**Women Building Peace: Somali Women in Puntland and Somaliland**

**Written by Shukria Dini**

**Introduction**

Since the collapse of Somalia in the early 1990s following a protracted civil war, all Somali people have been profoundly affected. They have lost loved ones, their limbs, livelihoods, access to essential services, their properties and state protection, and have been forcibly displaced. In addition, women and girls have experienced gender-based violence, usually rape. Despite the negative ramifications of state collapse and the armed violence, women in Puntland and Somaliland have responded creatively to the violence, and have taken actions to stabilise the lives of their war-affected people and build peace in their respective communities. Anderson describes the importance of women’s contributions in resolving conflicts, pointing out that “they are frequently the first to take the risks necessary to promote dialogue across divided communities and move towards reconciliation.”

In these interviews, the women peace activists were asked how they contribute to peacebuilding in their own communities, including what strategies and approaches they use to avert conflicts. The real names of these women peace activists have been altered for security reasons.

The article examines Somali women’s contributions to peace in Puntland and Somaliland – regions that have functioning administrations and are relatively peaceful, compared to the south and central regions of Somalia. The first section examines the ways in which Somali women in Puntland and Somaliland conceptualise peace, and how they perceive it should be both maintained and built. In the second section, how women understand their own agency in building peace is examined. Such recognition has not only motivated these women to counter their marginalisation from formal conflict resolution decision-making, but also to step into the frontline of peacebuilding initiatives. The third part of...
this article assesses the extent to which women peace activists are averting conflict and building peace in their communities.

**Women in Puntland and Somaliland Define Peace**

The words peace and peacebuilding exist in the Somali language as nabad and nabad dhisid respectively. Women in Puntland and Somaliland aspire to genuine and sustainable peace in their war-torn communities. Haweya describes peace as “when there is no killing, discrimination, displacement and every member of a community feels secure socially, economically and politically”. Women in Puntland and Somaliland want peace that is not only the absence of armed violence, but also the absence of deprivation and violence against women. Women in Puntland and Somaliland describe peace and its importance for women:

“Peace is holistic and covers many things. For example, peace is when women have access to state protection (legal) and access to opportunities such as education. A peaceful society is one where women are not restricted by patriarchy and oppression. Women’s insecurity such as illiteracy, poor health, poverty affects the security of the nation as well. Promoting gender equality is prerequisite for peace in Somalia and Somaliland.”

Women consider their participation as central in building peace, which will lead to new relations and opportunities to achieve gender equality in post-conflict stages. Women in both areas note that building a lasting peace in their respective communities requires comprehensive and inclusive approaches, which address the root causes of the conflict:

“The vulnerabilities caused by the war and the absence of a central state must be addressed. As long as the people of Somalia remain insecure, it will be difficult to build a genuine and lasting peace. Peace cannot be built by giving a specific clan the presidency or other high positions in the transitional government. Such a [power-sharing] approach has led to more rivalry among clans and further marginalisation for Somali women.”

As illustrated by this quote, the top-down approaches to building peace – where power-sharing is often emphasised as a solution – will never succeed unless the root causes of the conflict are addressed.

**Recognising Women’s Agency in Building Peace**

According to Stamp, “...women’s agency resides in their communal endeavours and is constantly reinvented in the context of political and social change.” Following state collapse and militarised violence, women in Somalia have been using their agency to respond to the devastating outcomes of political disintegration and violence. A peace activist in Puntland asserts that:

“Women in my community do have their agency in everything that goes in their families and communities. They exercise their agency on a daily basis inside and outside their homes. Due to their tenacity and resilience, women have been making their families and members of their communities cope with loss and deprivation, caused by state collapse followed by the civil war.”

Another peace activist describes women’s agency as “necessary actions which women take in times of hardships to simply protect the lives of their families. Women’s actions are also intended to re-stabilise the hardships that may threaten the well-being of their families and communities. These actions include women’s involvement in resolving conflicts.” Women in Puntland and Somaliland recognise that they have agency in building and maintaining peace in their communities.

Women’s recognition of their agency in building peace is essential in gaining “space” to shape the decision-making of peacebuilding activities in their communities. However, the existing social structures and values affect women’s agency and participation in peacebuilding. Puntland and Somaliland are both traditional and patriarchal societies, and most decision-making for resolving conflicts and peacebuilding are believed to be the responsibility of men, restricting women’s direct roles in peace. As a result, Somali women’s agency – their ability to use and direct their authority within their realm of influence to contribute to the peacebuilding process – is manifested primarily at the community level, rather than at the regional or national levels. But the women peace activists interviewed in Puntland and Somaliland do want to influence the decision-making of peacebuilding at the regional and national levels.

Somali men are placed in a privileged position in the decision-making arena, including in the clan system and customary law. Somali women are not allowed to participate equally in communal meetings intended to resolve communal violence. Menkhaus highlights Somali male dominance with regard to traditional conflict management in Somalia:

“The central actors in traditional conflict management in Somalia are clan elders – prominent adult males representing the lineage groups involved in talks. They [men] can include notable religious leaders – sheikhs or wadads – as well. Their rise to a position of influence and eminence is based on hereditary status and a lifetime of earned reputation as effective negotiators, trusted mediators, moving orators, or wise and pious men.”
Women in Puntland and Somaliland are creatively affecting peacebuilding despite their marginalised positions.

While resolving and managing conflicts in Puntland and Somaliland are considered a man’s domain, women could potentially play significant roles as well. The exclusion of women is justified by the belief that women lack the necessary skills and experience needed to participate in conflict resolution decision-making processes, and women are then expected to support the decisions made by men without providing their input. As long as such perceptions persist, Somali women will continue to be marginalised from conflict-solving decision-making.

Women in both areas are critical of the male-dominated approach to resolving conflicts in their communities. The domination of Somali men in resolving communal conflicts not only affects women’s participation in the efforts to resolve conflicts in their communities, but also their security. For example, one method used by male peacemakers to broker agreements is where young women (who are virgins) are exchanged as objects (known as peace brides) to resolve a conflict between warring groups. This practice is known in Somalia as godob-reeb. It has a profound effect on the women who are involved with such exchanges, as they are forced into marriages against their will. Young women who had nothing to do with the crimes committed by their own clan men are used to compensate for the loss of lives experienced by one of the conflict groups, and forge new relations between the warring groups. A majority of the women interviewed in both regions were critical of this practice, and wanted it to stop. On the other hand, some women in Puntland and Somaliland support the practice of godob-reeb, provided that the young women who are to be exchanged as peace brides are not coerced into the marriages. If the peace brides volunteer to enter into these marriages, the female supporters of this practice see it as an effective way both to avert further bloodshed and form new relations through marriages between former warring groups.

Women in Puntland and Somaliland continue to be resilient and resourceful actors for insuring the survival of their families and for peace in their communities. For example, due to loss of livelihoods and spouses (who were the primary income-providers prior to the war), women have become the main providers and protectors for their families. As such, they have adopted coping mechanisms and income-generating activities to fulfil their new roles and responsibilities. They see the new roles and responsibilities that they are shouldering as
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Women’s insecurity such as illiteracy, poor health and poverty affects the security of the nation. Essential to the survival of their families and communities, and central to building the foundations of new relations and sustained peace in their communities. These women recognise their agency and resourcefulness towards peace, and they note that peace cannot be achieved in their communities without them:

“Considering the large scale of the conflict and the destruction the conflict has caused on our people and community, the time has come for Somali women to be the peacemakers and peacebuilders, and should not be restricted by any groups or institutions from fulfilling such important roles. To find solutions to the tremendous suffering, hatred and social divisions, we have recognised that we have roles to play in overcoming these problems.”

Somali women do recognise that they possess the skills and capacities – including knowledge of customary law, clan politics, poetry, religion, and experiences and knowledge of the psyche of their people – that can enable them to resolve and avert conflicts in their communities. In addition, Somali women’s marginalised position allows them the ability to build relations across divides with women and men from other clans. One of the peace activists interviewed in Somaliland underlines that:

“In our community, it is often men who are given the title of nabad-doon, the “peacemakers”, and not women – even when they [women] contribute to resolving conflicts in their community. The various ways in which women contribute to resolving and averting conflicts hardly receives the same recognition and appreciation given to men.”

Traditional conflict management in Somalia is neither democratic nor promotes gender equality when addressing communal conflicts at the village and national levels. Women in Puntland and Somaliland have been challenging this male-dominated approach to resolving conflicts, and want to expand the roles of women in it. An activist in Somaliland notes:

“The violence in our society has opened our [women’s] eyes that we [women] have crucial roles to play in building and maintaining peace.”

Another activist in Somaliland adds:

“When your house is on fire, can you afford sitting down doing nothing and wait for someone else to come to your rescue to put the fire out, or you do it by yourself? Well, Somali women recognise that they have important roles to play in putting the fire ravaging their homes out.”

Women in both areas see that their involvement in building peace as more urgent than ever before; that they cannot afford doing nothing. In fact, they see that their survival really depends on their agency in peacebuilding. If given the space to participate as equal partners in the peacebuilding processes, women will be able to make even more significant contributions. Another activist in Puntland states:

“Somali women should not and are not allowing Somali men to decide our future. Why should we let Somali men who ruined the country be the only suitable and designated peacemakers and peacebuilders. I am not saying that men are unable to make and build peace. But Somali women also have important contributions to make to peacebuilding and the rebuilding of their war-torn country.”

Averting Conflicts and Building Peace from the Bottom Up

Despite their marginalisation from the national decision-making for peace, women in Puntland and Somaliland have been playing important roles in diffusing and averting conflicts in their communities. Responding to a number of conflicts among various clans within Puntland and Somaliland, women in these communities carried out activities such as organising
peace rallies, collecting resources to support conflict-affected individuals and groups, and appealing to conflict groups to end violence. The women peace activists who were interviewed in both Puntland and Somaliland describe the particular ways in which they affect peace and resolve conflicts in their communities:

“Whenever there is a conflict, we organise ourselves to appeal to both the conflict groups to end such violence between them. We also educate the public about the importance of peace. In our peace rallies and appeals, we use slogans such as ‘women want peace and not war’ and ‘women are united for peace’. We also speak on local radios to transmit peace messages, which are intended to educate the warring groups and the public about their roles in peace as members of their communities.”20

Women in both locations utilise creative strategies in both opposing and averting violence in their communities. The women peace activists also mobilise other women from the opposing conflict groups to place pressure on their warring leaders to come together and reach a peace settlement. Women are able to reach out to each other across conflict divides and make a difference.

In times of violence, women also contribute to conflict resolution by providing logistical and fundraising support to avert further bloodshed. According to a peace activist in Puntland:

“Women’s ability in quickly mobilising and collecting funds from the community for peace has not only contributed to the efforts of solving conflicts, but also has gained the admiration and attracted the attention of traditional leaders, who often approach them to gain their financial support for conflict resolution events in their communities. Mind you, women are not passively handing such resources over to traditional leaders without having a role to play in the decision-making processes for peace.”21

Somali women also use their poetry to promote peace and unity in their communities. In their peace poetry, they describe the horrors of violence, how they are profoundly affected and the importance of peace for all. One of the activists interviewed in Hargeisa, Somaliland notes the effectiveness of women’s poetry:

“On many occasions where women recited their anti-war poems, the fighting men got emotionally moved and laid down their weapons and ended the hostility.”22

Through their poetry, women place pressure on their clan leaders and warring groups to halt their conflicts and reach peace settlements. In past conflicts, women in Puntland and Somaliland held peace rallies, where they called for an end to vengeance killings and demanded the full inclusion of women in conflict resolution processes. In 1996, women activists in Puntland organised a peace rally to oppose the violence that erupted between two groups. In the words of one of the rally participants:

“It was one of the largest peace marches [that] women activists in Puntland organised. Many women from different walks of life attended. Even women who were heading that morning to the market to do grocery shopping joined our march. The women who attended the march chanted that they want peace and not war. We sent strong statements to all the individuals and groups involved in that conflict, and we women made it clear that we oppose such unnecessary violence and would not support it.”23

Women in Somaliland have also used peace rallies as a platform to demonstrate that they want peace in their community. Such rallies, according to women in both Puntland and Somaliland, have weakened the intentions of the conflict groups to wage war against each other, and

**WOMEN IN PUNTLAND AND SOMALILAND HAVE BEEN CHALLENGING THIS MALE-DOMINATED APPROACH TO RESOLVING CONFLICTS, AND WANT TO EXPAND THE ROLES OF WOMEN IN IT**

“Women in both communities have served as peace envoys – known in Somali as ergo nabaded. These peace envoys consult with warring groups and promote reconciliation, thus serving as communication channels between warring groups for the exchange of information pertinent to reconciliation. A peace activist in Somaliland notes:

“Without women serving as peace envoys, warring groups would not have found ways to receive information from each side and reach a settlement. It is these women who usually collect important information from each community to assess the destruction and devastation caused by the violence, and provide the information to each group and pressure them to end the violence.”24

Women in Puntland and Somaliland indicated that they both monitor and provide early warnings
of problems and disputes, known in Somali as baag. For example, women in cross-clan marriages are often the ones who, in times of conflict between their clans, contribute to monitoring events and the transfer of information needed to avert conflicts. Due to women’s multiple relations (with various clans) and their interests in protecting and maintaining such relations, women are able to warn communities that there may be an imminent attack, and who the attackers might be. Some of these women have been able to travel long distances to warn of possible “attacks”. The loyalty of women in cross-clan relations is often questioned during times of conflict. However, women in Puntland and Somaliland state that the portrayal of women as disloyal sometimes provides them more room and leverage to manoeuvre in their roles, and allows them easier access to information from various other groups and clans.

**Conclusion**

Somali women’s contributions to curbing violence and building peace contradicts the belief that peacebuilding is a man’s affair only. Rather, it demonstrates that peacebuilding is the collective responsibility of all members of the war-affected community. Somali women’s contributions demonstrate their agency in shaping and affecting their war-affected communities. Their efforts have been saving lives and complementing the top-down approach to peacebuilding in their communities. But, despite these important contributions, their peacebuilding efforts continue to be marginalised, under-valued and under-resourced. They have been operating within rigid social structures and traditional restrictions that make it challenging to make a difference in their own communities. Women in Puntland and Somaliland want recognition as important agents for peace. One of the women peace activists argues: “We want to be given our rights to shape the decision-making for peace that will pave the way for the future of our country.”

Despite their contributions to resolving conflicts in their communities, women peace activists in Puntland and Somaliland continue to struggle for recognition and inclusion.

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Somali women chant prayers and recite peace poetry to promote peace and unity in their communities.

women’s agency and activism and their particular contributions to peace and recovery.

Endnotes

1 Puntland was previously known as the north-eastern region of Somalia. In 1998, it adopted the name Puntland and established its own regional administration. Puntland supports a unified Somalia.

2 Somaliland is located in the north-west region of Somalia. It declared its independence in 1991 but has not received international recognition. Somaliland has its own government.


8 Haweya (2005) interview with the author on 26 October. Bosaso, Puntland.


