

## **Women's Rights in Somalia: Women's Role in Conflict Resolution**

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### **Abstract:**

The overthrow of President Said Barre in 1991 marked a turning point in Somali politics, economy and society. Since then, Somalia has suffered from civil-war, widespread famine, broken infrastructure, rampant human and civil rights abuses, poverty, human trafficking, rape, murder and corruption at every level of society from the Warlords to the merchants on the streets of Mogadishu selling 70\$ AK47's and rocket propelled grenades fresh out of the box. Basically no one is safe in Somalia. The State Department straight up tells people to avoid Somalia altogether with good reason. With all these problems facing Somalia, hope is still alive through the efforts of determined Somali women representing any number of the 20 plus women's organizations that are running and operating in Somalia to promote peace and conciliation between the two warring factions that control North and South Mogadishu divided only by the Green Line, a no-man's zone where arms dealers dominate the markets. Women have been the primary victims of a de-centralized war-torn nation and they at this point may be the only hope that Somalia has of ever reaching a legitimate cease-fire and progress towards decreasing violence and reaching political/economic stability in Somalia.

### **The Change of Women's Rights after 1991**

President Said Barre became un-popular in the late 1980's for different political reasons, but putting politics aside and looking solely at women's status we can see a huge discrepancy between life with Barre and post-Barre. While President Barre was in power from 1969-1991, women held prominent positions in society. Women became colonels, ambassadors and judges and were very visible in the public sphere. After Barre was ousted from power that all changed and a very different reality bore its ugly face to the women of Somalia. Without a centralized government to protect the rights of women and prevent human rights abuses, women have repeatedly and still are the victims of discrimination, rape, murder, poverty, and all kinds of other abuses not mentioned above. The eternal optimist would hope that the situation in Somalia is getting better and better for women however that is just not the case as of right now. The situation has actually been worsening for women in Somalia as they increasingly are being victimized mimicking the days, months, and years directly following the fall of Barre when the whole country essentially fell into disarray and mass death and human rights abuses followed.

Now that a real centralized government no longer exists, tribal and clan systems of governments have emerged all over Somalia and many have resorted back to Shariah and customary law which allow things like public stonings of women who have committed adultery with men being excluded from this. Also the machinations of clan government don't allow women to be represented in the clan and women don't really even belong to any clans. When U.S. soldiers in 1993 occupied a forward operating base just south of Mogadishu in order to bring peace to the area and protect U.N. humanitarian aid coming into the country, they were surprised to see women burying the dead of members from all clans where the men refused to bury the dead of opposing clans. This is just an illustration of how women are clan-less and much less biased when it comes to

clan affiliation in Somalia. This has actually allowed Somali women to play a pivotal role in the peace-making process. In Hussein Adam and Richard Ford's book "Removing Barricades in Somalia"<sup>1</sup> they mention this:

In Mogadishu, committees of women are leading NGO's and other groups toward reconciliation. They have organized committees for improved health and educational services, some of which have been collaborating across the Green Line. They are among the most visible, articulate, energetic, and respected of the groups working to eliminate barriers such as the Green Line. They have been able to win the support of groups of elders of all political, clan, and factional perspectives. Their persistent efforts, complemented by other domestic and external pressures, have helped bring about the present situation in which the barricades are being removed. Today, Mogadishu is largely unified on a day-to-day, operational level.

Even though women are essentially neutral when it comes to clan affiliation they are still the targets of clan-related reprisals and attacks. In 2003 10 women were murdered in clan-related attacks. Women are increasingly becoming victims to these blood-thirsty gangs that inflict their will primarily on innocent and defenseless women and young girls.

Another notable difference between the rule under Barre and the civil-wars that followed his overthrow is that women can only inherit fifty percent of what their brothers can inherit from family. Also if a woman is murdered under Shariah law the perpetrator's family is only expected to pay half of what they would have to pay if it was a man who had been murdered.

Also women who sell in the market from sun-up to sun-down just trying to make a meager living and avoid the widespread poverty and starvation that has gripped the country-side are not even allowed to use public restrooms.<sup>2</sup> This type of injustice is promulgated by the fact that women are not involved in the justice system whatsoever. This is due to the overwhelming patriarchal society that has developed in Post-Barre society.

Women also suffer immensely from the deteriorated infrastructure and healthcare services available. A staggering statistic is that Somalia has one of the highest maternal mortality and morbidity rates in the world compounded by the fact that 98 % of females are subjected to what many would consider the cruel surgical procedure called Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) also called "Infibulation" in which under unsanitary and often using barbaric methods the person performing the procedure actually sews the genitals of young girls between the ages of 4-8 together which creates untold number of health issues. It is said that the procedure is done to ensure chastity until the girl is rightly married, but the problem is that many girls die from the shock and pain of the procedure itself which under normal circumstances anesthesia is not even used, or they die from infections and massive blood loss that sometimes results. It also creates serious health issues when the girl starts menstruating and can result in death from complications even years after the surgery is performed. Under Barre this procedure was completely outlawed because of its cruelty to women however with him gone and no one really to stop it, it has become a wide-spread practice.

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1. Hussein, A. and Ford, R. (1998). *Removing Barricades in Somalia: Options for Peace and Rehabilitation*. Washington D.C., Peaceworks.

2. [www.womenwarpeace.org](http://www.womenwarpeace.org)

Other health issues affected thousands of Somali women are the struggle to have a consistent source of food, poverty, disease, drought, and critically limited educational and job opportunities. In fact Somalia fails to even make it on the Human Development Index which analyzes the situation of different countries and ranks them according to their level of development when it comes to health standards, human rights and poverty levels.

The women of Somalia are crucial to the collection of water and all elements of family sustenance in Somalia. Somalia has enjoyed two good rainy seasons which has increased agricultural production and as a result there was an 80 percent increase in cereal production nationwide in March 2003.<sup>3</sup> One other positive benefit from the abundant rainfall is that the overall cholera levels have dropped.

Another major problem facing Somalia is the large number of refugees and internally displaced women and children living within and outside of Somalia in refugee camps in neighboring Kenya, Djibouti, and also in Yemen. It is estimated that 400,000 refugees live in Kenya and that there are approximately 350,000 internally displaced (homeless) women and children living within Somalia itself. The increase in violence and warring parties has led to numerous deaths and there are many families with women as head of household. In fact a statistic done estimated that around 70 percent of Somali homes have women as heads of household. Women have assumed the reins and have done an excellent job in performing some of the jobs that men have traditionally have been responsible for taking care of.

With the economy breaking down and the spread of poverty, women are not attending school as much as the boys and UNICEF (United Nations Children Fund) have estimated that approximately 80 percent of women now cannot read in Somalia vs. a 55 percent literacy rate with Said Barre as President. In already financially strapped families parents are “investing” in sons more often than daughters with the hope that the sons stand a better chance of helping them get out of the poverty stricken situation that they are in. According to the U.N. Secretary General’s annual report on the current situation of Somalia from 8 October, 2004<sup>4</sup> stated that 14.3 percent of girls are enrolled in primary school whereas 25.5 percent of boys are enrolled in primary school.

Because of the situation in Somalia and with the thousands upon thousands of Somali women without jobs, food, money, security, and many other basic standards of living that have become either unattainable or extremely difficult to obtain a growing human trafficking problem is developing in the port city of Bossaso and potentially other ports as well. Many disillusioned men, women, children and elderly Somalis are turning to human smuggling in which they cram onto boats heading for the coasts of Yemen. Officials have estimated that 20,000 thousand Somali’s have fled Somalia in this fashion. The problem is that a high death toll has resulted because often when ship captains fear an inspection from patrolling Yemenis coast guard boats they throw all the passengers off board and leave them to fend for themselves. The majority of these passengers being women, young children, and elderly folks, meet an all too common fate of drowning or being eaten by the sharks that infest the waters in Somalia and Yemen’s coastal waters. Needless to say the situation in Somalia is very volatile.

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3. Ibid

4. Annual Report of the UN Secretary-General on the situation in Somalia, 8 October 2004

### **Impact women are having on creating peace and a more promising Somali future**

The situation for women living in Somalia appears to be worsening however that doesn't mean that through the continued efforts of all Somalis, U.N. peacekeeping forces and help from neighboring African countries like Ethiopia, Uganda and Kenya the situation could reverse and start improving. In Somalia and around the world, there are over one-hundred twenty different woman's organizations that are actively involved in improving the situation in Somalia. Even though due to the patriarchal clan system that has taken effect in 1991, women have still had a very significant impact on Somalia and have helped promote peace and reconstruction. Some organizations to name a few which are active in Somali, most being NGO's (Non-Governmental Organizations) are NOW, SIFA, WONCO, WoRiS, IIDA, UNIFEM, Bridge, SSWC, and CEDAW. These organizations vary from promoting health standards to decreasing the discrimination against women in Somalia to fighting the escalating crimes against women that are taking place primarily in the poverty stricken neighborhoods of Somalia.

The SSWC (Save Somali Women and Children) put together a convention that brought together 120 plus NGO's all championing women's right and peace negotiations within Somalia in 2001. The NOW (National Organization for the Development of Woman and Children) advises the TNG (Transitional National Government) on gender specific issues as well as discusses policies that could promote peace. Also fifty women were selected to participate in the Intergovernmental Authority for Development (IGAD) peace processes that began in 2003. Women originally were told they would have 25 percent representation in the transitional authority but in reality were only given 12 percent.<sup>5</sup> Various demonstrations have been put on by different women's organizations in and out of Somalia. On International Women's day in March of 2003 thousands of woman demonstrated in the streets of Mogadishu demanding that the different factions agree to the peace-negotiations that took place the year before and that women be included in any future authority. The following month in April while peace-talks were convening in Nairobi, thousands of women and children again took to the streets to demand that faction leaders continue talks and agree to further cooperation and peaceful arrangements between the opposing parties. Even with these efforts by the many brave Somali women who battle problems with disease, famine, drought, rape, and other forms of violence against women the situation in Somalia seems to be in continuous chaos. In the 23 October 2006 report of the Secretary-General to the Security Council it illustrates how Somalia is still battling some serious issues.<sup>6</sup> On page 36 we read:

Fears were also expressed by some Somali women's organizations regarding what they perceived to be their shrinking political space for participation in decision-making and representation in civil society groups. It was reported that women were no longer able to lead non-governmental organizations. In a bid to safeguard the rights guaranteed to them under the Transitional Federal Charter, representatives of Somali Women's groups in Mogadishu were advocating for representation at the Khartoum peace talks.

Fortunately the women of Somalia don't tire easily as they have been continually advocating numerous political, economical and social issues since 1991 to the present day.

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5. [www.womenwarpeace.net](http://www.womenwarpeace.net)

6. Secretary-General report to the Security Council, 23 October 2006

Today the current state of affairs in Somalia is still riddled with violence and rampant human rights violations. In the New York Times from the article “Peace Force Is Attacked on Arrival in Somalia,”<sup>7</sup> by Jeffrey Gettleman it says:

KINDU, Congo, March 6 -- The first group of African Union peacekeepers arrived Tuesday in Mogadishu, Somalia’s capital, and received a patently Mogadishu reception. Insurgents shelled the airport where peacekeepers from Uganda had landed and peppered the area with gunfire, witnesses said, setting off battles across the city that killed several civilians.

The article goes on to say:

The episode was the latest burst of violence in Somalia, and a sign that the situation the new peacekeepers are stepping into is dangerously reminiscent of the chaos that haunted the last such mission to Somalia in the 1990’s. After 18 American soldiers were killed in the infamous “Black Hawk Down” episode in 1993, most troops were withdrawn.<sup>8</sup>

The future of Somalia is uncertain at this point however fortunately through the efforts of peace-keeping forces like those mentioned above, numerous women’s organizations advocating the rights of women and improving the health and violence problems facing the country, the situation could improve and peace be restored in a matter of time. How long that takes really depends on all the Somali people most especially the militants who continue to create problems for everyone and prevent Somalia from returning to be the mythically treasured country that it once was.

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7. Gettleman, Jeffrey, *Peace Force Is Attacked on Arrival in Somali*, New York Times, March 6, 2007

8. Ibid