

SAVE SOMALI WOMEN AND CHILDREN REPORT ON HUMAN RIGHTS IN SOMALIA

Almost two decades after the overthrow of President Siad Barre, Somalia remains a failed state with little prospect of a meaningful peace on the horizon. As a result of the conflict, the human rights situation in Somalia remains dire. In places controlled by Al Shabab and Hizbu Islam, the civilian population is subjected to the worst cases of human rights violations including abduction, flogging, arbitrary killing, extortion and restrictions in humanitarian assistance. Al-Shabaab in particular has grown notorious for abusive and often arbitrary applications of Sharia law, which in at least a few cases have seen alleged crimes punished with amputations, beheadings, and, arbitrary floggings. In some areas al-Shabaab and other opposition groups have forcibly recruited men and boys into militia forces. In Jowhar, for example, al-Shabaab militiamen reportedly press-ganged men into military service in 2009. Many opposition militias include children within their ranks; in at least some parts of Somalia al-Shabaab has deliberately targeted children for recruitment through a mix of promises, threats, and indoctrination.

The recruitment, training and use of children in the conflict, especially by the armed militants, continued unabated. While recruitment of girls has been rare and is generally regarded as socially unacceptable, there are documented accounts of girls working for armed opposition groups, particularly in cooking and cleaning. Girls are also brought in to transport detonators, for logistics, and intelligence collection, though they do receive weapons training as well. The lack of schooling for children has made them especially vulnerable for recruitment by armed groups.

Somali women are systematically discriminated [against] and subordinated ... [They face] limited inclusion in decision making structures and leadership roles, limited access to reproductive health, higher rates of stigmatization from HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases, denial of due process rights, abuse of women's rights in divorce cases, denial of custody of children [and] denial [of] women's rights of property ownership and inheritance under customary law. The persistent conflict only exacerbates women's problems.

War-related rape and domestic violence are widespread including genital mutilation. Women in Internally Displaced Person (IDP) camps are particularly vulnerable to rape, abduction and forced marriage. . The rape of women and girls by militia and bandits is a common phenomenon and there are no laws against spousal rape. Women and girls are kidnapped, tortured and generally threatened. Even though women are essentially neutral when it comes to clan affiliation they are still the targets of clan-related reprisals and attacks. Women increasingly remain victims to these blood-thirsty gangs that inflict their will primarily on innocent and defenseless women and young girls.

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 "Infibulations" 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.

Other 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. Many Somali women have lost their husbands and eldest sons who either died or left home to become fighters. Often they find themselves alone with several children and relatives to look after. They struggle to provide for the physical needs of the family amidst a myriad of challenges. A lack of basic resources like water has created cases of infectious diseases like diarrhea and scabies especially in the camps for displaced people (IDPs). Nutritional deficiencies for both mothers and infants are very common and communicable diseases like cholera have been on the rise. Mothers also face the challenge of high infant mortality when they are not able to access clinics where their children can get treatment and immunization. Pregnant women often do not attend antenatal clinics, which leads to complications during childbirth, because they do lack basic health education. Further, accessibility to the few available clinics can be an issue, as there are many roadblocks on the way that can prevent patients from attempting to get help.

Many of the women heading households work very hard to provide for their families and relatives and ensure they get at least one meal a day. Many of them remain the sole caregivers in families. They are often overworked and suffer from nutritional deficiencies, as only on rare occasions do they get sufficient and balanced meals for the whole family. When they do, the children take priority and it is common for mothers to go hungry. Life is especially difficult for those who have no work and have to rely on neighbors for support.

These difficulties have forced majority of women to engage in high risk survival activities like fetching firewood and water from distant and insecure areas. Many of the young displaced girls are forced to look after goats in the fields where they are exposed to a risk of sexual exploitation and if they become pregnant, no health services or social support is available to them. Even in the camps, women collect firewood, do laundry and carry water for others who have a little money to spare. A few of the displaced families are fortunate enough to collect remittances from relatives abroad, but these are the minority and even then, they have to share their meager income with other relatives.

The general insecurity, including regular outbreaks of fighting and the murder and abduction of humanitarian workers, has made it more and more difficult for relief agencies to access those in need. As a consequence, the vulnerable are not getting access to adequate water, food, health care, education and shelter. Half of the population living in Somalia is in urgent need of humanitarian assistance, one in every five children is acutely malnourished and less than 100,000 of the country's internally displaced children attend primary school.

While the political solution to the political crisis is in the making, the protection of the people from further human rights violations relies mainly on the human rights defenders. Prevention of human rights abuses is a top priority; without it lasting peace cannot be reached in the complex

Somali society. Yet, human rights defenders in Somalia are faced by a myriad of challenges that affect and thwart their work, from more blatant and traditional forms of repression to more recent legislative efforts by the authorities to restrict their space and criminalize their legitimate activities. Somali human rights defenders and journalists have been victims of targeted killings, death threats, abductions and attacks over the past three years. Many civil society activists have been forced into exile because of such threats and those remaining in Somalia remain at grave risk. The NGO SPAS reports, just like many other analyses of human rights abuse including arbitrary killings of top Somali advocates of human rights and humanitarian assistance. The chairperson of Somali Human Rights defenders Network and its legal adviser are currently living in exile in Uganda. Peace activists have also fallen victim of targeted killings. Those still operating on the ground, notably the Peace and Human Rights Network (PHRN) have resigned themselves to using self-censorship in order to protect themselves from attacks. In spite of this they continue to be subjected to intimidations and threats. On the 11th June 2008 Somali peace activist, Executive Director of the Women Care Organization (WOCA) and founding member of the Peace and Human Rights Network (PHRN), Mr Mohammed Abdulle Mahdi “ Qeylow”, was killed in Swk Ba’ad in Northern Mogadishu. In January, 2009, two humanitarian workers were reported killed (NGO SPAS report no. 02/09). Some journalists were killed too and on 16th April 2010, Alin Hilowle Hassan, director of Isha, a human rights organization in the Bay and Bakool region of southern Somalia, was captured at his home by armed al- Shabab members in Baidoa the region’s capital. They accused his organization of spying for foreign powers. Despite intense lobbying by Amnesty International, he has not yet been released. Not even the media has been spared this horrific treatment. On January 15th 2010, the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) ordered independent radio and television stations closed down, citing national security. On 3rd April, the armed opposition group Hizbul Islam ordered radio stations to stop broadcasting music, claiming it was un-Islamic. On 9th April, al- Shabab banned the BBC and VOA from broadcasting in areas under its control claiming it was opposed to an Islamic administration and seized the BBC satellite dishes and FM transmitters. Most radio stations had to stop relaying BBC programs and airing music, for fear of reprisals by armed opposition groups.