

ETHIOPIA: Double Discrimination - Gender Violations of Minority Women

With one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world, limited political and legal resources for women, elevated rates of forced marriage, and female genital mutilation, the overall situation for women in Ethiopia is one of the most precarious in the world.

While Ethiopia has adopted the provisions of CEDAW into its national constitution and legal codes, gross violations of the convention's principles occur unchecked throughout the country. There remains a critical lack of de facto implementation of the de jure measures Ethiopia has made to ensure gender equality.

Further violations to the rights of minority and rural women run rampant throughout the nation, compounding the already discriminatory environment. There is a critical discrepancy between the number of health facilities and medical practitioners amongst rural and urban areas of the country, with a particular shortage in services for Somali women living in the Ogaden region. In addition, Somali women have faced large scale campaigns of rape and arbitrary arrest as a result of government-sanctioned attacks on the region's population. The disregard for legal codes and monitoring of violations against minority women living in these marginalized regions have also severely limited women's access to services guaranteed by Ethiopia's own legal codes, namely the right to equality in education, divorce, refusal to marry, property, and ownership rights.

While the government might, in theory, promote equality between men and women, the fact remains that in times of war and hardship, women and children routinely suffer disproportionately to men. Basic household tasks related to the preparation of food often leave women exposed to arbitrary attacks and violence from army personnel. Collecting water and other such tasks are jobs still confined to the women's domain, resulting in a high degree of abuse and violence levelled at women as they leave the relative safety of their homes.

According to the United Nations Country Team Ethiopia, in 2000, "out of the estimated 350,000 internally displaced people more than 75 percent are assumed to be children and women." It is true that "the consequences of conflict affect all people in society, [but] it is women who have borne the disproportionate burden of displacement. Many males joined militia groups while others were recruited into the army, thus leaving women solely responsible for the household during the period of the conflict."

The prolonged and continuous conflict and war on women in Ethiopia has psychological and social ramifications. As we have seen in many parts of the world, during war conflicts and particularly ethnic-based wars, women are used as pawns on a chessboard as collateral damage. This is the case in the Ogaden region where residents are routinely marginalized politically and socially and women are subjected to sexual violence and other dehumanizing acts.

The government-backed Liyu Police militia has committed numerous abuses against civilians in Ethiopia's Ogaden region.

Since 1994 when formal fighting between the Ethiopian government and the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) erupted in the Ogaden, the Ethiopian military has received assistance from local militias. Before the establishment of the Liyu police in 2008, there was a Peace and Security Coordination Cabinet office in each district's administration, which was authorized to organize clan militias for the Ethiopian government. Members of one of the most prominent militias, established in 2001, were trained and based in the town of Godey, and later disbursed to the main districts of the region such as Kabridahar, Degahbur, Wardher, Fiiq, and others. After they failed to receive promised salaries, they ceased to function fully and were later dismantled deliberately by the government, who suspected militia members were providing support to rebels.

However, the Ethiopian government established new forces which were paid directly by the government and equipped as the military. This group, called the Liyu police, was granted similar powers to those possessed by the military in the region. In mid-2008, the government collected unemployed young men, former militia members and regional police, and sent them to a training camp in Jinacsane, 20km north-western of Jigjiga. The first 800 Liyu police militia men celebrated their graduation ceremony in a Garab'ase military barack of

Jigjiga in the presence of the region's President, Da'ud Mohamed, and its Peace & Security Head, Abdi mohamud (aka Abdi Ilay), in early January 2009.

The Liyu police are financed directly from the regional budget under the leadership of Abdi Mohamud Omar (Abdi Ilay), who was the head of Peace, Justice and Security Coordination and the new Head of the Region. Their military equipment is reportedly supplied by the Somali Region Administration of the Ethiopian Ministry of Defense. Nearly 20 Toyota four wheel drive (4WD) pickup trucks, and a dozen 26-30 ton Isuzu pickup trucks were purchased for the Liyu police, though they frequently use both civilian and government-owned vehicles. They are mostly equipped with AK-47s, PKMs and other military-grade weapons, and dress in green Ethiopian Federal Police uniforms.

Many residents in the Ogaden region report that the Ethiopian military is more polite and humane than the Liyu police. This is not to be interpreted as evidence of the kindness of the Ethiopian military, but rather the comparative seriousness of Liyu abuses against the Ogaden. The Liyu police are responsible for crimes ranging from harassment, arbitrary arrests and extrajudicial killings. Both during and after training, the government emphasized to the Liyu police that they were the most powerful organ in the region. This idea has led them to overuse their power against vulnerable people who are not equipped to fight back, including civilians from both the urban and nomad communities.

In January 2009, the Liyu police settled in a number of villages, including Qorahay, Fik, Wardher, Godey and Degahbur zones, including Framadow, Gaba-gabo, Marsin, Yo'ale(Garbo) and Qolod, among others, where they began fighting alongside the Ethiopian military.

In February 2009, Dayib Yaase was killed in Muugo, 20 km north of Kabridahar, after he tried to defend his daughter. In the nearby village of Fardhiig three men were reportedly killed by the same team of Liyu police. When the people in the town of Kabridahar learned of the killings and came to perform the funeral process, they encountered the same team of Liyu police along the way. When questioned about their activities, they responded that they were on their way to perform the funeral duties for the people the police had killed. The Liyu police, however, denied responsibility for the killings, and retaliated by shooting and killing a man who was a relative of one of those killed earlier in the day.

In March 2009 warfare broke out between the Liyu police militia and the ONLF in Qolod, a village between Birqod and Garbo. Following this, the Liyu police came back to Birqod and collected some men from the village market and took them to the camp. On their way to the camp, they began shooting the men; three died on the spot, and many others were wounded.

In May 2009, Mahad Mohamed Dariiq, a graduate student from Godey agricultural college, was shot to death in Kabridahar by the Liyu police.

Arbitrary detention is a common experience for the Ogaden people. People remain in Liyu police custody for as long as the Liyu police wish; locals report that no court in the region would formally order a prisoner's release from their custody.

Relevant Links

Deq Dahir, a student in Jigjiga high school, was arrested in Qabridahar August 5, 2009 by the Liyu police head Deeq Jirri, and his associate, Mukhtar. Mr. Dahir remained in Liyu police custody for several days, and was later released after being threatened with torture and execution while in custody.

In September 2009, the Liyu police shot to death Axmed Xuseen (Fowjad Saangor) in a public arena, following accusations of his involvement in an April 2009 skirmish in which a Liyu commander was killed. Nearly ten days later, Liyu police shot to death Sahra Xassan Nuur, a mother of eleven, following allegations of her participation in the fighting.

The Ethiopian government and its militaries have long held the belief that the civilian population in Ogaden act as a safe haven for rebels. This has led them to employ a strategy of collective punishment against the Ogaden as a means of dismantling rebel groups.

Reports from the field

For the past few years, African Rights Monitor (ARM) has been monitoring developments in the Ogaden. The situation in the region is deteriorating and the Ethiopian Government is escalating its war. Refugees are streaming from the Ogaden into the refugee camps in Northern Kenya. ARM met and interviewed the victims of the wars; many of them were subject to arbitrary arrest, rape, torture, and other acts of violence. ARM collected the stories and images of several Somali men, women, and children who suffered at the hands of the Ethiopian Government. The following are pictorial anecdotes of victims of torture and rape.

Pictorial anecdotes of victims of torture and rape can be viewed here. These anecdotes were only the tip of the iceberg. Through our interviews with refugees in the Dadaab Refugee Camp and sources in the Ogaden, ARM documented and reported the gross human violations against the Ogaden people and women in particular. The stories told by the refugees and ARM's sources in the Ogaden are corroborated by the reports published by Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and local human rights organizations. As of late, the Government of Ethiopia escalated the war and reports of rape, extrajudicial killings, torture and burning villages have streaming from the region. Women bear the brunt of the Government's wrath. Women both in the urban and rural areas were arbitrary detained, tortured and raped by the military and security agencies. Women that are detained in the army barracks face the more brutal violations and have no legal remedy. Treatment is almost unattainable as the rural areas have limited healthcare facilities and the urban areas have expensive healthcare facilities.

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Recommendations

1. The Government of Ethiopia has routinely denied its role in campaigns of rape, torture, and arbitrary detention of women in the Ogaden region. ARM calls on the Government of Ethiopia to commit and allow an independent, international investigation into the reports of mass arrests, torture, and rape of women in the Ogaden region by Government forces, and design a strategy for the completion of the investigation by December 2011.
2. In addition to denying a proper investigation into the allegations of arbitrary arrest and rape, the Government of Ethiopia has not yet prosecuted any accused perpetrators of such crimes in the Ogaden region. In accordance with the revised Criminal Code of 2005, ARM calls for the immediate prosecution of any and all individuals who have been found responsible for the incidences of arbitrary arrest and rape which threaten the basic rights to life and discriminatory violence against the women in the Ogaden region.
3. In order to achieve more de facto equality for women in Ethiopia, ARM recommends more concerted and comprehensive efforts to sensitize and educate local authorities, community councils, woreda (district-level) courts and other judiciaries on any and all de jure measures which ensure women's participation and equality in regards to their legal rights to

- a. register land under their own name,
- b. access education to the university level,
- c. participate in political processes which affect them,
- d. receive support upon dissolution of marriage,
- e. access to family planning services, and
- f. protection from harmful traditional practices, including FGM,

A concrete and strategic plan must be designed and implemented to guarantee these rights within 18 months.

4. To accompany the implementation of more comprehensive sensitization campaigns, we call on the Federal Government of Ethiopia to oversee a more stringent system of evaluation and retribution of local authorities and courts, including suspension, fines and other minor forms of punishment for those officials who do not implement de jure measures which guarantee the full equality and freedom of women, in particular the revised Criminal Code of 2005, in addition to the Ethiopia National Policy on Ethiopian Women and revised Family Codes.

5. Further provisions must be made to ensure a greater number of women receive a full and robust education, including through the reinforcement of rural outreach programs, and an increase in efforts to combat drop-out rates and build up the infrastructure of secondary schools.

6. To ensure greater impact on the economic development of women, particularly in rural areas, the Ethiopian Women's Development Fund must be broadened in its scope, concentrating on more than four regions of the country, and must be more diligent in directly distributing funds and services to women's groups themselves.

7. Drastically low levels of antenatal care and high rates of home-birth without trained assistance are primary factors in contributing to the dangerous levels of maternal mortality in Ethiopia. Such figures are a result not only of poor utilization of healthcare services, but also of weak services offered. The Ethiopian Government must rapidly ameliorate the maternal health infrastructure through

- a. better training and recruitment of health personnel
- b. improve the outreach and referral component of the Health Program

Regional discrepancies abound throughout the indicators of women's development, but are perhaps most marked in the figures of health service utilization and presence of medical personnel. More concerted efforts to recruit and train medical personnel in marginalized regions, particularly the Ogaden, must be made as soon as possible to help address the severe health ramifications occurring as a result of continued conflict in the area.

9. Government efforts to address chronic food insecurities, particularly the 2005 Productive Safety Net Program, must be extended to the Ogaden region within three months, where 950,000 people are estimated to require emergency food assistance, of whom 642,016 live in areas restricted to international organizations.

Relevant Links

11. The central Government must create a national enforcement mechanism to ensure that any and all revised Family Codes are adhered to; those regions which have not yet adequately revised antiquated Codes in favor of gender equality and in accordance with Article 16 of CEDAW, must receive more stringent pressure from the State to comply with national standards of equity in marriage at the risk of suspension of local judiciaries and government bodies.

12. Amendments or additions to revised Family Codes must be made to give greater recourse for women seeking maintenance at the dissolution of marriage to prevent further economic impoverishment and discrimination against women.

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