for collective action (see also Andersson and Gabrielsson, 2012). While this is a clear example of learning and of how identity is negotiated and reinforced through the groups, such instances are less common among the Maasais of Tanzania than the Marakwets of Kenya. Group members in Tanzania in fact mention that: *"Whenever our husbands have money they use them to drink. Having or not having a husband is the same thing: they just want to be fed. And we use the money we get from the group also to feed them in order not to be beaten when there is no food"* (Alice, 28<sup>th</sup> August 2013).

Alice's quote suggests that the group dynamic supports planning for difficult times as well. Creating social security for each other within the group is a temporal response to difficulties with the existing gender contract. Nevertheless, group membership does not necessarily equate to gaining bargaining power more broadly in society, quite the contrary it equates with maintaining the current standing of gender relations. Thus, the positive and empowering connotations implicitly attached to group dynamics and social networks should not be overestimated, as groups can be grounded on conservative practices and hinder change from happening but still are very important in addressing needs at specific life events. Women, in fact, are not only in a subordinated position, but they participate in the group not to challenge their unjust condition, but rather to avoid further conflict while creating shifts to these conditions in a long-term perspective.

Thai migrant groups raise funds by hosting an annual festival which includes a beauty pageant, Thai dancing, Thai boxing and various other traditional skills. This draws on individual bodily resources instead of material goods. Participants in the contests, separated by age groups, are the local women and their children who wear traditional Thai clothing. Preparation for the event is festive with formal hairstyles and makeup provided by friends and family. One woman interviewed, Mai, even subsidizes her yearly income by sewing Thai costumes locally for girls and women participants (13th October 2011). Swedish husbands and extended Swedish families make up the majority of the audiences attending these events. In Stockholm, women present themselves as feminine, graceful, and respectful:

The woman did some dancing and “wai” ed [sic] the audience. They stood and walked and posed at the center of the stage. Then the women lined up at the front of the stage and received roses. The woman who received the most roses would win this section of the contest. Roses were available for purchase and cost 5 kr each (<1 USD). (field notes, November 2014)

As shown in earlier literature (e.g. Singh, 2015; Mayoux, 2001), women participate in saving groups or fundraising groups as long as it does not challenge the gender structure of their household but it does imply changes throughout a temporal scale – both for life events and through the life course. Volunteer work is at the heart of the strategies employed by the migrant homosocial groups driven by community need and collective responsibility. Limited resources in Sweden drive negotiations over strategies for achieving goals and outcomes for Thai migrants who wish to build a community temple. This is a long-term goal with a view to building a sustained community in Sweden, where women can access resources needed by the community at different stages in their migration stories. Swedish state funding is not an option for this community group and there are few funds available from Thailand to build or maintain temples. Importantly, Thai women migrants generally do not have significant disposable income and what is available is often sent to Thailand in the form of remittances which are dedicated to a long-term family/household strategy (Angeles and Sunanta, 2009). Consequently, Thai women need to raise the funds



themselves locally to set up and maintain a charity through their volunteer labor. Donations and charitable contributions of clothes, rooms, medicines et cetera are routinely organized through the temple building group. As migrant women their ability to mobilize more formal channels of income generation are limited and so their volunteer labour is indicative of gendered practices which privilege male networks in formal economic sectors (Forsberg and Lindgren, 2015).

Fundraising is aligned with community and identity building where activities provide an arena to negotiate meaning of what it means to be Thai in Sweden. These homosocial practices represent an important process of norm-making whereby gender and ethnicity which are mobilized and performed by the group. Identity can be understood as a flexible gendered relation. Representations of Thai culture are carefully negotiated, selected and presented by the participants. The role of Swedish men evaluating their Thai wives and girl children is further evidence of the defining roles of male homosociality. Thus it is shown that gender is negotiated within homosocial groups but structure of negotiation is shaped by patriarchal norms. The event, itself, is a short moment in the negotiation where particular gendered performances of gender contracts are enhanced and performed. The beauty pageant implies an ideal type of gender contract which differs from day-to-day gendered activities yet it is mobilized in homosocial settings. The beauty pageant indicates a temporal relation to the performed and daily gender contract whereby simultaneous engagement and contradiction of gender, ethnicity and age are utilized.

The group dynamics highlight the importance of different time scales, in lived and age time, in understanding gender contracts. In the case of Kenya, learning happens on an intergenerational basis: older experienced women pass on to young brides their agricultural knowledge. In the case of rural Sweden, established Thai migrants help introduce new migrants to community norms. While Hirdman (1991) claims gender contract has an age dimension, no author so far has explored this aspect in -depth. We find an attentive homosocial analysis can contribute to deepen the understanding of the age (or intergenerational) variable within LGC. While age is an important indicator of status in Thai culture, in this locality, LGC negotiations are aligned with the migration event creating a unique perspective on intergenerational learning. Children performing their dances

are an important part of inter-generational learning and group activity creates a quasi-public space for their children to learn these collective norms despite being far removed from Thailand. Experience comes from time spent in Sweden and not age. Yet the principle of passing on knowledge applies accordingly.

While analysis of LGC have often brought to light how renegotiation in individual gender contracts influenced the overall societal contract, exploring small groups unwinds how women re-negotiate LGC within their own context. In particular, the Thai migrant community reveals how the mobility of identities creates room for new forms of negotiation based on different cues from the dominant social structure. It is clear the aforementioned group dynamics do not lead to substantial social change as both examples show how gender contracts are maintained despite group activities. Nonetheless, learning processes in the group could be seen as trials for larger scale negotiation. Through homosocial practices women find strength in each other and the varying time-scales is utilized to challenge unequal power relations.

### *Maneuverability*

Studying local gender contracts at the community and group level reveals that negotiation is a complicated and flexible process. We show negotiation is flexible both in terms of time but as it relates to power. Women are required to be flexible in relation to the power structure sometimes yielding to the gender norms, as seen through the pageant, and at other times, openly resisting power structures. This implies that the gender contract is constantly negotiated through flexible and elastic interpretations of rules and regulations.

While *Harambees* are loosely regulated, rotating saving and credit associations are common among women and require consistency and commitment. In fact, Kenyan members are fined for their absence and excluded from the group after a certain number of absences without justification. In this sense these groups are characterized by horizontal accountability; women value these networks for the strong bond of reciprocal trust that is created among them (Singh, 2015).

In Marakwet, Kenya, men inform women groups' leaders of cleared plots that are ready to be sown or of upcoming celebrations where women should perform traditional dances. Informing women is a manifestation of men's homosociality and thus of power relations. In Engaruka, Tanzania, women state: "*You will not ask ladies to help you in your field because the crops belong to your man and you will not gain anything from it*" (Anita, 26<sup>th</sup> August 2013). This statement highlights the subordination of Maasai women throughout their life course: first by their fathers who prioritize marriage over education and then, by their husbands' expectations of bearing several children while also carrying out agriculture (see Archambault, 2011). Women's constricted initiative reflects a male driven *modus operandi* both within the household and in agriculture. Yet, women report that husband's support them being part of a women's group because "*they know one way or the other that they will get some advantage*" (Ella, 29<sup>th</sup> August 2013). This statement is a testimony to men's homosociality: letting women participate to groups' savings and activities to profit from them (see also Mayoux, 2001). On the other hand, water, the most important productive resource is in the hands of men, practically stopping women from enhancing their group activities.

Women in strongly patriarchal societies, such as Kenya or Tanzania, do not have the same status as men and may lack self-confidence and group management skills. Women's life conditions are dictated by the decisions taken by their fathers. Recently, in some cases, girls have been allowed to attend school instead of marrying between the age of 12 and 16 (see also Archambault, 2011) indicating maneuverability within gender contracts. The objectification of women, finds Bird (1996), to be a key practice in maintaining hegemonic masculinities. This can be seen in the Swedish example as well, where patriarchal practices direct the actions undertaken within a group.

Thai migrants work together to build a temple, a long-view goal, which will serve spiritual needs as well as practical supports for an established migrant community. The temple, in many ways, represents a way to build and coalesce power for the women. Existing temples serve many roles to Thai migrants beyond spiritual guidance; they serve as community centres, language schools, legal and visa support and even as shelters for women fleeing from domestic violence. The women, who are working towards

building temples, are willing to use the skills and resources that are readily at their disposal. Their own bodies, as sexualized and feminized bodies, are one way to achieve these goals. However, at the same time, the practices and resources required to achieve this goal reinforces LGC through dominance and subordination of the material female body to the male audience. Beauty pageants, women presented for appreciation, and masculinity, to gaze upon and evaluate, harkens back to traditional gender contracts. Vertical gender hierarchies create maintain power relations within LGC. Yet within the group, gendered femininities are negotiated horizontally to create a long-term benefit that creates benefits beyond the current community. The beauty pageant is on one hand a serious endeavor while the other, a chance to laugh and mock gender roles. This interplay between humor and earnest gender performances highlight the flexibility of gendered social structures. It is humorous because everyone in the audience recognizes the arrangements of a gender contract and yet the performative character of resistance is vital.

Group activities highlight the way horizontal and vertical powers relations are flexible concepts with a temporal perspective. Negotiation with a gender contract, then, may be focused on creating change that does not necessarily benefit the individual but rather creates a sphere for future negotiation. By working towards a temple, women engage with their current resources with the hope of a better future for their children and/or other future migrants. By having a resource in place for future migrants could shift the power dynamics for both individuals newly arriving in Sweden as well as for the whole community. Flexibility in articulating or using power is present throughout the event. Certainly, events such as these may expose unresolved hotspots in local Swedish gender relations (Mattsson and Pettersson, 2007). These events define and legitimize specific LGCs where “exotic” beauty, materialized in bodily performance, is displayed for consumption by the dominant male homosocial group. It raises questions about how men negotiate gender contracts as well. Through their support of the event they sustain the current contract but the gaze of male dominance could shift within the new local context of a community with resource. By examining the role of women’s collective work and response to their needs it is important to explore the notion of flexible power; one that shifts in time and context. Certainly, it would be easy to assume patriarchy has set the

framework for an event such as these but the homosocial practices reveal a more complicated relationship between gendered power relations.

Accordingly, LGC can contribute to a deeper understanding of power and especially vertical accountability within a group dynamic. Working with different scales of temporality and flexible power, homosocial practices become an important way to understand how gender contracts are constructed. Group dynamics created gendered systems of belongings which appear to be important to maintaining LGC structures. The group and community dimensions were briefly mentioned by Hirdman (1990) and tentatively studied by Caretta and Börjeson (2015), but never operationalized in the analysis of gender contract.

### **Conclusion**

This paper brings forth an empirically-grounded discussion of gender contracts. By interpreting disparate case studies we have sought to advance the understanding of negotiating and constructing local gender contracts as they are formed in homosocial groups in relation to patriarchal systems. Local gender contract, as seen at the homosocial level, highlight the temporal and flexible aspects of power in gendered social structures. This helps to address challenges faced by feminist scholars to articulate gender relations in diverse setting (e.g. Charrad, 2010; Maitra, 2013). The experiences of Thai migrants and East African farmers do not share a common context, but they do share temporalities and flexibilities in their responses against patriarchal structures. By building upon the concept of local gender contracts through homosocial practices, this paper asserts the importance of gender sensitive analysis of local social networks in order to explore a more nuanced and localized understanding of processes of power. Our intention with this paper is to stretch the concept of gender contract in order to better understand the interlock between gender practices and social networks.

Local gender contract allows us to reflect on the nature of women's work. It is volunteer and invisible work but does not necessarily stem from altruism (Stowe, 2013). These women help each other in the fields and cook food for monks -classical examples of economies of care (see Razavi, 2007) - but do so with very specific aims. Again here, analyzing these common

enterprises solely through the lens of social structures would not elucidate their intrinsic gendered nature nor highlight the gains and motivations behind collective work. The gendered nature of this trend attests to the strength of LGC in forming modes of belonging and exclusion where gender is regulated through horizontal accountability. Thus homosocial work practices can be seen as part of the formation of gender contracts and not merely a result of existing gender contracts. This is a significant addition to gender contract theory by opening the sphere of contract negotiation to women-led activities.

Group dynamics and the results of shared learning are fully contingent upon local social structures. Our study stands in contrast to Hirdman, gender contracts are produced and used to create power relations within women's groups in opposition to men. Our results show a more subtle understanding to gender contract as a means of negotiation amongst women as well. Thus, to operationalize gender contract applicable in other contexts, we suggest the further exploration of community level groups to study how gender contracts, rooted in specific spatialities shift and change, according to the need of individuals. . For example, by identifying what can or cannot be challenged within a social groups reveals the intricacies of negotiation between these concepts

In this article we show how the actions of the individual, and in turn, of the group, are shaped by the underlying local gender and power norms. Accordingly, we discuss how power is manifested and challenged through small-scale practices by individuals (within the group context) in terms of temporal and flexible changes. The group routines women engage with do not necessarily counteract male homosociality: women remain in a subordinate position. Men are not the focus of our examples yet they remain important in how women may conceive their gender roles and shift power relations. Men are active participants, through their homosocial hegemonies, which shape the ways in which women maneuver and strategize over time. Instead, this type of analysis allows us to explore how women, working together, create opportunities to meet their needs within patriarchy and in opposition to it. Women in Kenya, for instance, could monetarily contribute to the household budget and hence decide on how it could be employed. Thai women are working to build a temple, a shared community resource,

which may, in time, decrease their dependence on husbands for local information.

The broader implications of this study are relevant to vulnerable populations like migrants and women in the global south where sensitivity to their lives is required. These conceptual understandings emphasize power maneuvers of small changes overtime. Together these concepts may be better equipped to challenge hegemony discourses on the role of women in society by highlighting and demanding attention to the role played by women's social networks in encouraging women's agency in daily life.

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