

## **Peace Negotiations: Somali Women – the Missing and Resourceful Agents**

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It is a great pleasure for me to be participating in this forum. I thank the organizers and sponsors, particularly Mr. Roy Cullen (MP) who worked very hard to make this forum possible. I hope that there will be more opportunities such as this, beyond Toronto, to discuss the multi-dimensional solutions to Somalia's problems. The tragedies of war-torn Somalia cannot be addressed in a one-day forum. However, I would like to emphasize the importance of this meeting as it provides the Somali diaspora a much-needed space to come together, exchange ideas and strategize around solutions that will help to bring a sustainable and successful resolution to the difficulties facing my homeland.

### **Introduction**

I chose this topic for many reasons. As a woman, as an internally displaced person who became a refugee and as a Somali who has experienced the civil war in my country, it was evident to me that women were often denied a place in public discussions, particularly when they dealt with conflict resolution at the local level. In efforts to resolve conflict in the Somali town where we sought refuge, I remember how women cooked and cleaned as the men “mediated.” Some women showed an interest in being part of the discussions, since they also felt the impact of the conflict between the two belligerent groups. However, women were told that they are not equipped to propose solutions to the problems. Gender bias and gender inequality are still prevalent in our post-war society – and continue to affect the contribution of women in finding a sustainable peace for Somalia.

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As someone who personally experienced the brutal war that destroyed my homeland, I would like to share with you briefly the active role which women played in the Somali civil war. Somali women were not passive as is often portrayed – they participated the war in various ways, supporting their clans by going to war with them, cooking, cleaning, nursing, or even spying on “the enemy”. Some women who did not physically participate in the war, used their artistic expressions to support their clans, through war songs and poems to encourage and boost morale. In the early days of the war, I remember one afternoon when armed men and women came to our home to loot whatever they could find. Men looted the cars and heavy objects, while the women walked away with jewellery and clothing. Some of the women searched for us and took some of the jewellery we were wearing. I am telling you this, to explain that women were actively involved in the war, participating for various reasons, whether by choice or by force. I believe we need to recognize the active agency of women in war-time, as well as their important potential contributions to peace-building and the rebuilding of a new, peaceful, Somalia.

I strongly believe that many Somalis, including all who are here today, want to see peace in Somalia. But peace means different things to different people. Some of us simply want to rebuild the political structure of Somalia, others focus upon the economic and security aspects, while others want to address social concerns as a way of finding durable solutions to Somalia’s problems. Martin Luther King Jr. once said: “peace is not just the absence of tension, but the presence of justice.” Our proposals and strategies for helping to foster peace in Somalia should not only alleviate the immediate tensions or conflict between groups, but also address the root causes of those conflicts -- including gender inequality – and aim to bring peace to a new Somalia.

More than a decade after disintegrating due to civil war, Somalia remains unstable and the search for durable political solutions continues to be sought. Numerous peace processes and negotiations have failed as various warlords who come to the negotiation table could not reach a consensus in building a peaceful Somalia – fundamentally because that peace would result in a diminishing of their power and authority. The major argument which I make in this presentation is *the need to address the under-representation of Somali women from vital peace negotiations, an omission which denies them a role in shaping the decisions that will affect their lives and the formation of a Somalia built upon the visions of all Somalis, regardless of their gender.*

Somali women are largely excluded from the peace negotiations which are intended to resolve the unending civil war. Factors that hinder their participation in the discussions include:

- i. Women were / are in a socially disadvantaged position in both the pre- and post-conflict periods, yet they play a major role in fostering a culture of peace at the local level. Women lack the opportunities and resources which would enable them to be a part of the peace-building effort. They lack information and political affiliations.
- ii. Peace negotiations are seen as a male domain, which means that they also employ discourses and practices that are closer to men's reality than to women's.<sup>2</sup> As a result, women miss the opportunity to influence directly or indirectly the peace-building agenda. Most of the Somali

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted from online resources, author, <http://www.unrisd.org/wsp/op3/op3-01.htm>.

women living in refugee camps and those in Canada whom I have encountered have explained their absence from these important negotiations, in part because “women are believed to lack any contributions to politics and security of Somalia. Thus, peace and security are considered to be men’s tasks”. Such beliefs in fact fail to acknowledge the grassroots peace-building efforts in which women are involved through their everyday life activities.

- iii. During the conflict and its aftermath, women are often portrayed as vulnerable and as victims (Cockburn, 1998). Yet, women have been bridge-builders; the glue which holds families together, which creates communities across clan-lines. This depiction of women reveals men as the only “legitimate” peacemakers (despite their historical role as creators of war). There is a need to reverse this stereotyping of women, to see them as active and creative agents for peace with more attention should be paid to their realities of life, their capacities and their priorities. Somali women should not be portrayed simply as victims of conflicts, but also as important actors who can contribute to the peace-building activities in their war-torn communities.

These hindering factors which led to women’s absence from vital peace-building negotiations needs to be addressed urgently if women are to make an equal contribution to the process. Men in general and warlords who specifically caused war and devastation with no real interest in bringing peace to Somalia, continue to be given opportunities such as resources, space, mobility, information and international recognition / legitimacy to discuss “peace.” Whenever a few women are given a similar opportunity to participate in these negotiations, they are often only given space to serve as observers, rather than decision-makers.

Having a few women at the negotiation table as a token gesture does not truly provide women with the appropriate space to shape the peace agenda. Many Somali male friends of mine often tell me that women have always been present at the peace negotiations. I argue, however, that having women who are hand-picked by their clan groups does not necessarily mean that women are given an equal space to voice and influence the peace negotiations.

Why is the participation of Somali women in peace negotiations vital? In Arta's peace negotiation (Djibouti), Somali women played an instrumental role in persuading men to put their differences aside and come to an agreement to form a national government. Why should Somali women, who constitute half of the population, be excluded from such efforts? Somali women, whenever their families and communities were threatened by new conflicts, organized and held peace protests in the areas where fighting erupted. If women continue to be excluded from these negotiations, their issues have no chance of being discussed or even being placed on the agenda of reconstruction. If durable political solutions are to be found in Somalia, gender considerations need to be mainstreamed into the peace and rebuilding processes. If peace negotiations take place without women's participation, they will bear the brunt of misshapen policies and agendas, as the process determines the kind of space in which women can or cannot take actions to improve their status in any future government. I argue that the male-dominated, top-down peace negotiations will do nothing to reshape the gender roles and the position of women in the aftermath of conflict.

### **Canada's Role**

What can Canada do to help Somali-Canadian women to participate fully in future peace negotiations? Before I discuss the potential role of Canada, I will discuss briefly how important Canada has been to Somalis like you and I who have adopted this country as their new home. I was very lucky to have been given a second chance to rebuild my life. It has allowed me to obtain a higher education – which not only benefited me, but is also helping my family members who are refugees in various countries neighbouring Somalia as I send them remittances. I share some of the security elements Canada has given me with my family members. Without the opportunity given to me by this country, I would have been among the thousands of refugees living in deplorable conditions in many refugee camp... thousands who are still in limbo a decade after the civil war began. Canada has been a very generous country for those of us who have made it home since our displacement from Somalia. Our status as Somali-Canadians allows us to be here today discussing and hoping to find solutions to Somalia's political instability.

I am so proud to be Somali-Canadian. It is such a privilege for me to be sharing a space with Mr. Roy Cullen and other honorary guests. As a young woman growing up in Mogadishu, I had never met any members of my country's parliament in person, let alone any of the government's Ministers. The political system we have in Canada allows citizens to have access to their elected members of parliament as well as their government. Mr. Cullen, we thank you for your time and the support you have given to the Somali community.

### **The United Nations Resolution 1325**

The Security Council adopted Resolution 1325 on October 31, 2000. This was a historic event and a victory to women who are in or are from war-torn societies. It

was the first time ever that the importance of women's contribution to peace-buildings was recognised and advocated by the United Nations. Resolution 1325 recognizes:

[women's] important role in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peace-building, and ...the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security, and the need to increase their role in decision-making with regard to conflict prevention and resolution (United Nations, 2000).

The Resolution provides guidelines to include women of all peace-building efforts and the rebuilding of war-torn societies. I believe that if Resolution's guidelines are utilised in an honest way by different actors, agents and countries working toward peace, the gender gaps that have been prevalent in peace-building negotiations will be addressed.

I wonder how many participants of the current round of Somali peace-negotiations, which have been taking place in Kenya since the end of last year, know of the existence of Resolution 1325 and if they are truly implementing its guidelines.

I also wonder if Resolution 1325 is translated into Somali. If it is in Somali, how much awareness exists among the participants about the importance of including women in the process. I am interested in taking the initiative of translating the Resolution into Somali - so you are welcome to join me in doing this task.

Having a Resolution 1325 that advocates the full inclusion of women in all stages of peace-buildings and rebuilding is one thing.... implementing it is another.

There is an urgent need to implement the recommendations of UN Resolution 1325 in all peace-building efforts that are to come in Somalia. What is needed is commitment on the part of local actors as well as international actors, including Canada, to adhere to the recommendations made in Resolution 1325 to address the unequal representation of women in peace-building efforts.

Canada can use the Resolution's guidelines to promote Somali-Canadian women's involvement in future peace processes. I would like to point out a few critical areas that need immediate action by the Canadian government to facilitate this:

- Making available to women in the diaspora (in our case, Somali-Canadian women) the vital information on current or future peace negotiations. The lack of information has kept many women in the dark. In order for us to play a pivotal role, access to such information is required. The participation of women should not be left only to a few academics, politicians or businesspeople – but rather, open to the majority of Somali women who are living outside of their homeland.
- Providing resources to women in order for women to be physically present where the peace negotiations are taking place. Financial assistance to women will promote their full participation in the negotiations. Canada should use its diplomacy and positions of influence with various international bodies to which it belongs to ensure “seats at the negotiation table” are accorded to Somali-Canadian women.
- There should be an ongoing consultation with Somali-Canadian women by the Canadian government. We need to be consulted regarding peace

proposals or plans, regardless of their origins in the UN, European Union or other agencies. Canada should be an advocate for the inclusion of Somali-Canadian women (representing different local organizations, intellectuals and students). There should also be consultation with the Somali community, representatives, youth and the Department of Foreign Affairs, so that the Canadian government can formulate policies relating to all aspects of its relationship with the current and future Somali leadership that is appropriate, sustainable and culturally aware.

UN Resolution 1325 is an important instrument or guideline that can provide women their denied rights and opportunities to bring solutions to their war-torn communities. Canada should not let this opportunity to slip by.

The effective participation of Somali women in any peace process negotiation requires a complete recognition of them as an equal partner. Women should not be used as an ornament at the table to tritely demonstrate that women are “a part of” the peace agenda – their participation must be authentic and meaningful, or it will be a waste of resources and vital perspective.

## **Conclusion**

I believe that peace is achievable in Somalia, if we are very committed to peace and the reconstruction of our former homeland. We need to put aside our differences and always place the needs of our country and the hundreds of thousands of impoverished people who are either internally displaced or refugees in neighbouring countries at the centre of our efforts. A poor, ruined Somalia overrun by anarchy will not only endanger the existence of our people but also our collective psychological well-beings. We in the diaspora have also been

shouldering enormous financial responsibilities to our family members, who we left behind last month, last year and last decade which cannot be sustained forever.

We will prosper and gain from a stable, democratic and developed Somalia. I think that it is about time that every Somali individual makes his or her contribution to finding peace and security. We should get rid of the habit of waiting for "others" to clean up our own mess or rescue us from our own predicament. We must take responsibility for the past, and for the future of Somalia. There is no doubt we need the support of the international community – but we need not abandon our own resources, which are sustainable, at the expense of foreign dependency -- which is rarely sustainable and does nothing to enhance Somalia's internal capacity to govern itself.

I look forward to hearing your views on Somalia's present and future. I hope that we in the Somali diaspora community can find the common ground, the mutual respect and consideration which has been so profoundly absent in our homeland. With sincerity in our hearts and conviction for the cause of peace, we may finally discover the path that leads to a prosperous and peaceful Somalia.

Thank you.