

Somali women and peacebuilding

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During the Somali civil war many women found themselves at the centre of conflicts fought between their sons, husbands and other male relatives. For the sake of their families many women have been active in peacemaking and peacebuilding.

In Somali society it is men, specifically the elders, who traditionally have the means to make peace through dialogue and mediation. But although women are typically excluded from decision-making forums where peace accords are negotiated, their position within the clan system gives them the ability to bridge clan divisions and to act as a first channel for dialogue between parties in conflict.

Women have also been effective in influencing elders and others to intervene in conflict and have mobilized resources to finance peace meetings and support demobilization. While men typically focus on achieving a political settlement, with the assumption that peace will ensue, women's vision of peace exceeds this and includes sustainable livelihoods, education, truth and reconciliation.

Women have also led the way in mobilizing civil society engagement in peace work, although few of their initiatives for peace have been documented. Many women peace activists have found the struggle for peace inextricably linked to that for women's rights.

In internationally-sponsored peace processes women have successfully lobbied for places in decision-making forums and for seats in parliament. And they have made some gains in formal politics, holding seats in the different Somali parliaments and some cabinet posts. But their political role remains severely compromised. The emergence of religiously driven politics presents Somali society with a new challenge: some Islamic groups are supportive of women's participation in politics; others are against it, which threatens to undermine the few political gains that women have made.

This article speaks to the vision of peace that Somali women embrace, the initiatives they have embarked on and the outcomes of their efforts.

Women, tradition and local peace processes

The war against Siyad Barre's regime in the 1980s was seen as a just cause by many Somalis and many women participated in the struggle to end the dictatorship. Those who earned respect from their participation later used this to demand concessions from warlords and militias. Several became leading members of civil society and the women's movement and became engaged in peacebuilding.

But with the collapse of the state, women also lost the legal status and equal rights that had been afforded them. While women have actively engaged in peacebuilding, the gendered nature of clan-based politics means that women are typically excluded from full participation in peace talks.

It is commonly said in Somalia that while women can build peace only men can make it. One reason for this is that a woman's affiliations with her father's clan, and her mother's, husband's, children's and son-in-law's clans, mean that a woman's clan loyalty is perceived as unpredictable. They therefore are not included as clan delegates in negotiations and decision-making forums that can affect the fortunes of the clan.

By the same token a woman's multiple clan affiliations can give her a structural role as a peacebuilder, enabling her to act as a conduit for dialogue between warring parties and to exert pressure on them to keep talking.

When mobilized, women play an important influencing role in local peace processes, especially if they have wealth, are related to clan elders or come from a respected family. In Puntland, in response to one conflict, elderly women from several clans



Medina Mohamoud Elmi ("Generale") addresses the Mogadishu forum in June 2005, where an agreement was reached to clear the city's roadblocks © CRD

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approached the leaders and demanded a cessation of hostilities. Their message was simple: ‘we have had enough displacement in our lifetime and at this age we can’t tolerate it anymore’. This mobilized clan elders and leaders to intervene and ensure the conflict was peacefully resolved.

Peacebuilding conferences in Somaliland, in Borama and Sanaag (1993) and Hargeisa (1996), would not have taken place without the collective lobbying of women pressurizing the elders to intervene to end the conflicts. But despite their efforts, and confirmation from religious leaders that Islam offered no grounds to exclude them, women did not participate in the talks themselves, other than as fundraisers and cooks. After exerting pressure on their clansmen, ten women were allowed to observe the peace talks in Borama in 1993 and eleven were allowed to observe the 1996 Hargeisa Conference, but had no voting rights.

One of the powerful lobbying strategies women have used under such constraints is poetry. In the 1998 Garowe conference in Puntland, Anab Xasan, frustrated by what she called ‘male power-grabbing and selfishness’, recited a poem that left many men in tears. Reportedly, after hearing the poem the elders agreed to allocate women seats in the administration.

*Oh men, why don't you realize the difficult circumstances that
We are now facing?
Or keep the land and we will emigrate.
When the rhythm for rebuilding slows down, we rally and mobilize
For the purpose. We are always beside men, never behind them.
We are at the forefront of peace and reconciliation,
We are ready with what it takes to resurrect good government.
But you men ignore our advice and inspirations,
You suffocate our intellect, so it never sees daylight...
Be warned, we are now awakening after a deep sleep and
passivity.*

(Excerpt translated by Faiza A. Warsame)

For the most part, male delegates dictate the shape and form of negotiations. Women remain in the conference venue as

observers and as pressure groups ensuring that any challenges that would cause a break-up are promptly dealt with.

Puntland and Somalia allocated quotas for women parliamentarians of eight per cent and twelve per cent respectively. Somaliland has no quota system and in the 2005 parliamentary elections only two out of the 82 seats were taken by women candidates, and only one of these two was elected.

Women, civil society and peacebuilding

Excluded from the all-male arena of clan-based politics, women have directed their collective political acumen and agency into the civil society space that opened up after state collapse. Within the somewhat inchoate definitions and boundaries of civil society, Somali women have operated as key players and shown keen leadership. Indeed some women would argue that Somali civil society organizations’ engagement in peace work did not start until women took a dedicated leadership role.

Inspired by their involvement in the Beijing Conference on Women in 1995, women in Mogadishu in 1996 built on their growing experience in cooperating for peace to establish the Coalition for Grassroots Women Organizations (COGWO) as a platform for peacebuilding that united women’s voices and efforts. COGWO has worked to promote women’s rights and to support victims of violence, but its major contribution to peacebuilding in Somalia has been in stimulating the engagement of civil society organizations (CSOs).

In 1997 a workshop of CSOs organized by COGWO in Mogadishu concluded that it would take more than dialogue among a small group of warlords and their international patrons to secure a lasting solution to the Somali conflict. The organizations at the meeting made a commitment to take action to overcome the obstacles to peace: warlords and their supporters in the international community, certain businesspeople, elders, militia, and irresponsible media, and inaction by civil society.

The first step taken after the workshop was to set up the Peace and Human Rights Network – *Iskuxirka Nabada iyo Xuquuqal Adamiga* (INXA). This was a turning point in Somali politics and CSO engagement in peace processes. INXA became a platform that politicians wanted to associate with, including the warlords, who saw it as an opportunity for political survival because the public was fed up with them.

In addition to those mentioned, the range of peacebuilding activities that Somali women are involved in can be illustrated by the following examples from south central Somalia:

- *Human rights* Mariam Hussein, widow of the human rights lawyer Ismail Jumale, founded the Ismail Jumale Centre for Human Rights to monitor and record human rights violations so that perpetrators could be brought to justice once proper institutions were in place.
- *Disarmament* The IIDA Women Development Organization of Merca was founded by Halima Abdi Arush, a former teacher, headmistress and education inspector, who lost her husband and many members of her family in the Somali conflict. Initially formed to support internally displaced populations, in the mid-1990s it started a daring initiative to disarm and retrain young militiamen. In a direct challenge to the warlords, the programme required militiamen to commit to refrain from violent acts and to hand over their weapons. In return they were given tools, training and start-up capital. Some 156 militiamen were demobilized and their rifles melted down.
- *Peace and security* The network Women Pioneers for Peace and Life, known as HINNA (*Haweenka Horseedka Nabadda*), was formed in 2003 by former women fighters, such as the late Medina Generale. They became ‘peace pioneers’, organizing peace campaigns and using the respect they earned as fighters to intervene with militia and warlords to diffuse tensions at critical times in Mogadishu.

HINNA's first major campaign in 2005 was to remove 42 roadblocks from Mogadishu and to encamp and retrain the militia. With the agreement of warlords and militiamen HINNA mobilized resources from businesses and CSOs and established two camps. A lack of international assistance, however, meant that the camps could not be sustained and the boys returned to the roadblocks.

At the time US-led counter-terrorism action involved huge payments to warlords to deliver individuals on Washington's terrorist list. As the warlords needed to engage their militia for this, it undermined the women's plans for further

demobilization. Some of the women were later involved in mediating between the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) and certain warlords who had held and deported individuals they suspected of being on the US terrorist list.

- *Political advocacy* In 2007 IIDA initiated the Somali Women's Agenda (SWA), linking Somali women in the diaspora with those in the country. Based in Mogadishu and with branches in several Somali regions, its members are engaged in promoting peace and advocating for the appointment of women in local councils and regional administrations.

Such initiatives have attracted support from international donors who have seen civil society pressure groups as an essential counterweight to the faction leaders, warlords and clan elders who have filled seats at internationally-sponsored peace talks. In 2000 the Djibouti government accorded civil society organizations a prominent role in the Arta reconciliation conference. In the peace talks in Kenya (2002-04) civil society participation was supported by the European Commission (EC) and other donors.

Women and internationally-sponsored Somali peace processes

In theory at least, international support has afforded women civil society activists an entry point into externally-sponsored peace processes, which had previously largely been a male preserve. In the Arta conference in Djibouti and the Mbagathi conference in Kenya, women made inroads with their participation and representation.

The Arta process coincided with the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. This stresses the importance of women's ‘equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security, and the need to increase their role in decision-making with regard to conflict prevention and resolution’.

At the Arta conference women lobbyists succeeded in convincing Djibouti President Omar Guelleh to secure a position for women in the talks and quota of 25 seats for women in the 245-member parliament. The achievement was somewhat undermined, however, when women were selected by men on the same clan basis as male MPs, using the ‘4.5 formula’, rather than on merit.

Two years later, at Mbagathi, conference organizers categorized women together with civil society. Some 100 women from diverse backgrounds tried to take part in the conference on this basis, which at its height had over 1,500 male delegates. The lines between civil society activism and politics were blurred and some political opportunists sought to gain seats under the civil society banner.

With the conference management *de facto* in the hands of the faction leaders and their regional supporters, just 55 women were given places: 21 as officially registered observers and 34 as official voting delegates. Of these, 26 women took part as members of faction groups or the TNG. A woman sat on each of the Reconciliation Committees established as part of the process, and two women participated in the powerful 'Leaders Committee', consisting of 22 faction leaders and five members of civil society.

Women therefore made some gains in terms of their formal participation at the Mbgathi talks because of international support. However the Transitional Federal Charter reduced the quota of parliamentary seats allocated to women at Arta to twelve per cent in the larger Transitional Federal Government (TFG) parliament. Political leaders have since failed to uphold even this number and when a woman vacates her seat her clan fills it with a male candidate. Consequently women made up only eight per cent of MPs in the 275-member parliament. Since the parliament was expanded in January 2009, women make up only three per cent of parliamentarians in the new government of Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed.

Looking forward

Somali women-led civil society organizations have achieved much in the past two decades. They have helped to disempower the warlords, reduced the significance of clan affiliation, ensured civil society representation is essential to any peace and reconciliation process, and made progress on the participation of women in politics. But Somali women still face constraints in breaking through gender-based inequalities and cultural and practical barriers to equal political participation.

It will be interesting to see how women fare in Somaliland where male dominated clan politics has, theoretically, been replaced by multi-party politics. Women have exercised the right to vote in large numbers in the three elections that have been held since 2002. Civic activists and the Nagaad Umbrella Organization have been educating the public on women's leadership and have supported women's candidates in elections. But they face a strong cultural bias against female leadership in government, among both women and men.

In south central Somalia the challenge is daunting. An increase in violence since 2006 has deepened insecurity for everyone, undermined some positive civil society developments, stalled progress towards the formation of a stable government authority, and brought religiously-driven politics to the fore.

In theory women have more rights under *Shari'a* than they do under Somali customary law, which treats them as legal minors. Under a moderate Islamic government women could gain in terms

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of increased political rights. But militant Islamist groups like Al Shabaab and Hizbul Islamiya promise no good news for women's rights or the civil society space that Somali women have managed to occupy and evolve since 1991. Somali women point out that under traditional law women are in principle protected from killings. In some areas under Al Shabaab authority women have been targeted and face increased strictures on their rights and organizations.

International diplomatic engagement in this context also faces tough dilemmas. UN SCR 1325 enjoins international peacebuilding efforts to ensure the full participation of women. To insist on this risks accusations of imposing foreign values and alienating Somali society. Not to do so risks undermining the rights of Somali women.

Finally, civil society organizations and activists should take some responsibility for failing to build upon their successes. After the Arta conference, for instance, CSOs relaxed and did little to monitor the progress of the TFG and hold it accountable. Instead several activists joined the parliament or the cabinet. Similarly CSOs have failed to ensure that seats allocated to women in the TFG are filled by women only. While they have succeeded in addressing some internal obstacles to peace in Somalia, they have not addressed regional and international ones.

The Somali Women's Agenda provides a platform around which to mobilize a common internal and international agenda in the face of these on-going challenges. This time there should be no relaxing until threats to peace and the road to recovery are decisively dealt with.

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