

International Peace Day Celebrations: The role of Somali Women in Peace Building and Conflict Transformation
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Sahro Ahmed Koshin, AGAD NGO, Galkayo, Puntland

*Peace! Peace! Peace assurance, I call
Everyone in society has a great role to play
Never to repeat previous mistakes
Never to shun responsibilities
Because peace is a collective responsibility*
Somali poetress Mariam Mohamud, Galkayo

How does warfare and armed conflict affect the lives of women and young girls in Somalia? Do women have a role to play in peace building and conflict prevention? Never before has a conference of this kind; exploring specific personal experiences of violence been organized in Galkayo. These questions were answered at a Somali women's conference on the occasion of International Peace Day September 21st 2012 in Galkayo. The event was funded by HIRDA, and it was attended by a good number of Somali women from different walks of life; doctors, lawyers, women's rights activists, students, stay at home mothers, politicians and women from the civil society in Galkayo. Also Somali women from the Mudug part of Puntland, Somalia were present. During the conference their voices, experiences and frustrations were captured.

New gender roles, new responsibilities

It is early morning and the first participants to arrive are the older women, I assumed mothers whose children are old enough to fetch for themselves or be left alone at home. There is a sense of sisterhood in the air and women greet and embrace one another. They look curious and keen to attend the peace day celebrations.

These women experienced war and each wrinkle on their face tells a different story. In Somalia mothers are respected as leaders and as peace builders, because they demonstrate capacity to resolve issues in their houses and within the wider community. During the civil war, these women acted as crucial peace builders by facilitating peace negotiations, taking part in mediations and community conflict resolution.

Specifically in Galkayo, these mothers gathered and protested during violent ethnic clashes which are still very much rampant in Galkayo. These roles have not been given to these

women voluntarily, they demanded it, and they fought for it. These new roles have enabled women to take up new responsibilities which in turn stimulated them to take up a more active role in their communities at large, not only in private business and within the household, but also visibly in peace building, leadership and state building processes.

Different speakers, different perspectives

The meeting kick-started with a representative from AGAD NGO welcoming the participants and highlighting main goals and objectives of the meeting. Different speakers touched upon the topic from different channels; the relationship between health, economics, society, religion and the absence of peace and security were thoroughly explored. Plenary discussions led by the participants themselves followed and this spontaneity triggered a heavy discussion.

Women's voices and experiences

A member of the group explained how she was personally affected by violence in her community. The woman had her phone stolen at least 4 times in the past 2 years. She and her entire family avoid going out in the evenings. Another woman explained how the often forgotten Somali women saved Somalia and its people, particularly the younger generation, during the war. Somali women were doing the hard work during the difficult times but when the good times have arrived they are not allowed to enjoy the fruits of the crops they planted or even reap them. During the war Somali women protected and helped the family and neighbors (children, the old and the sick), they took over the role of the women as well as that of the man. They became the backbone of the country in terms of producing and maintaining the future of their kids and educating the nation's young.

In a nutshell the challenges that the women face:

- Somali women are confronted with different kinds of sexual violence rape, FGM, domestic violence , early and forced marriage and need emotional and psychological abuse
- Somali women's resources are denied from resources such as land, livestock and wealth
- Lack of security and identification, IDs (sharci daro)
- Some traits of Somali culture and traditional leadership are an hindrance to Somali women
- Poverty and lack of shelter affect displaced women a lot
- FGM affects the lives of Somali girls in all spheres such as mental, social, in child labor, fistula

Specific challenges Somali women face in taking active roles in society

- There are little or no female representations in positions of decision making
- Existing grass roots initiatives are developed by women for women, but are not coordinated or prioritized in national strategies
- No consultation on strategies, imposed on women and forced to oblige
- Traditional customs, misinterpreted religion to portray chauvinistic and misogynistic beliefs as true

- Predetermined gender roles and glass ceiling effect for female advancement

The women gave the following recommendations:

- Weapons, even small ones, should not be used in areas inhabited by people, especially in IDP camps
- Resettlement of female IDPs and their security and safety, also upon arrival, should be guaranteed
- Community policing programs, methods and techniques should be started
- Articles that forbid and criminalize FGM in Islamic law and in the constitution should be adopted in the constitution and FGM should be included in the school curriculum
- Female committees should be formed so that they lobby for women's issues through the country
- Female police officers in police stations
- IDP women should be given legal aid support as well as paralegal help
- The numbers and quality of safe and good shelters should be increased
- Gender mainstreaming in all sectors, ministries, administrations, no limited to government but private sector as well
- Equal opportunity policies to ensure government action against businesses discriminating based on sex (without a mandatory quota for female mainstreaming, equal opportunities, social reintegration for recovery will not be able)
- Develop an implementation strategy resettlement plan for the IDPs
- Adopt a national 1325 action plan, consult women (state and non-state) grass roots bottom up approach in implementation
- Develop implementation plan and seek UN support in government accountability for up holding