

CASE STUDY

There is more that unites than divides us: Women-led peace and dialogue initiatives in the Somali Regional State

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Ugaaso Women's Dialogue Space (Ugaaso-WDS), is an advocacy organisation and a platform for women leaders in the Somali Regional State (SRS) of Ethiopia. It brings together women leaders across political and social backgrounds to drive women's political inclusion in the region. Through a Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund Rapid Response Window (WPHF-RRW) grant, Ugaaso-WDS worked to empower women leadership in the peace processes of the Somali region, with the aim of building trust amongst people from both sides of the conflict towards a shared vision.

The SRS in the East of Ethiopia has been one of Ethiopia's most conflict-affected regions. The Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) has been fighting for self-determination for Somalis in the SRS since 1984. They won the elections for the first SRS regional assembly in 1992, and turned to armed insurgency in 1994, following disagreement with the federal government over self-determination rights of the Somalis. The Kenyan government facilitated the peace process between the ONLF and Government of Ethiopia which began in 2012. In 2018, the Asmara Peace Declaration was signed between the government and the ONLF, stipulating that both sides would cease hostilities and the ONLF would pursue its political objectives through peaceful means. This peace agreement and the change of government in Jigjiga (after the former President, Abdi Iley, was removed from power in August 2018) has brought relative peace and opening up of the civic and political space in the Somali region. Some of the notable achievements in SRS since 2018 include the following - ONLF demobilisation and transition to a political party; establishment

and operationalisation of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission; self-mobilisation and organisation of victims and survivors of past human rights abuses and violations; emergence of a vibrant, albeit weak, civil society space and several dialogue and dispute resolution mechanisms such as Inter-political parties platform's Joint Dispute Resolution Council, Women Dialogue Space (WDS) and Council for Peace and Unity. However, this relative peace remains fragile and needs further investment to address and resolve root causes of the conflicts in the region.

Amidst these changes in the conflict and political landscape in SRS, women's meaningful participation in governance and peacebuilding has been heavily limited throughout this period, including in the Asmara peace agreement and subsequent ongoing peace and political processes. For example, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) has only two female commissioners out of its six commissioners. This reflects the broader barriers that women in the Somali Region have faced in political participation, including gender norms, inter-clan and patrilineal dynamics and socio-political marginalisation, detailed in a separate publication, which also shines a light on Ugaaso-WDS' broader work on advancing women's participation in politics.

To help address women's exclusion from peace and political processes, Ugaaso worked to connect different women peacebuilders, strengthen their skills, and build support amongst decision-makers for women's involvement in the peace process. They also leveraged their cross party membership to broker dialogue between women party leaders at critical moments.



Strategies to connect and empower women leaders in peacebuilding

- Provided mentorship and support, strengthening the mediation and advocacy skills of women leaders in peacebuilding.** Ugaaso-WDS was founded in 2021 as the only woman's space of its kind in SRS, bringing together women from parliament, opposition parties, civil society, academia and education, media, art, business, and other sectors of society, including women with disabilities, from marginalised clan groups, and different religious groups. Several members of Ugaaso-WDS serve as regional peace mediators and women peace ambassadors in the region, and Ugaaso-WDS has also built expertise in providing mentorship and capacity building support for women's political participation. Through the RRW-funded project, Ugaaso-WDS provided training programmes on conflict resolution, dialogue facilitation skills, and advocacy.
- Developed strategies to generate support for women's political participation, which it was able to bring to peacebuilding processes.** Ugaaso-WDS organised advocacy meetings with participants from standing committee members, women's caucuses, regional decision-makers and the Bureau of Justice, to advocate for a 20% women's quota in the Guurti. Ugaaso-WDS also held separate dialogues with major political parties recognising the importance of women participation in the peace process.

- Built trust between political parties and bridge divides between them.** Its membership includes women across political parties, including PP and ONLF, along with other opposition parties' members, and Ugaaso-WDS has developed close working relationships with key members from both ONLF and PP. Ugaaso-WDS was able to facilitate five engagements between women leaders from ONLF and PP parties, providing the platform through which women leaders across parties collaborated on reducing tensions during ONLF anniversary celebrations, a traditionally volatile period.

“Building connections with women from other areas has inspired me.”

Feedback from an advocacy workshop on training women leaders and peacebuilders in conflict resolution and mediation, attended by 100 women leaders and peacebuilders

Ugaaso-WDS' ability to bring parties together has also given it legitimacy beyond women leaders. Ugaaso-WDS aimed to facilitate a meeting between ONLF and PP's leadership, leveraging its longstanding non-partisan and inclusive reputation, and existing relationships with elders and religious leaders. While the meeting was delayed beyond the timeline of the RRW project, the leadership of PP recognised Ugaaso-WDS' role as a mediator for future discussions with ONLF, and informal communication with President Mustafa suggests a willingness to engage.

Achievements: Building women's leadership for cross-party collaboration

- **Increased confidence of women in conflict mediation:** Women who attended Ugaaso-WDS-led training had a marked increase in self-assurance; where they initially expressed hesitation about engaging in mediation given cultural and gender norms, they later shared instances of intervening in conflicts within their households and communities.
- **Increased commitment to female leadership in peacebuilding by other leaders:** Trainings, workshops and other activities helped shift community perceptions about women's leadership in traditional structures, where women are typically not seen as capable of mediating. Nowhere was this more evident than in the recognition of Suldaanad Marwo Abdi as a female traditional leader (Suldaanad) by the women of the Women's dialogue space in a formal ceremony, an unprecedented event in the Somali region where traditional eldership is reserved for male elders. The ceremony was widely shared on social media, and received recognition and congratulations by key figures such as Regional President Mustafa and prominent clan elders. Two women were also chosen as National Women Peace Ambassadors, promoting women's visibility in national level roles.
- **De-escalated tensions by facilitating political collaboration across parties:** By bringing together women from across ONLF and PP, Ugaaso-WDS helped to foster political collaboration, particularly in conflict-ridden areas such as Kebridahar and Degahbour. The annual ONLF celebrations in Kebridahar on August 15th are usually a flashpoint for tension; historically, these events have been marked by violent clashes between ONLF and PP. In 2024, women participants from ONLF and PP worked together to ensure that tensions did not escalate into violence, contributing to peaceful celebrations.

STORY OF CHANGE: EMPOWERING WOMEN AS PEACEBUILDERS IN CONFLICT-AFFECTED COMMUNITIES

Political tensions between the ONLF and the government often spill over into local communities, with violence affecting civilians caught in these larger political struggles. Hani, a young woman from the Ogaden heartland, grew up in a region plagued by ONLF-PP tensions. She had witnessed first-hand the impact of violence and had a deep desire to support her conflict-affected community, but limited experience in peacebuilding. Hani attended Ugaaso-WDS' training on dialogue facilitation, held in March 2024. Following the training, she applied her newly acquired skills in dialogue facilitation towards organising a community discussion involving local elders, youth and women's groups, to address issues related to political tensions, land disputes, and inter-community violence.

Her efforts represented the first time that women in the community led the conversation on such issues. Hani's own calm approach and ability to mediate between conflicting parties also earned her the respect of the elders, who historically excluded women from peace talks. Indeed, the dialogue resulted in an agreement between conflicting parties in the community to halt violence and jointly engage in further dialogue. Hani's success highlights the importance of empowering women with the skills and confidence to actively participate in peacebuilding.



Recommendations: how can policymakers, donors and INGOs better support women peacebuilders to influence peace processes?

Strengthen mechanisms for women's participation in peace negotiations and conflict resolution

- Strengthen alliances with political leaders and key stakeholders to overcome cultural barriers restricting women's political leadership and participation
- Provide structured platforms for women's organisations to support, amplify and strategise together on meaningful participation in peace agreements

Promoting fair electoral processes

- Include measures to protect female candidates from intimidation, harassment, and violence.
- Establish independent electoral monitoring bodies with gender-balanced representation to oversee fair election practices.
- Implement capacity-building initiatives for electoral commissions to mainstream gender considerations in election planning, voter education, and dispute resolution mechanisms.

Providing finance training programs tailored for women candidates, covering fundraising strategies, budgeting, and financial literacy.

- Develop accessible financial management tools and software training to enhance women's ability to navigate campaign financing and political resource management.
- Advocate for gender-responsive political financing policies, ensuring equitable allocation of campaign funds and financial support for women candidates.

Facilitate Comparative Learning and Cross-Country Best Practices on women in peacebuilding

- Facilitate South-South learning exchanges, allowing Somalia and other states within Ethiopia to learn from initiatives such as Ugaaso, and for Ugaaso to learn from Tanzania's gender reforms.
- Encourage peer learning among women political leaders, civil society organisations, and policymakers to adapt best practices in governance, electoral processes, and conflict resolution.
- Support financial capacity building sessions for Women in peacebuilding

The Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund Rapid Response Window is a funding mechanism that addresses urgent funding gaps with targeted, short-term support to increase women's participation in peace processes and the implementation of peace agreements. WPHF is a flexible financing tool supporting quality interventions to enhance the capacity of local women to prevent conflict, respond to crises and emergencies, and seize key peacebuilding opportunities.

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