

## **Building Peace in the Space of Civil Society: The Case of Somali Women**

I would like to thank Dr. Jalloh for inviting me to this conference as well as all the conference organizers. Thank you.

In this short presentation, I will provide discussion on women's gained space in the civil society space, the origins of women's organizations, their activism and their roles in peacebuilding in Somalia. I will also address some of the challenges facing them.

War affects everyone negatively but also transforms people positively, including women. In Somalia, the heroes have been Somali women who have been saving their war-ravaged nation. I would like to say that: "There are only two things going for Somalia: God and women. Both God and women have not let Somalia down. The war provided Somali women opportunity to re-examine their own identity as women (their status) and recognized their own agency and capacities.

### **Introduction**

Of all the Post-Cold War conflicts to arise in Africa, one of the most disastrous has been the collapse of the Somali state (legally and administratively) following a civil war in which Somalia degenerated into a collection of feudal enclaves, each controlled by a self-appointed 'warlord' and Islamic courts. The current Transitional Federal Government faces enormous challenges to assert its authority beyond Baidoa (is a tiny town).

Somalia is a nation plagued by hunger, disease and poverty. It is a nation facing a very complex humanitarian crisis.

The people of this nation have been experiencing economic, political and environmental insecurities. Women have been particularly affected as there are no publicly funded social services available (these include: employment, healthcare, education and protection). Even some of the gains which women made in education and politics were rolled back (the lost decade for Somali women).

In fact, the status of Somali women ranks at the lowest rank in the United Nations Development Report. Such setbacks will be costly for Somali women as well as the nation in the post-recovery stage. The international community has attempted since 1991 to resolve the political fragmentation of Somalia.

The needs of the people within the country have been the focus of sporadic relief efforts by humanitarian and development agencies. In addition, there are local organizations in Somalia that have been responding to the humanitarian crisis which this presentation touches. A question which needs to be asked is what contributions are Somali women making to building peace in their country? The Somali case tells us many stories, a collapsed state in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a nation facing complex humanitarian emergency, a peace issue, civil society and women's activism in a stateless nation.

Civil society is the arena in which people, associations voluntarily to advance common interests. In this presentation I am using Habermas' concept of civil society which means nexus of non-governmental or secondary associations ranging from churches, cultural associations, academies, independent media, sports and leisure clubs, debating societies, groups of concerned citizens, occupational associations, political parties, labour unions and alternative institutions. Civil society as a space, a site (for governance and strategic actions) of action and agency (actors). Civil society in Gramsci's conception becomes the site for the construction of a counter-hegemonic narrative.

Can we actually discuss about civil society in conflict zones (where the required resources and infrastructures do not exist)? Is there civil society in Somalia? Yes.

Micheal Edwards argues that the site of civil society is a potential site. It is where progressive politics including human rights, women's rights, good governance, sustainable development, peace and security do take place and emerge (2004). Civil society are crucial agents building new society out of the ashes. They are the best hope for promoting democracy, peace, women's rights and human rights. When I was in the field, I was really amazed by about how the NGOs / civil society have both sensitized / educated their members about human rights, women's rights, sustainable development/environment and governance discourses. Somali women have been using the civil society space to deliver services to vulnerable groups and build peace.

Scholars on post-conflict societies point to the ever-growing number of women-led non-governmental organizations in post-conflict societies.<sup>1</sup> Women's activism in various war-torn societies has been visible and continues to be a force which has not only been responding to the needs of their communities but also to the processes of peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction (Cockburn, 1998; El-Bushra in Jacobs et al., 2000; Kumar, 2001; Sorensen, 1998 and Tripp, 1998).<sup>2</sup> In Somalia, due to the insecurity, that international humanitarian aid agencies had to rely on the partnership of local organizations, and have contributed to the growth of local NGOs in Somalia and Somaliland.

One of the positive outcomes of the collapsed state and the civil war, is that women gained a space that they never had before. Women have been using it very effectively. (It was not an easy experience for women to occupy this space. They were harassment and violence was leashed on them. Most of the leaders of these organizations whom I interviewed stated that the community which they were serving misunderstood their work and their properties were vandalized and looted. They were stoned at and accused for indoctrinating women (it was women, children and youth, they target through their programmes). (Patriarchal institutions weaken temporarily due to men being involved with the clan-warfare and the power struggle). It is important to understand that the ways in which women are using this space as a form of resistance to violence, statelessness, poverty, and underdevelopment.

### **Factors which led to the formation of these organizations**

There are three driving factors which led women to organize and establish their own non-governmental organizations and to respond to the needs of the war-affected population. They include:

- The fall of the Somali state (statelessness, lawlessness and power vacuum). It was violently removed by armed opposition groups.
- The rupture of gender relations (men being occupied with both clan warfare and power struggle). As result, patriarchal structures weakened (temporarily). Somali women got the opportunity to reinvent themselves and reassert their agency in lawless nation.
- And the civil war and its devastating impacts on the people.

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<sup>1</sup> Women-led NGOs are organizations initiated, formed, and sustained by women. Women's leadership is very much pronounced in these organizations.

<sup>2</sup> I define peacebuilding as the rebuilding of relationships between groups in conflict. In the Somali context, this requires a re-achievement of the social relations of respect and cooperation between various clans which had existed prior to the civil war.

Thus, civil society, including women's organizations are products of the civil war (humanitarian crisis). Somali civil society emerged out of crisis – collapsed state, civil war and its humanitarian crisis negatively impacting on the people.

All the leaders of women-led organizations whom I interviewed in Bari, Nugal, Mudug, Sanaag and Hargeisa, had no previous experience of working in the NGO sector. Most of the leaders of women's organizations are educated, urban and middle class. They stated that they were compelled to assist vulnerable groups – women and children. “We had to do something to save the lives of our people. We could not ignore the humanitarian crisis affecting our people and community”<sup>i</sup> These leaders have sold their meager assets (jewelry) to set up a feeding programme, schools and so on. As the sufferings of the Somali people intensified in the 1990s, Somali women were confronted to respond to the humanitarian crisis. Some of these women's organizations may have lacked the skills, capacity and the required resources to carry out such daunting tasks. Similarly Somali women living outside of the country were compelled to do something for their families, neighbors, people and communities. Somali female activists who were inside Somalia sought the support of Somali diaspora, particularly women to finance some of their relief projects. Somali women in abroad have organized various events such as luncheon, dinner to collect funds from every individual who attended such events. There were even times when the clan card was used to encourage people to support their clans men and women who were in need of humanitarian assistance.

Women's organizations have been delivering much needed services to women, children and other vulnerable groups. They have built schools, clinics, wells, and supported number of micro-credit programmes for children, youth and women. It is through their services that reduce the vulnerabilities of people, particularly the youth (who can easily be recruited to militia groups). Many slogans are used by these organizations to promote the education of the youth – pick up the pen and put down your gun” – qalinka qaad qorigana dhig.

Somali women's activism and organizations in various communities in Somalia have been visible (even in remote places, you can find community-based organizations which operating in one tiny rooms) and continue to be forces which have been responding to the needs of the needy and traumatized groups of the population (mostly women and children). Women in Somalia and Somaliland have developed their own networks. There are three major women's networks (which 90 percent of women's organizations are member): The Coalition of Grassroots Women's Organization (COGWO), NAGAAD in Somaliland

and We are Women's Activists (WAWA). They cooperate and do carry out a nation-wide campaigns including FGM.

Their contributions to community development and peace-building initiatives are small-scale but yet are having enormous impact on the lives of ordinary people living in fragile situation. Their programmes are building new communities. In spite of the absence of state, war, lawlessness, chaos, poverty and under-development, Somali women have been participating in a new and vital civil society development in war-torn Somalia. The activities of such organizations are crucial and highly needed in post-conflict situation such as Somalia.

According to Edwards, these organizations are strategically located at what he calls the space of "microclimates in which skills are learned, values and loyalties are developed, and caring and cooperation – instead of competition and violence – become the rational ways to behave" (2004:41). Trust has been one of the casualties of the civil war. Women's organizations' programmes are formulated and implemented in way to foster unity, cooperation and trust among their beneficiaries. Various groups belonging to different clans residing in one locale are encouraged to work together in all stages of these projects. It is through these projects that have brought people from various ethnic groups to interact thus contributing to social peace. At the beginning each clan refused to work with each other due to mistrust and fear of the other. However, women's NGOs have assisted these groups to overcome such fears. There were clan leaders in certain villages whom were adamant to cooperate and work with other clans. Women's NGOs pulled their operations in these places and rewarded (with more projects and assistance) to other villages and towns where their inhabitants willing to cooperate and manage their projects.

Both their humanitarian / community development activities and the space of civil society which women have been occupying is and can be a political – where women are /can pursue (ing) their political struggle in war-torn country. It is their work and this space where women's organization can advocate for gender equality and resist new oppressive forces.

### **Somali Women's Roles in Peacebuilding**

Somali women's activism in peacebuilding is linked to their activism in war. Some of their contributions to the war included: songs, poems, encouraging men to fight, collecting funds and resources to finance the war, provided food, medicine and water to fighters. Women have been resourceful peacemakers/peacebuilders and have been building peace from the bottom up.

Somali women and their organizations have been making their share to the peace-building and conflict resolution efforts in their communities. There have

been numerous peace making and building initiatives carried out by women in every corner of this troubled nation. During periods of tensions, women established their own peace envoys and delegates (known as Ergo nabadeed) who have certain skills (good nature, personality, charismatic, well versed with the traditional and customary laws). Whenever violence erupts between two groups, women study the conflict, assess the impacts of the conflict on women and also study the prospects for peace. For example, the war between Ali Mahdi and the late Aideed – two powerful warlords who controlled Mogadishu and led to the division of the city of Mogadishu into two parts – North and South. A green line was set up to divide the people. Women who belonged to both of their clans (the Abgaals and Habar Gidir) crossed the check-up points as well as the greenline to check upon other women (from other side), and provided assistance to women and children affected by the violence. Often, women used various excuses to cross and checkpoints and used excuses that they are simply crossing these checkpoints to borrow salt and sugar from a friend who resides the other side of the city. In addition, they have mobilized resources and facilitated contacts and communication between the warring groups. In many communities in Somalia and Somaliland, women have traveled many miles to carry peace and reconciliation messages to warring factions. Women have also pressured local authorities to keep the peace in their cities. There is an initiative called Hufan – Hufan is the name of the leader whom organized all female boycott. Hufan and thousands of women in Bosaso sat in the Bosasso port aimed to disrupt economic activities for the local authorities/militia groups. Women did this sit in to pressure local authority to establish law and order in Bosasso town. It led to results. Even women have and do promoted peace and averted conflicts by pressuring their spouses in the bedrooms.

Thus, women's organizations have been pushing for an alternative – a bottom-up approach to community development, gender justice and peacebuilding and rebuilding in war-torn Somalia.

There are many challenges facing women's organizations in Somalia. They include:

- Lack of sufficient resources for them to meet the needs of the population. This is where Somali diaspora can help.
- Insecurity can hamper their activities.
- The lack of infrastructure, investment, high unemployment, and environmental degradation (charcoal burning) are barriers to both social and economic recovery – thus, making difficult for women's organization to do their work.

## Conclusion

It is the space of civil society where Somali women are not only building social peace but also transforming war-torn Somalia. I argue that it is the civil society space where women are clearly expressing that they are not accepting the tragic situation engulfed in their country. Women have been using their own experiences as victims, perpetrators and active agents to create a sustainable peace in a nation ravaged by unending civil war. The future of women's organizations and their activisms in the space of civil society will depend upon number of things: the new government, the Islamist group, their policies and actions towards civil society as well as their commitment to democracy, social justice and gender equality in war-torn country.

Thank you.

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<sup>i</sup> Personal interviews conducted from August 2005 to April 2006.