INCLUSIVE PEACE

VOICES OF SOMALI WOMEN PEACEBUILDERS

CAN | Creative Alternatives Now

UNDP

Inclusive Peace:
Voices of Somali Women Peacebuilders

February 2025

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Published online in February 2025

Published by the United Nations Development Programme in Somalia

The research project, "Inclusive Peace: Voices of Somali Women Peacebuilders" was funded and supported by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Reconciliation and Federalism Support Project (REFS) for Somalia under the Low Value Grant Agreement.

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FOREWORD & ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Numerous studies, including those by UNDP, suggest that women's participation in peace process contributes to quality and durability of peace, as they usually focus more on positive aspects, than on "the spoils of the war". Women have consistently acted as an agent of peace during conflicts across the world, and yet, their contribution is often unrecognized and undervalued. This report documents the experiences, challenges, and triumphs of Somali women peacebuilders, who have made significant contribution in resolving local conflicts, and building peace in Somalia.

In 2020, UNDP engaged the Somali civil society through small grants in the ongoing peacebuilding and state-building endeavors. Recognizing the intrinsic importance of diverse groups of Somali women in achieving these objectives, UNDP adopted a strategy centered on strengthening and supporting these unsung heroes. This report emerges as a crucial guide, offering practical avenues to fortify and uplift women peacebuilders in Somalia.

Through 20 insightful semi-structured interviews with leading women peacebuilders, coupled with a comprehensive analysis of current academic and practitioners' literature, the report presents a nuanced understanding of the challenges and triumphs faced by women engaged in peacebuilding activities. It elucidates how women peacebuilders define, execute, and assess their peacebuilding endeavors, offering recommendations to bolster their vital work.

The report sheds light on the complex the social, political, and legal challenges faced by women peacebuilders, while also presenting a forward-looking perspective. It outlines actionable steps to support Somali women peacebuilders and their activities. The proposed solutions include steady and increased financial support, systematic capacity building, the formalization of women-led peacebuilding networks, and the initiation of mentoring relationships. The report recommends recognizing and promoting women peacebuilders at all levels, reinforcing that their contributions deserve acknowledgment on the international, national, regional, and local stages.

In the following pages, readers will find a compelling narrative to help understand the potential of these women peacebuilders. It is a call to action, urging stakeholders at all levels to recognize, support, and amplify the voices of Somali women peacebuilders and work collaboratively toward a more inclusive and peaceful future for Somalia.

UNDP would like to express special thanks to its REFS and the Creative Alternatives Now (CAN) teams in Somalia for leading this research. In particular, our special thanks to Amjad Bhatti (Chief Technical Specialist), Mohamed Ali Farah (Programme Analyst) , Marina Kumskova (Senior UN Policy and Advocacy Advisor) and the REFS team who provided invaluable and timely support, advice and insights for developing and finalising this research.

Special thanks to the research team form CAN, namely Bahar Ali Kazmi, Faisa Loyaan, and Michelle Spearing. We would also like to thank all the Somali women who shared their experiences and helped us to understand the political, social and emotional contexts that shape their peacebuilding work. Our special thank to the CAN field research team, Marian Gilao, Abass Khasim, Samira Duale, who collected the policy documents, recorded and transcribed the interviews. We are thankful to the CAN project adminstration team, Abdinasir Osman, Alnoor Amlani, and all the support staff who successfully managed the finance and logistic of the project.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2020, the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund (UNPBF) supported the following ten peacebuilding priorities in Somalia - countering violent extremism, improving education, employment, governance, inclusion, justice, reconciliation, security provision, and youth empowerment (UNPBF, 2020). UNPBF strongly acknowledges the importance of the roles and contributions of diverse groups of Somali women in peacebuilding and has made strengthening and supporting them a key strategy to accomplish the peacebuilding priorities.

This report, therefore, suggests practical avenues of supporting and strengthening women peacebuilders in Somalia. It is based on analysis of twenty semi-structured interviews with leading women peacebuilders, together with insights drawn from current academic and practitioners' literature[1] on women and peacebuilding in Somalia.

The report describes and explains how women peacebuilders define, carry out, and appraise their peacebuilding activities and impacts, and offers a framework of recommendations aimed at supporting and strengthening the work of women peacebuilders in Somalia.

Key Insights

- Diversity, political underrepresentation, informal participation in public issues, and limited access to justice are the key characteristics of the social, political, and legal context in which women peacebuilders do peacebuilding activities.

- Somali women are a diverse group, divided along regional, class, and political lines. Their roles, relationships, and public contributions are not only shaped by local, regional and national gender and conflict dynamics but are increasingly influenced by international social and political trends.

- Women's representation in the Somali parliament follows the clan-based quota system which is contested and still needs to address representational inequalities across diverse groups of women. Evidence suggests that women's parliamentary leadership is often perceived to be serving the interests of clans and/or powerful men and families, rather than highlighting women's experiences and their unique perspectives on socio-economic conditions in Somalia.

- Somali women's in leadership often encounter exclusion, discrimination, or simply not being taken seriously.

- Somali women have little to no say in the judicial decisions that affect their lives. They often use informal local security or governance for a, such as the clan structure and xeer (or Heer) system, to get involved in decision making. Their ability to access justice depends on the nature of the legal issue, available resources, and the system(s) of justice available.

- Somali women seem to perceive ongoing conflict and violence in Somalia as a direct outcome of the politicization of grievances and suffering, gender-based violence (GBV), and youth exclusion and related threats of violent extremism.

- Somali women peacebuilders see their role as being transformational change agents. They perceive peacebuilding as a collaborative activity, aimed at changing institutional and cultural practices.

- The women peacebuilders are solution-oriented.

- Somali women peacebuilders often begin engaging with localized disputes and gradually develop themselves as peacebuilders. In so doing, they integrate themselves into a range of existing peacebuilding networks and alliances, both face-to-face and online.

- Where women peacebuilders saw the need for new responses and ways in which women could contribute to peacebuilding processes, they established new informal peacebuilding spaces, supporting women to take on new roles within their communities.

- The women peacebuilders re-purpose Somali cultural traditions and norms to design and implement peacebuilding strategies, such as using family and clan ties to wield influence over leaders and raise funds for peace activities.

- Somali women peacebuilders lack consistent and adequate financial and organizational support.

- Somali women peacebuilders believe that experience, training, security, and community trust and status are essential for doing peacebuilding activities effectively.

The Way Forward

The following actions can build and strengthen Somali women peacebuilders and their activities:

- Steady and increased financial support to women peacebuilders;

- Systematic upgrading of women's peacebuilding capacity, and organizational skills;

- Greater emphasis on initiation, formalization, and institutionalization of women-led peacebuilding networks;

- Dedicated effort to support women peacebuilder in repurposing cultural traditions and norms as peacebuilding tools;

- Fashioning and establishing mentoring and coaching relationships between the experienced and the young women peacebuilders, and;

- Formally acknowledging and promoting women peacebuilders and their work at all levels-international, national, regional, and local.

BACKGROUND

Purpose and Approach

Somalia has had many committed and talented women peacebuilders and leaders who are supported by sustained regional and international diplomatic efforts, multi-lateral organizations, international donors, and NGOs. Evidence suggest that the women peacebuilders are effective peacebuilding actors, however, one evident key challenge is their invisibility at policy level. For example, many resourceful women peacebuilders and their organizations are excluded from political dialogue, and from peacebuilding and reconciliation initiatives. Not being seen, particularly in the formal processes, means that their contributions are unrecognized, undervalued, and unknown.

Creative Alternatives Now (CAN) is a not-for-profit development policy, research, and practice organisation that works with and for policy makers and in Somalia. CAN seeks to fill the aforementioned knowledge gap in policy and practice by generating a deeper understanding of women peacebuilders. Hence, the project examines the strategies, and assesses the capacities of, women peacebuilders and their networks. It explores the question **how do women peacebuilder groups work, organize, influence and shape the peacebuilding and reconciliation process?**

The research is expected to contribute to achieving the peace and reconciliation policy objectives in Somalia: In particular, it will help with:

- Developing and refining strategies of supporting women peacebuilder groups;
- Enhancing their strategic and political position in relation to other civil society actors including Elders, and;
- Framing and strengthening their standing within the Somali communal socio-legal system.

Research Methodology

The project builds on existing policy research and insights and applies a case study research method, which is an efficient way of identifying similarities, differences and variations and the factors that shape these. This qualitative research includes an analysis of twenty semi-structured interviews of leading women peacebuilders, and insights drawn from current academic and practitioner literature on women and peacebuilding in Somalia. The literature review covered both academic and grey literature (see Annex 2). Literature published since 2016 is prioritized because it builds on earlier works and reflects on the current situation. Interviews followed an open, discursive approach, guided by key questions but allowing space to identify the concerns of the women themselves.

The team interviewed women peacebuilders based in Hirshabelle, Puntland, Galmudug, Southwest, Jubaland, and Banadir (areas that are controlled by the Somali Government). They made significant efforts to identify three women peacebuilder groups in each region, representing both rural and urban communities.[2] The criteria for selection used a broad definition of peacebuilding to encompass humanitarian assistance, gender work, social service deliver, conflict resolution, and peace activism as this reflects a diversity of engagement already identified within Somali women peacebuilders and how they define peacebuilding themselves. Based on the information gathered from the secondary and primary sources, the following criteria were developed to identify women peacebuilders groups:

- Record of carrying out work with communities in their respective areas and professional circles
- Representative of the sections of society that are directly affected by or have a role in local peace processes.

The data from interviews were analyzed for common themes across multiple interviewees. The interviews were transcribed and organized into a spreadsheet for identifying the similarities, variations, and differences. Key themes were then identified and organized into the core issues described in the report. The data was either paraphrased where they articulated general points or presented as direct quotations to prioritize the voices of women peacebuilders themselves.

Finally, we conducted several research team consultations to discuss themes and to explore the most significant and/or surprising issues as well as identifying gaps. Following this, the literature review and interview analysis were integrated around the identified priority areas which were framed as 'voices of women peacebuilders'.

The research does not cover geographical areas which are controlled by al-Shabaab. It would be useful to consider the role and peacebuilding activities of women who live in the al-Shabaab controlled areas, although this may need a revised methodological approach. Furthermore, this research exclusively considers the women peacebuilders who perform leadership roles. However the research also highlights the importance of networks of women and youth that play vital roles in building peace. This area needs further exploration and should be included in future research.

WOMEN, PEACE, AND SECURITY[1] IN SOMALIA

This section describes the four fundamental dimensions of peace and security that Somali women peacebuilders have been engaging with.

The state-supported women's movement[3] in Somalia did not last long and, from 1991, the civil war weakened it significantly: It altered gender roles and relations, revived traditional social and communal structures, systems, and values, wiped out the gains that Somali women obtained, and destroyed the public education system for women. Furthermore, the civil war divided the women's movement along regional lines (Horst, 2017). Women who before had fought side-by-side for increased gender equality were now no longer able to collaborate, because they were fighting for fundamentally different political projects.

Due to death, disappearances, and lack of livelihoods for men, women took on new responsibilities beyond caregiving during the civil war, leading simultaneously to weakening the position and role of men and strengthening many women who had developed new levels of resilience and self-reliance during the everyday reality of conflict (Gardner and El-Bushra, 2016). However, this led to tensions in the post-war period as women's desires to continue engaging in social, economic, and political spaces did not sit easily with the resurgence in traditional clan-based structures and customs which lacked formal roles for women. Women faced barriers as well as opportunities. This is particularly evident in the overlapping areas of peace, political representation, and justice.

The women peacebuilders seem to perceive ongoing conflict and violence in Somalia as a direct outcome of the politicization of grievances and suffering, gender-based violence (GBV), and youth exclusion and related threats of violent extremism. Whether they tackle the problem of extremism or individual grievances and suffering, the women peacebuilders focus on societal or institutional conditions (root causes, unjust clan practices, and lack of economic opportunities for youth) that trigger, sustain, extend, and deepen conflict and violence in Somalia. They concentrate on the following fundamental dimensions of peacebuilding work in Somalia.

Political Reconciliation

The legacies of the civil war contribute to perpetual conflict among the clans and have caused widespread grievances and suffering. Many women peacebuilders insist that it is the unaddressed grievances and mistrust among the clan leadership which has caused conflict and violence in Somalia. One woman peacebuilder stated that *"since the civil war 30 years ago, the local conflicts between clans over scarce resources and land ownership have been recurring - their grievances from the civil war have not been addressed properly and mistrust between the clans still exists"*.

The women peacebuilders argue that the recurrent intra- and inter-clan conflicts are increasingly entangled with political agendas, manipulating community level grievances for political ends. It is this viewpoint that convinces many women peacebuilders to focus on the reconciliation process among clan and political leadership. One woman peacebuilder commented on the strategic value of focusing on the clan leadership, stating, *"the important thing, we talk about reconciliation every time, but the truth is that the conflict isn't between the people but between the politicians, so they're the ones who need genuine reconciliation"*.

Legal Justice and Voice

Somali women's roles and positions in society and their abilities to influence and access justice have historically been defined by the Somali clan structure, with its customary law system (Xeer) and Islamic jurisprudence (Shari'a) which today co-exist with evolving formal justice structures of the state. Women are sometimes given space to engage in minor disputes within clans, but left entirely out of higher-level and formalized decision-making processes. Formal and traditional

[1] Also See Annex 2: A note on policy and legal context.

justice institutions overlap and intersect. Somali citizens, particularly women, navigate these systems and may have claims in several justice channels simultaneously (Albany, 2020).

For most women, Ulama-mediated Shari'a is seen to be best suited for resolving domestic disputes, such as divorce or inheritance issues as women have recognized rights in these cases. Most women prefer, however, to take SGBV and high-profile cases to the formal courts to seek justice under national legislation rather than customary or Shari'a laws which do not adequately recognize the needs of survivors and their families, and accountability of perpetrators. One woman peacebuilder explained this challenge, and declared, "*Now the traditional elders negotiate between the two clans involved. Let's say a woman was raped. The traditional leaders of her clan negotiate with the perpetrator's clan. Neither the victim's family nor the perpetrator is included in the process. The perpetrator is not held accountable. It's just the traditional elders who negotiate and get compensation - the money may not even reach the victim's family. We are trying to change that culture*".

However, formal courts can be expensive, inefficient, and are often inaccessible for women, minorities, and IDPs (Albany, 2021). Recently, women's access to justice, including linkages between customary and formal systems, has been addressed through different informal local security or local governance processes with women playing key roles in monitoring and responding to insecurity and crisis.

Constitutional Representation

Prominent Somali women recognized the exclusion of women in the emerging political leadership and system, and during the 2000 Somali National Peace Conference in Djibouti formed a sixth clan - a women's clan - borne out of the desperation of Somali women caught between clan loyalties as a result of the civil war (Horst, 2017). The notion of the "sixth clan" subsequently gained attention among Somali women activists.

Although the electoral quota of 30% for women was adopted for the 2017 elections it is still not enshrined in law and the quota was not met. Currently, women's participation in politics and leadership positions is around 24% of parliamentary seats, and some senior roles such as the Deputy Police Commissioner (GAPS-UK, 2019).

Although some state governments have declared their support for women's rights and have appointed women to state government positions, community members say that women are often only appointed to non-essential decision-making roles. There are also suspicions about the political integrity of the women who achieve political positions. These women are often connected to powerful men or families and are seen to have their agendas. Not only is it very difficult to obtain access to political office and use that position to promote women's interests, it is also extremely difficult to remain in position due to clan politics (Horst, 2017).

Women remain underrepresented in political processes and public offices, including in the cabinet and legislative and administrative bodies across the country. Poor women from rural areas and those from marginalized groups, such as minority clans and IDPs, are often underrepresented across all federal member states in Somalia.

Youth Inclusion

Youth inclusion is an important agenda for many women peacebuilders. They are increasingly concerned with the lack of roles within society for young people and the implications this has for localized violence as well as recruitment into armed groups, including Al Shabaab. One woman peacebuilder described her vision and declared that "*we want everyone to put the gun down and take the pen. We were advocating for children not to be recruited as soldiers, we rehabilitate youth from Al-Shabab and show them there is a good way to live"*.

The women peacebuilders prioritize providing alternatives for the youth. One woman peacebuilder stated, *"we rehabilitate young men from Al-Shabab, train them, get them a job, and help them change their lives. We give them a second chance. We show them that there is a better life. No one ever even took the time to talk to them and ask them why they were engaging in violence. We provide them with counseling, sports, therapy, and connect them back with their families"*.

SOMALI WOMEN PEACEBUILDERS

This section considers the motivation, experiences, and skills of women peacebuilders in Somalia.

Motivations

Some women peacebuilders interviewed decided to engage in peacebuilding because of personal experiences of violence and loss, resulting in trauma. They had experienced or witnessed GBV and political violence, and lost sons, husbands, fathers, wider family, or community members. One woman peacebuilder described the tragedy she experienced personally and collectively with other members of her community. She said, "*I was driven to work on issues of peace and reconciliation by the killing of my father which later led to multiple killings between clans [locally] because each clan was seeking revenge on the other. I thought it was important for me to participate in peace activities to save lives and reduce conflicts".*

Some women had reached a 'tipping point', compelling them to work against the systems that perpetuate violence. *"We do not want our boys to die"*, one woman peacebuilder asserted. Suffering also appears to be a social fuse that blows, altering the trajectory from violent conflict to the pursuit of peace. In Kismayo, for example, with conflict fuelled by historical grievances, geopolitics, and elite (largely male) interests, women reached their tipping point and became peace activists, taking great personal risks in taking collective action through women-to-women reconciliation and consensus-building within and across clan divides as well as resource mobilization for peace activities (LPI, 2018).

Some Somali women peacebuilders started engaging with peacebuilding whilst living abroad, Capitalizing on less constrained clan and gender norms, they have utilized family and clan ties to wield influence over male leaders and raise funds for peace activities. One woman peacebuilder told a story of how she entered the peacebuilding work, stating, *"in Canada, first it was men who started these efforts for peacebuilding, but later, they allowed women's participation and noticed that without women nothing goes ahead. They chose several women including me to play a vital role in peacebuilding and reconciliation programs"*. Diaspora Somali women have been able to commence or continue engagement in peacebuilding after returning to Somalia, bringing the experience of peacebuilding as well as deeper experience and knowledge of community welfare, organizing skills and, distinctive perspectives that could generate creative responses to conflicts. One woman peacebuilder explained, *"When I returned to the country, I mobilized other women and encouraged our male counterparts such as community elders, peace activists, and leaders to resolve local conflicts"*. They also try to establish new initiatives - one woman in the diaspora who had lost her husband back in Somalia was motivated to return and establish a peace center as a tribute – whilst others join existing women's rights and peacebuilding efforts.

Many younger women peacebuilders show a distinctive network orientation. They are active online and have a high awareness of conflict issues. One woman peacebuilder described it, *"young women have two windows open for them to take advantage of, one, being part of all opportunities open to women of all ages and the other one being the opportunities for the youth who are both boys and girls, young women previously had the misconception that "youth' opportunities were open to young men only"*. Young women note that '*conflict plays out everywhere'* and engagement in the family- or even a school-based conflict resolution provides valuable experience and awareness applicable to wider society.

Experiences

The women peacebuilders begin with localized disputes and gradually develop themselves as peacebuilders. In so doing they integrate themselves into a range of peacebuilding networks and alliances, both face-to-face and online, or establish new informal peacebuilding spaces. The women peacebuilders adapt and work with networks to respond to evolving situations. The women peacebuilders value the solidarity and support that networks offer – it enables them to sustain and build on their initial engagements over the longer term.

The peacebuilding activities which women do are solution-oriented, collaborative, and situational. One woman peacebuilder explained it in the following manner, *"We started by mediating between families over domestic disputes but later we would travel to villages and mediate between clans disputing over land or pasture. Our strategy is to start at the village level, then at the regional and national level".* Many women peacebuilders have begun with localized actions and gradually become members of multiple peacebuilding networks. One woman peacebuilder declared, "*We are part of wider women's umbrella groups in peacebuilding initiatives, we are developing strong networks of individuals invested in achieving and sustaining peace through dialogue*".

The women peacebuilders often begin by acting to address conflicts in the short term through mediation and rapid response and gradually adopt a long-term vision for peace based on observation of the systems, structures, and norms that have perpetuated cycles of conflict between communities and clans, and how they generate new conflict trends. *"we did our campaign for the traditional elders telling them that they are not just responsible for men, that they should be fair to their daughters as well as their sons and equally treat them…We work with traditional elders to build and open their minds to make more inclusive by bringing women and youth in the XEER system*".

Women peacebuilders see possibilities for women to change the situation where current approaches are failing. One woman peacebuilder explained how this often worked in Somalia, she noted that *"In times of conflict between clans the men are affected but nobody harms women unless hit by a stray bullet. In times of violence, women have the power to talk to the men because women are not targeted unlike men".* Women's status as mothers and wives, their relationships with influential men, and the community roles (such as teaching) they perform give them a status that they leverage for peace. However, it seems that the women working actively for peace are still a minority. Many women peacebuilders express a desire to mobilize other women to act, particularly younger women.

FACTORS SUPPORTING SUCCESSFUL PEACEBUILDING

This section explains the socio-political conditions and challenges that shape the success of women peacebuilders.

Communal Trust and Status

Women peacebuilders highlight the centrality of creating trust at the community level and, for that they are expected to demonstrate their commitment, skills, relationships, networks, and status in different capacities. *"I listen to the needs of the community and work with them to overcome challenges like repairing roads, building schools, mother and child health clinics, and the encouraging of helping one another during times of need. These are the qualities my community likes about me and makes my work easy and supported on issues of violence and insecurity*", one women peacebuilder explained, highlighting the link between the skills to deliver public services and peacebuilding.

Crucially, the longevity of development and peace engagement is seen to bring increasing trust and recognition that have enabled the women to be effective. In this sense, women are increasingly seen as active stakeholders in creating the desired trust within communities. One woman peacebuilder reflected on the question of communal trust, *"I have the community acceptance as a leader as a result of my commitment and long number of years of working with them"*. The women have noted how their ability to influence is supported by their previously demonstrated commitment to providing community services, their demonstrated personal responsibility and sacrifice, and their perceived neutrality. One woman peacebuilder, describing how the community perceived her, said, *"I am known in the community and through my work, I am respected in the community. I am committed and passionate about peacebuilding".* Another woman peacebuilder noted, *"The respect I have within the communities enables me to work on peace. I am known to be a neutral person and not a representative of my clan".*

The community and women peacebuilders both value and trust those who have received training or have a wider experience of peacebuilding. One woman peacebuilder particularly highlighted this aspect of her work, stating, "*I have been working with the Somali community the last 30 years. The Somali culture dynamics, traditional mechanism, and other tools and skills that we have learned from the international partners have given us the strength to do peacebuilding work . . . There were 9 countries in the Horn of Africa that we worked with and learned from, to build ourselves on peace and reconciliation experience*".

Demonstrating a strong level of personal commitment, education, experience, and neutrality are important in being able to lead and influence. However, it seems that the younger generation of peacebuilders may feel excluded and undervalued. Younger women peacebuilders described the work they do and highlighted the trust deficit they experience, with one stating, *"Because of our age, the elders do not allow us to be present in the reconciliation conferences. We conduct awareness raising on the effects of the conflicts and promote peaceful coexistence among the communities. We promote interaction between the youth in the district, such as organizing sports activities where the youth can meet and play. We use social media platforms such as Facebook to raise awareness and mobilize the communities*". The young women peacebuilders advocate for awareness of youth challenges and their potential to contribute as these are often disregarded by the elders. They use traditional cultural forums and social media channels and new technology – whatever will reach people.

Political Support and Safety

Support from the, mostly male, political leadership is also seen as a factor in women getting a platform to influence and ensure their security in the process – from local to national levels. *"Thanks to our Southwest State President, we women now get to be seen and heard, women are getting more*

opportunities to represent themselves, represent other women and their community during peace-building and conflict resolution forums", one senior woman peacebuilder noted, highlighting the importance of political leadership.

Although there has been progress, the women peacebuilders face resistance to their roles. The women peacebuilders who contributed to this study explained coherently the societal prejudices and expectations that prevent, undermine, and undervalue their peacebuilding work. One woman peacebuilder commented on the lower social status of women, "*men were always seen the leaders in our culture, women were not seen as equals. Changing the way men see and value women are challenging but we always knew that we could overcome such prejudices*". Another peacebuilder shared her experience and stated, *"No one takes you seriously. They say, you're just a woman. Always there are challenges, but I don't want to give up, I want to work harder, I'm not less than a man"*.

The public sphere is viewed as men's domain, women are often not seen as capable, and traditional systems exclude women from decision-making. Women peacebuilders are aware that changing the way men perceive women, and more general shifts towards gender equality, are needed to underpin their roles in securing peace. One woman peacebuilder told a story of 'committee formation', *"I attended a committee formation meeting and found all the women cooped up in the social affairs committee and no woman was included in the security or constitutional review committee as if women do not have a say in such matters. Women are pushed to work on human rights, social affairs or family affairs"*.

Ongoing security concerns often limit women's access to key areas, particularly where Al-Shabaab is present. Elsewhere, the risk of GBV is high for women in the public sphere. One woman peacebuilder commented on this risk, *"Somalia is not secure and in some of the villages we go to the boys (Al-Shabab) are there. So doing peacebuilding is risky".* Another woman peacebuilder told us that *'the threat posed by al-Shabaab limits the potential for civil society to contribute to peacebuilding. Al Shabab and allied groups have threatened to behead me numerous times"*.

PEACEBUILDING GOALS AND ACTIONS

This section explains the peacebuilding goals and actions that the women peacebuilders carry out.

Defining Peacebuilding

What women peacebuilders call 'peacebuilding' in Somalia includes: mobilizing women, men, elders, peace activists, and leaders; establishing new local institutions; building sustainable linkages among traditional and formal institutions of peace and justice; and, improving their responsiveness to meet the needs and interests of women and youth. For them, peacebuilding is both a societal change and a healing activity. They perceive peacebuilding as a collaborative activity, aimed at changing institutional and cultural practices. They introduce themselves as key stakeholders, participants, and contributors to peace processes, and attempt to change institutions, depoliticize grievances and suffering, remove representational barriers and foster communal healing. They employ a range of political, social, and communal approaches to achieve these peacebuilding goals. Thus, they engage in a long-term, collaborative, and transformative process.

Changing Institutions

The women peacebuilders see their role as being transformational change agents. One woman peacebuilder articulated this role and vision, she declared that *"technically we are trying to change the system, mainly customary system, the traditional system being used*". Another woman peacebuilder elaborated the desired changes and stated, "*in addition to life-saving support to women, we strive to create a more enabling and progressive social environment"*. It seems that they envision peace which places empowerment of women and other marginalized groups at the center, ensuring that the needs, interests, and grievances of diverse groups are addressed and that their various capacities, skills, and relationships are harnessed for peace rather than violence – strongly aligned with the intent of UN peace agenda.

One woman peacebuilder highlighted the importance of long-term institutional change and its impact on local peace and security, stating, "*we united the women and empowered them to intervene between the men in times of conflict or dispute. We also formed 10 women groups in the 10 districts of the region acting as neighborhood watch. We issued mobile phones to strategic public places such as coffee shops owned by women and advised them to report suspicious persons or activities to the village leader who then reports the matter to the regional administration who then informs the police. This system has improved peace and security - making Baidoa the safest region. This still exists and is still effective in maintaining peace and security within their districts. It formed a great working relationship with the police".* Another woman peacebuilder described the actions that were aimed at transforming the context for peace negotiations, stating, "*when there is tension between clans in some areas, we hire vehicles and go to them to mediate between clans. We go between armed men and call on them using poetry. ….. We call the government and elders to join us".*

The need to change norms, leading to the inclusion of different voices and safeguarding of rights for all, is seen as central in transforming the traditional system. One woman peacebuilder explains how they have been trying to achieve this goal, "*We try to do things differently and ask how we can change things that are not working. We bring people working together to tell their ideas and bring solutions".* The women peacebuilders recognize the need to create space for people to see different possibilities, beyond current processes and practices of resolving conflict and managing resources.

Many women peacebuilders speak of the need for creativity and innovation to break cycles of violence and ineffective, counter-productive, traditional responses. One woman peacebuilder, describing her peacebuilding strategy, stated, "*I wanted to use my voice through poetry to influence peace and use poetry to mediate between conflicting clans. We stood in the middle, and I recited my poetry and*

proverbs. I remind them of their relations and how they used to live peacefully". The importance of poetry in the Somali culture is seen as an opportunity to disrupt conflict situations. The use of poetry and proverbs is also seen as an effective way to engage women who are reluctant to act, situating their activism within the culturally accepted activity. "*Poetry helps greatly. It touches the nerves of society",* one woman peacebuilder noted, explaining the cultural value of poetry in Somali society.

Many women peacebuilders observe the increasing politicization of local peace and reconciliation agendas and are building alliances and networks to challenge it. In so doing, they are engaging with politicians, participating in the state-building process, and making efforts to legislate for women's rights. Many women peacebuilders, therefore, are focused on achieving representation of women within political processes. One woman peacebuilder celebrated their success in these words, "*we succeeded in getting many leadership positions available to women and helped them secure those positions. We are proud of the fact that some of the women we empowered are sitting MPs, Ministers, District Commissioners, and other senior government positions, for example, the current Deputy Permanent Secretary of the Office of the Prime Minister was once one of SWLI's female Youth Ambassadors for Women in Political Participation and Leadership in 2016*".

Many Somali women have established new peacebuilding initiatives to support women to take on new roles within their communities where they saw the need for new responses and ways in which women could contribute to peacebuilding processes. They re-purpose Somali cultural traditions and norms to design and implement peacebuilding strategies.

Somali women peacebuilders raise peace awareness at the community level, covering core peace and reconciliation issues as well as gender-specific issues such as FGM, sexual harassment, and prejudice that exclude women from influence. One woman peacebuilder detailed their strategy, "*The awareness raising program that we have implemented in Balcad district had an impact on the mindset of how the community perceives peace especially those who had grievance on each other. The radio programs that are aired by the IPN group have also changed the mindset of the community".* Women peacebuilders are increasingly demonstrating extensive reach through the use of new technologies and social media. One woman described how they assess the impact of their work, she said, *"I think some of the videos over 100 thousand people watched so we are doing a lot of education in that way reaching out to people to educate them on peacebuilding and reconciliation and to mainly challenge the way our culture treats women".*

Communications technologies and social media have proved useful to women peacebuilders. Social media platforms have been used to disseminate peace messaging and connect youth for peace where they have felt excluded from existing initiatives. Communications technology has been used to influence remote, conflict-prone areas where insecurity prevents the physical presence of women peacebuilders. It has also extended advocacy beyond local levels, for example, a regional peace platform lobbied using WhatsApp to communicate with officials and women lobbied the state administration to increase women parliamentarians.

Strengthening and Expanding leadership roles

Women peacebuilders recognize the need to remove barriers that prevent women from fully participating in the peace processes – including GBV, unfair social norms, economic restrictions, security risks, and limited resources and capacities. One woman peacebuilder stated that the "*reduction of violence against women, access to knowledge and greater economic independence will contribute to women's political empowerment".* Another woman peacebuilder highlighted the strategic importance of promoting women's roles in governance, she argued that *"the justice of the court is for those who have elders, MPs, and money. We struggle to overcome these sorts of things. We work closely with the police, likewise with the Ministry of Women, the Ministry of Justice and the other organizations like them".*

One woman peacebuilder commented on the growing political influence of Somali women, *"we enforced the 30% women political participation and managed to secure a seat for one female in every 3 seat allocation for each clan through a slogan we named "Sii gabaadha codka". We joined forces with women from other regionals and managed to support each other through information sharing and moral support".* This

success is an outcome of the changing social attitudes towards women. As one woman stated, *"We are seeing a change of attitude in communities we have worked in. Although, some government officials continue to say that political participation is not for women we have noted changes where they are accepting that women can also be given that chance. Women are also more educated and experienced nowadays so more women are seeking more political offices and getting them".*

There is an established core of registered, women's rights organizations (WRO's) and wider civil society organizations (CSO's) that focus on preventing and responding to GBV as a core service and/or focus of advocacy to support women's rights. Others are focussed on supporting women's participation in societal change and peacebuilding more specifically, viewing women's empowerment more broadly as key to ensuring they can act as effective peacebuilders. The women peacebuilders who have participated in this research argued that *"You can't separate women's financial freedoms from their ability to participate, whether it's politics, peacebuilding, and reconciliation"*

Only a minority of WRO's have adequate financial support[4]. One woman peacebuilder described the significance of financial support for organizing even a micro- peacebuilding event, she stated that "*you need to bring the conflicting parties to sit together, you need refreshment. When there is conflict, there is Sabeen xir (compensation or restitution) paid the wronged side. Sometimes you need logistics to visit the affected areas. We sometimes as a group pool together a small amount of money to cover some of these costs, but most people are poor and cannot afford to contribute".*

Despite increasingly limited access to financial resources and support[5], the women peacebuilders actively generate funds for their activities. One woman peacebuilder who contributed to this study summarised their fund-raising strategy, *"The 25-committee members of the Jubaland Platform decided that each member would contribute ten dollars every month to assist us to respond to conflicts quickly. The funds were meant to make the organization self-sufficient as first responders. We raise two hundred and fifty dollars every month, which is deposited in a bank account".* Some women peacebuilders, it appears, mobilize funds when needed and some have institutionalized fundraising.

There is a strong perception amongst the woman peacebuilders that male-led initiatives receive more funding than women's initiatives and there are reservations about donor requirements that steer CSO's towards partnership with INGOs rather than receiving direct funding. "*The international community itself that advocates for women rights, do not give funds to women-led organizations as often as they do for men-led ones"*, one woman peacebuilder concluded. What peacebuilding signifies to the women peacebuilders, however, does not stop here.

Healing individuals and communities

Peacebuilding activity also helps with personal and communal healing. One woman peacebuilder, who has lost her loved ones, alluded to this aspect of peacebuilding. She declared that "*engaging with this peace process was a turning point for me to deal with my anger".* Some women peacebuilders believe that for them peacebuilding implies establishing a safe social space for communal healing, they stated *"there are scars of trauma caused by civil war. Everyone is almost a victim so that the community should have the courage to speak about themselves. We bring the people together to discuss and have a say about what happened without fear".*

The practice of communal healing and integration is even more pronounced in the peacebuilding work which the women peacebuilders have been doing to reintegrate youth and AS defectors. They work with youth to develop livelihood skills and opportunities and to change the perspective of the older generation towards young people who do not have status and voice within society and whose rights are not realized under the Xeer system. The women peacebuilders link with the business community to overcome resistance to employing AS defectors. Supporting youth to work actively for peace, including younger women, is also a focus for some women peacebuilders. One woman peacebuilder remarked, "*We managed to turn youth away from unlawful ways and create opportunities for themselves in peacebuilding and reconciliation. We also managed to inspire young women to take part*". The importance of creating a vision for youth, where they can see better ways to live, is seen as crucial peacebuilding activity

Many women peacebuilders, therefore, combine social development and humanitarian activities alongside influencing, dialogue, and peace activism. Addressing basic needs and supporting inclusive socio-economic development are seen as essential for conflict prevention, particularly where this engages women and youth. One woman peacebuilder explained the logic of combing socio-economic development and peacebuilding, asserting, "*We work to make an environment that is viable for life, focusing on job creation, developing the income of the family, and empowering women".* The encouragement of self-help and local mobilization to meet essential needs is also a vital approach for women peacebuilders. *"The mind your neighbor initiative urges villagers to fundraise or assist the less fortunate ones in the community, it has provided a considerable amount of basic as well as medical and educational needs for the people of Bay region",* one woman peacebuilder argued.

THE WAY FORWARD

Somali women peacebuilders understand the social and political complexity of peacebuilding in Somalia. Their vision aligns with both the international framework of inclusive and sustainable peace and the local needs and interests of Somali communities. They envision peace which places empowerment of women and other marginalized groups including youth at the center of their peacebuilding work.

Women's peacebuilding work is under-resourced and unrecognized. This can be addressed by providing sustainable financial and technical support to women peacebuilder groups through international, national, and regional institutions. This will lead to the impactful engagement and influence of women peacebuilder in decision and policy making in Somalia i.e. increased representational and leadership positions at regional and national levels. It is important to support women peacebuilders directly and commit to long-term partnerships, which go beyond specific projects. Financial and technical support should prioritize the areas the areas that women peacebuilders prioritise, particulalry addressing the politicization of grievances and suffering, gender-based violence (GBV), and youth exclusion and the related threat of violent extremism.

Women peacebuilder groups work effectively as networked organizations. It is therefore important to recognize, formalize and institutionalize women-led peacebuilding networks. The institutional aspect of women's peacebuilding work is vital as it enables them to balance their personal and collective needs as well as helps them with building their representational skills and status. Potentially, a network approach to financial, technical, and relational support can lead to building a locally beneficial and regional, and nationally responsive institution.

Building and strengthening the relationship between experienced and young woman peacebuilders should be a fundamental feature of the women peacebuilder's policy and strategy. It can be organized by establishing a formal peacebuilding institution, aimed at fashioning mentoring and coaching relationships between the experienced and the young women peacebuilders. This should add value to women's peacebuilding work by combining the advantages of experience and passion and prepare the next generation of women peacebuilders.

The following recommendations, our analysis suggests, can lead to building and strengthening Somali women peacebuilders.

- Steady and increased financial support to women peacebuilders
- Systematic upgrading of women's peacebuilding capacity and skills
- Greater emphasis on initiation, formalization, and institutionalization of women-led peacebuilding networks
- Dedicated effort to support women peacebuilder in re-purposing cultural traditions and norms as peacebuilding tools
- Fashioning and establishing mentoring and coaching relationships between the experienced and the young women peacebuilders, and finally
- Formally acknowledging and promoting women peacebuilders and their work at all levels-international, national, regional, and local

ANNEX 1: A NOTE ON POLICY AND LEGAL CONTEXT OF WPS IN SOMALIA

In 2000, as international civil society actors were lobbying the UN Security Council to adopt UN Resolution 1325, the foundation of the Women, Peace and Security agenda – Somali men and women made a historic decision to include women in the Somali National Peace Process in Djibouti. Somali women actively engaged with WPS pillars since 2002. Despite successes, Somalia still has no formal National Action Plan (NAP) on Women, Peace, and Security, to set priorities in addressing the key challenges, including sexual violence and the continued exclusion of women from critical political processes. It does, however, have a NAP on Conflict-Related Sexual Violence which addresses some of the WPS agenda (GAPS-UK, 2020).

Somali resistance to WPS as an external policy agenda has deterred the development of a WPS NAP, although the Somali Women's Charter reflects the WPS agenda. A NAP on WPS, developed through a participatory process, could tackle women's current needs and address new forms of political contestations where women and girls are disproportionately affected, whilst becoming a rallying point for women and men who understand the potential of WPS principles to transform responses to Somalia's ongoing conflict (Albany, 2021).

No key legal reforms supporting women's empowerment and gender equality have been undertaken since the civil war, although a National Gender Policy framework was recently approved by the Federal Cabinet. Somalia has not ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) or the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa ('the Maputo Protocol'). Furthermore, WROs have long advocated for the Sexual Offences Bill (SOB) which has been met with a backlash in parliament - an altered version allowing for child, early and forced marriage being denounced by local, national, and international organizations. The Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) Bill is also currently being prepared under the leadership of the Ministry of Women and Human Rights Development. WROs view adoption and enactment of the Sexual Offences Bill (SOB) and FGM legislation as crucial for bolstering current GBV prevention and response efforts which are inadequate. The Government of Puntland state passed its SOB in 2016, reflecting greater support there, however, the implementation of this law has stalled due to lack of funding to support implementation (GAPS-UK, 2019).

The Somali Government is committed to UNSCR 1325 and related resolutions 1820, 1888, 1889, and 1960. The Somali Constitution adopted in 2012 explicitly entrenches the key role that women should play in nation-building, including being at the decision-making table. However, there is a lack of clear policy and legal frameworks that support and promote women's political participation and involvement in peacebuilding. Where laws do exist, there are weak implementation mechanisms nationally and within the regions. Women´s rights organizations have continued pushing for their cause, but at times, they are seen to be representing western interests, for example, women's rights issues such as FGM and age of consent evoke traditional norms and become a challenging and complex theme to run interventions (SIDRA, 2018).

The pool of women activists, lawyers, and political leaders present an opportunity for WROs and CSOs to lobby for the government to fully adopt a Somali NAP on Women, Peace, and Security and advance legal reform in areas of political participation and gender-based violence: to increase women's representation in the next election; adopt the 30 percent quota in the Constitution; lobby for the development of a Somali National Action Plan (NAP) on Women, Peace, and Security; and advance legal reform in key areas, including the passing of an unaltered Sexual Offences Bill (LPI, 2018). Legal and policy level change, however, needs to be accompanied by programs that will transform the root causes of the issues, such as influencing responses of formal and informal justice actors and institutions to be more inclusive of and responsive to the needs and demands of women, girls and other marginalized groups (GAPS-UK, 2020).

ANNEX 2: LIST OF THE PUBLICATIONS REVIEWED

Albany (2021), Towards Inclusive Justice: Women, Peace and Security and Access to Justice in Newly and Recently Recovered Areas, Albany Associates & KasmoDev, London

GAPS-UK, Saferworld, SWDC (2021), Now and the Future: Gender Equality, Peace and Security in a COVID-19 World – Somalia, London

GAPS-UK, Saferworld and SWDO (2020) Supporting Civil Society and Women's Rights Organisations in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Contexts: Somalia Report, London

GAPS-UK (2019), International Commitments and Priorities for the 2019 UK-Hosted International Conference on Gender-Based Violence and the 20th Anniversary of UNSCR 1325 in 2020: Somalia consultation, GAPS-UK, UNFPA, Legal Action Worldwide and FCDO

Gardner, J. and J. El-Bushra. The Impact of War on Men and Its Effect on the Family, Women, and Children. Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2016.

Horst, C (2017), Implementing the Women, Peace and security Agenda? Somali debates on women's public roles and political participation, PRIO

LPI (2018), Women, Conflict and Peace: Learning from Kismayo, Life and Peace Institute, Peace Direct and Somali Women Solidarity Organisations

Saferworld (2020) Gender and COVID-19: responding to violence against women and children in Somalia, London

Saferworld (2020), The Missing Link: Access to Justice and Community Security in Somalia, Saferworld

SIDRA (2018), Women, Peace and Security Agenda: Somali Women in the Post-Conflict Socio-Political Arena, Somali Institute for Development Research and Analysis/Kvinna til Kvinna

UNPBF (2020), FINAL REPORT: ONLINE CONSULTATIVE PROCESS, United Nations Peacebuilding Fund

[1] Literature published since 2016 was prioritized as this reflects the current context as well as builds on earlier works.

[2] Note: This research does not cover the role of women in areas controlled by Al-Shabab and therefore it should not be seen and read as representing the views of women living in the areas controlled by Al-Shabab

[3] Despite disagreements on the public and political role of women, Somali women have, at least since the 1960s, held civil-political leadership positions. Initially, Siad Barre's scientific socialism provided a form of state-supported feminism. Women were encouraged in Somali towns to participate in public life. Debates about women's legal rights and their position in the xeer system (customary law) flourished amongst the urban elite. The 1975 Family Law gave women equal rights in marriage, divorce, and inheritance and, hence challenged the xeer law. The state-sponsored Somali Women's Democratic Organization (SWDO), dedicated to seeking greater social and political representation, was established in 1977 and grew prior to the civil war.

[4] Women's peacebuilding activity is underfunded, with women perceiving that male-led initiatives are more easily funded. Many women need to earn income alongside their peacebuilding work, whereas men are more likely to do this work in paid capacities. External support is invaluable for both the financial backing and technical support it brings as well as the platform it can initially give to women peacebuilders as they establish their personal and institutional space as activists. Working across a range of networks, formal and informal security and justice mechanisms, political channels and civil society allows women peacebuilders to act within flexible alliances, providing support and security and balancing individual and collective initiatives. It also offers greater sustainability. The institutional aspects of women's peacebuilding work are key as new channels for influence are created.

[5] The COVID-19 pandemic has seriously impacted women's income due to mobility restrictions, lockdowns and increased work at home. For example, measures to contain COVID-19 have imposed restrictions on international and local flights, affecting imports of goods including khat, vegetables, fruits, candies, and clothes, most of which are sold by women in Somalia. Night curfews have negatively affected small businesses belonging to women, such as teashops, restaurants, and milk shops, who could not open their businesses at night which is the peak time. As a result, many businesses belonging to women have been hit hard and experienced loss of incomes and customers, negatively impacting the wellbeing of their families and overall communities. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a reduction of remittances and aid programs that focus on strengthening women's economic initiatives, leaving women and their families without income or any safety nets. Economic hardships, suspension of schools and movement restriction measures have led to UN and Somali organizations reporting an increase in DV and other forms of GBV against women and girls, including sexual exploitation and abuse. Teenage girls have been subjected to increased CEFM and FGM, as families are facing economic difficulties and the closure of schools has provided the traditional cutters with the opportunity to resume and increase their practice. This is a setback to many decades of awareness-raising on the negative effects of harmful cultural practices on women and girls. Mobility restrictions and cuts in funding for GBV prevention and response mean that survivors are struggling to access essential GBV response services from women's organizations and have fewer options to rebuild their lives and livelihoods (Saferworld, 2020)

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