

# Narrating everyday peace and (in)security: Somaliland women’s lived realities as sites of contestation

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*Abstract:* This article is a collection of Somali women’s narratives during Somaliland’s early peace and reconciliation conferences (1992–7) and their experience of the post-conflict reconstruction period (2000–12). Women’s experience with violence, insecurity and prevailing gender norms highlights that peace is not the absence of gendered violence and that everyday peace is mired in political stability and physical insecurity. Twenty years on, women’s narratives have helped to fill gaps by showing how women’s contributions have been sidelined but also demonstrate their unique experiences of ‘peace’ and ‘security’. This has been instrumental to framing Somaliland’s political history as a region exempt from the civil strife manifest in other parts of the Horn. This article examines the sites of contestations and conflict that have emerged as a consequence of women’s narratives being marginalised and its implications on how ‘peace’ and ‘security’ are practised and framed in the Somaliland context.

*Keywords:* Peace, security, gendered violence, Somaliland, narratives.

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## Introduction: narrative inquiry

‘What is termed as narrative inquiry is using the stories we tell about our lives or we hear about others’ lives as a basis for analyzing broader phenomena’ (Connelly & Clandinin 1990; 2000; Webster and Mertova 2007). It is a study of lived experiences through storytelling, oral histories, poetry and other forms of narration and how we understand those narrations. Narratives can be used to challenge meaning and transform them. As a research methodology, seeking coherence and generalisability through narrative analysis is difficult to maintain and I have found myself grappling with the inconsistencies present even in one sitting (during a single interview). The informant can speak about seeking to fight against patriarchy and to bring about radical changes for the Somali culture while also recognising and supporting other tenets that contribute to women’s subjugation (i.e. clan elder authority). We can certainly view this as a series of negotiations dependent upon the context and conditions of one’s lived experience (according to class, education and mobility for example), but what is more telling is that the narrative regarding one’s lived experience can illuminate real and imagined desires. Apparent contradictions in this context may in fact be more reflective of both pragmatism and idealism—a reflection of the conditions that exist and those that the woman would like to see realised. And yet causality is important in interpreting data even when undertaking discourses analysis.

The narratives collected here not only describe what happens throughout informants’ lives but are used as evidence for the ongoing challenges present in engaging women in post-conflict societies like Somaliland. Although narrative inquiry is adapted from the field of literary criticism, it is now used by a variety of social scientists as a potent methodology for analysing the role of stories and storytelling in any society (Clandinin 2006: 44). Consequently, attempts are made to craft a genealogy and typology for its usage as data collection and as a research method. Narrative inquiry (poetry, storytelling, oral testimonies) can be seen fundamentally as the study of human experience and when interposed with an analysis of exclusion, marginalisation and power, those everyday experiences can articulate and enact their desires. It is also understood to be a profoundly social experience and done in relation to the person asking the questions and the one telling the story. Clandinin & Connelly (2000) use a three-fold approach to the space of ‘narrative inquiry’ that is, how to analyse *where* narratives occur as well as *what* is being said. They suggest looking at ‘the personal and social; past, present and future; and place’ (Clandinin & Connelly 2000: 54).

Similar to the structures for developing storylines, it means that every narrative consists of dialogue, a plot line and a context. How do we, in that sense, establish truths or accepted facts derived from lived experiences? Even if we contextualise the context these experiences are embedded within and the use of literary tools like poetry,

myths and metaphors, they do not negate the validity of the data collected especially when field notes about the researcher's own experiences are incorporated (Connelly & Clandinin 1990: 5). The value of this lies in the capacity for narratives (including the researcher's) to give context to the larger image of women's lives before, during and after conflict in Somaliland. In this way, whether an informant uses poetry to express their recollections or conversation, the medium they use and what is being said can contribute to a greater understanding of how women use and politicise their everyday activities.

This paper looks at Somaliland women's narratives from their experiences of the Somali civil war through to their lived realities in Somaliland at present. It references the Somaliland peace process (1991–2000) and contemporary challenges to post-conflict reconstruction (2000–12). Interviewees included elderly women (60 years of age and older) as well as young women—born during and after the Somali civil war (1989 onwards). It begins with an exposition of the methods used to collect women's narratives and its limitations. It is followed by a brief outline of the ways that Somali gender norms have been shaped historically. This is done in order to contextualise the ways these gender norms and values are contested through the narratives presented in this paper. The subsequent sections highlight the role that oral history (life history) testimonies and Somali poetry played as a popular narrative style (for interviewing). They are largely referencing the early peace process (1991–2000) and legacies of the Barre dictatorship (1969–89). These types of narratives and their relevance are expanded upon in the next sections, which highlight Somaliland women's narratives regarding the post-conflict reconstruction period (2000–12). As the historical retelling of women's experiences traverses time periods and overlaps with contemporary processes, it is important to keep in mind that narratives are largely not neat autobiographical references. Rather, they offer an insight into meaning-making for Somaliland women who were, in many instances, telling their stories for the first time.

### **Method: collecting narratives**

The fieldwork for this paper was conducted over a period of seven months from October 2011 to May 2012. I was based at the Somaliland Academy for Peace and Development (APD) in Hargeisa, the capital city of Somaliland, for the duration of the fieldwork. Many of these narratives were collected largely through structured and semi-structured interviews in formal and informal settings and using other ethnographic methods and tools. Interviews occurred in the cities of Hargeisa, Burao (Somaliland's second-largest city), Borame and Gabiley.

Many of the narratives collected are about and were given by women; this was done purposefully. Women's narratives regarding the conflict and post-conflict period

in Somaliland have been largely ignored in popular re-tellings of Somaliland's political history. Such narratives include detailed accounts about how women provided moral, financial, medical and humanitarian support during the outbreak of conflict in Somaliland. As I began my literature review on Somali women's involvement in the Somali civil war, it became apparent that Somali women's contributions were rarely viewed as grounded in political dimensions.

The fieldwork was ethnographic in nature with participant observation as the main entry point to facilitating access to individual women and their organisations. In some instances, I participated actively in the work of the APD and other organisations (NAGAAD Umbrella Organisation for Women, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR]). I took part in events they organised as a facilitator, researcher or speaker. Nevertheless, I was very much a privileged participant. According to [Zieman \(2012\)](#), what is termed as privileged participation involves engaging in a capacity that facilitates learning for respondents and the researcher. This was done through my capacity as a lecturer in various universities throughout Hargeisa.<sup>1</sup> The opportunity to teach came as a result of interviewing some young women who asked whether I was interested in teaching a course at their university. I took up the opportunity to get to know more young women and talk informally about their experiences growing up in the aftermath of Somaliland's self-declared independence (post-1991). During classroom breaks, or especially relevant topics related to my research objectives, students provided valuable insight into their experience with Somali women's participation in peace and reconstruction efforts in Somaliland. Classroom sizes varied between 30 and 100 students.

While my identity was a limitation in some respects, it could also be an asset to my research. In some contexts, I found that once informants knew of my clan affiliation in many instances it helped to foster an environment of familial exchanges where some women sought to educate me about the importance of knowing one's clan and what it means to be a woman between two clans. I found myself in this position quite often when speaking to female informants who sought to taken on the role of 'teacher' imparting knowledge regarding women's proper roles in Somali culture and Islam while I listened patiently to ideas and practices. This is part of what [Hampshire et al. \(2014\)](#) sees as a part of the interview process being another form of *narrative ethnography* where 'self' (researcher) and 'other' (informant) are blurred on occasion. In essence, the interview process is a dialectical relationship where knowledge is produced jointly, creating a narrative unique to the participants in research ([Hampshire et al. 2014](#): 215–16). In this light, where I was seen as an insider, friendships were formed and maternal affections exchanged. For example, I was introduced to my first interviewee by a third party as 'this is your paternal aunt' (figuratively).

<sup>1</sup> Hargeisa University, Admas University College Hargeisa, New Generation University College Hargeisa.

Informants were selected with the help of various individuals and organisations (APD and NAGAAD) but remained largely open-ended. As the research process developed I began targeting certain women to interview for their particular insights. The majority of informants were older women (aged 40 and above). As I engaged with younger women (aged 19–35) through teaching at the various universities, I sought to see how differing narratives of Somaliland’s peace and reconstruction could produce different meanings of peace, security, violence and politics.

### **Narrative approach: life history testimonies**

Life history interviews were conducted with many informants, largely in formal or structured settings. The interview usually centred on the start of the conflict in Somaliland (1991) to begin with, and many indicated that 1981 was a more realistic beginning of the conflict since wide-spread suppression of northern clans by the central government of Somalia was heightened and intensified during that year before the outbreak of civil war (1988). Some Somali women’s narratives took this path to offer a perspective on what their hopes were as part of a fledging democratic state (1960–9) to the decline into civil war (1988–91).

Younger generations of women who have experienced Somaliland’s political process through its self-declared independence and reconstruction process had a dramatically different perspective to offer. For some, ‘conflict’ referred to the 2003 passing of President Mohamed Ibrahim Igal as a tense period for clans and their militias. For others it was the 2008 bombing of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) compound, the Ethiopian government’s trade office, and other buildings in Hargeisa. I understood this to mean that periods of insecurity, violence and peace are interposed with one another and I use these narratives to show different kinds of contributions made by Somaliland women to Somaliland’s peace, security and reconstruction process.

### **Focus group discussions**

Focus group discussions (FGDs) centred on creating safe spaces for groups of women (10 or more) to articulate their perceptions of issues ranging from governance to development and especially their views on clan politics. Women are often intimidated about publicly expressing their views on political processes or issues so women-only FGDs provided an opportunity for the older generation of women to relate their experience and indignation at having been excluded from formal political processes and institutions. These discussions allowed younger generations of women to address

issues that are seen by mainstream society as being outside of the scope of understanding for youth in general and women in specific. An FGD consisting of a group of 13 women was organised, whose participants had been active in the early peace conferences but also who had provided humanitarian assistance to Somali National Movement (SNM) soldiers during the war, supplying them with clean clothes, food, shelter and rudimentary health services.

Another FGD involved an organisation of Somaliland women lawyers entirely comprised of younger female graduates who related their experience of Somaliland's political process at a time where fragile livelihoods were the norm. With the assistance of international organisations, these young women related their views on participation in a political landscape that rarely concerns itself with gender-specific issues (rape, inheritance rights, domestic abuse) through political institutions (i.e. judiciary), entirely mediated through the clan structure.

During my fieldwork, workshops at the APD, dealing with women's participation in institutional politics, were organised for a group of 50 women in Gabiley and 50 women in Burao. The workshops were organised as a part of the APD's Decentralization Program seeking to enhance women's participation in the local council elections that were being prepared for by the Electoral Commission at the time (2012). I was invited to participate as the facilitator of the workshops tasked with setting the themes. In conjunction with the programme managers of the Decentralization Program, they agreed to let me use the workshop as an opportunity to incorporate elements of my research (questions and design) with the idea that the outputs would be shared with the APD. My role as facilitator included designing tools for participants and engaging in active learning of key issues relating to women's political participation (i.e. campaign financing, networking, clan politics). These workshops contributed significantly to my understanding of the strategies women employed to participate in what had become an exclusively male domain and how they confronted dominant discourses and practices that limit their participation in institutional politics, particularly clan.

### **The limitations of using a narrative approach**

As a study about the narratives of women's lives before, during and after conflict in Somaliland this paper is limited in its scope and in its selection of female informants. Initially, those who had been a part of a generation that was educated during the Siad Barre dictatorship (1969–81) and were present during Somaliland's early peace process (1991–2000) were sought out. Some had passed away or were not available for interview at the time. As well, my efforts to uncover narratives that were deemed 'missing' required a conscious effort to select women who were active as organisers of peace campaigns and marches. This was quite difficult since many women operated

in 'informal' and therefore unseen ways for promoting peace/conflict resolution. I was told on numerous occasions that women who participated during the early peace process in Somaliland (1991–7) were few since many interpreted my request to mean women working in an 'official' capacity (as delegates during the early peace conferences). When I mentioned that I wanted to interview *any* individual they believed contributed significantly in visible/invisible, official/unofficial ways, the potential was opened up for interviews with diverse and previously unknown narratives to emerge.

Another limitation of the study was the concentration of interviews held in Hargeisa, which limited the possibility of interviewing local female activists in other parts of Somaliland. My access to transportation, logistical support and social networks concentrated with NGOs in Hargeisa were key reasons for the paper encompassing informants largely from Hargeisa. Finally, this thesis presents and is built upon only a fraction of narratives about Somaliland women's experiences of conflict, peace, violence and insecurity. My hope is to elevate how we approach these narratives as worthy of scholarly research and inquiry as well as viewing them as inherently political.

### **Somaliland: culture, tradition and women at a glance**

Somali society and culture has historically been characterised as pastoralist and nomadic. Pastoralism is a mode of production that relies on livestock rearing (cattle, sheep, camels) and some other form of subsistence including cultivation of land, hunting and gathering (Hodgson 2000: 6). Kinship groups that form around this type of lifestyle provide and maintain social networks and define roles for each member of the family. Kinship as an ideology goes hand-in-hand with the construction of gender norms in Somali pastoralist society. Somalis are organised around an exogamous social structure where descent is traced patrilineally. While Somali lineage systems can trace ancestors fifteen or sixteen generations back, the most active and politically relevant sub-clan is the diya-paying group. This group is bound together by a social contract that is more popularly understood as a set of customary laws (*xeer*), which, for example, is responsible for blood-money payments and which share 'common political responsibility' (Lewis 1965: 127).

Women in this system have specific gender roles rationalised according to the communal needs and demands of pastoralist society. Girls and married women tend smaller livestock but the responsibilities of married women also include building and dismantling the *aqal* (house) taking care of the children and occasionally selling milk or ghee (Ibrahim 2004: 30). As a society that relies on labour as one factor in production, it is debated whether women's roles can easily be read as a source of inequality. Those who do characterise Somali pastoral society as patriarchal see marriage as the



site for which gender roles are cemented and reproduced (Kaptejns 1995; Gardner & El Bushra 2004; Hasan *et al.* 1995).

However, others insist that numerous examples exist of pastoral societies in East Africa where lineages are traced matrilineally, and women are independent economic producers and make decisions in male-dominated political arenas (Hodgson 2000: 4). This contrasts this with those that contend that, since authority (and therefore power) is conferred through the *xeer*, men's roles in the pastoral economy as 'autonomous producers' allow them to exercise authority over household decisions (Kaptejns 1995: 246). Even still, there are authors who suggest it is difficult to divorce the relevance of gender roles from the ecology of the land and its climate (Lewis 1999; Nakaya 2003). The context of women's roles in the pastoral economy and the symbolism of the *xeer* as a system of equitable exchanges made through marriage is a common logic dictating that marriage brings different responsibilities that are different but equally crucial (*ibid.*: 138–9).

Suffice to say that the gender division of labour enables men to establish their own households, and women's productive labour has traditionally been subsumed for the benefit of the nuclear family and wider community. The 'paradigm' of kinship ought to be seen as a system of interdependencies where group relations are valued above individual relations (Lewis 1999). This nuanced account serves to demonstrate that women's roles in the pastoral economy are situated within a logic of 'corporate kinship' where an 'individual has a political status' (Lewis 1999: 2). It is through this paradigm, for example, that social protection through diya-paying groups can seek compensation for violence committed against Somali women.

However, the cultural production of 'power' and 'authority' is not entirely contingent upon the *xeer* in the pastoral society but is strongly influenced by Islamic principles of gender relations. Although Islamic principles can be interpreted to deny women access to property, the product of their labour, and power over their decision-making capabilities, women's roles are continually negotiated between *xeer* and Islam. Islam neither explicitly forbids women from seeking gainful employment outside of the household nor from maintaining property (Warsame 2002).

As opposed to *xeer* that is clan based, Islamic principles and traditions have been seen as a unifying force (Lewis 1999; Walls 2013). Although Somali cultural traditions and Islam are colloquially said to be similar, tensions do exist between the two, especially in relations to Somali women.<sup>2</sup> While a few informants highlighted the limitations placed upon their participation in politics and public spaces by Somali culture, the dominance of male authority is further entrenched by male Islamic scholars. The importance of Somaliland women/girls engaging in depth with the Quran (in Arabic) and the prophetic traditions (hadiths) is a challenge that is currently being taken up by

<sup>2</sup> Many Somali's follow the Shafi' school of thought in Islamic jurisprudence.



NAGAAD<sup>3</sup> (Walls 2013: 11). For Somaliland women, interpretive power over Islamic texts and the lack of education afforded to women in Islamic education is nowhere more apparent than in South-Central Somalia where militant insurgents adhere to a conservative interpretation of women's roles in public life. As conflict and insecurity increased in South-Central Somalia, women's propensity to seek to wear the veil increased as a consequence of increased violence but also stems from the presence of conservative preachers promoting what they considered to be appropriate female dress (Abdi 2007). In sum, the values that women and men uphold reflect the interdependencies of pastoral society and nomadic life *as well as* the influence of Islam on Somali traditions—allowing Somali culture to respond and change accordingly to different socio-political and economic contexts. Given this context, the transformation of Somali gender norms from the changes to pastoralist societies to socialist institutions can be gleaned through life history testimonies. During a period of intense animosity, civil strife and state-sponsored violence, the ensuing Somali civil war and its retelling can produce multiple perspectives and truths.

### **Oral narratives: universal representations of truths?**

Narratives generally reference the past in an idealised manner of representing the 'self'. The role of oral narratives as a source of analysis points to the way social actors construct meaning from events and how these events are represented through their gendered subjectivities. Narratives that are systematically ignored or silenced can obscure the impact of gendered subjectivities and unequal power dynamics. These narratives can be seen as sites of contestation but also of violence when particular ones are chosen as universal representations of truths—essentially making narratives political projects as much as they are seen as re-telling of actors lived experiences.

The women and men whose narratives were collected often times related similar events but in dramatically different ways. For example, during interviews, when the question was posed: *what were women's contributions during the early peace process?*, female informants referred to women's political organising through rallies. They also recalled being expected to contribute through providing domestic labour towards the logistics of conference organising. Male informants during interviews (and colloquially) referenced the importance of women offering their domestic labour as evidence of the enduring nature of gender roles derived from Somali cultural norms (*xeer*). Invocations of tradition were part and parcel of how early peace conferences were

<sup>3</sup> NAGAAD Umbrella Organisation is an umbrella organisation that supports women-led and women-run civil society organisations in Somaliland. Their advocacy focuses on enhancing women's political participation in institutional spaces and capacity-building for Somaliland women.

framed in conversation, as these traditions were central to securing peace among warring clans in Somaliland.

Narratives are political and powerful in conveying grievances and building consensus around key events in conflict and post-conflict contexts. [Wibben \(2011\)](#) writes: ‘narratives are profoundly referential and influential in their representation. They create phenomena and have a tendency to generalise, universalise, and decontextualise the particular’. Yet they also produce distinctions and are valuable at capturing what she considers ‘incommensurable differences’ between narrators including men and women ([Wibben 2011](#): 100). Indeed, what is considered ‘traditional/modern’, ‘political/apolitical’ is actively reshaped by oral narratives demonstrating that gender subjectivities are another site of reproduction and contestation for prevalent norms in society. An upper-house senate member remarked at how pleased he was to offer support for women’s rights as long as they stayed within what he considered to be an acceptable paradigm of Somali cultural norms (that are congruent with Islamic moral principles) but indicated that far more destructive discourses on women’s rights are propagated:

There is a national organization of women [in Somaliland]. Why is this so? This only segregates our society. This was begun by someone in the UNDP who admitted that this was just used as a front to gain funding ... [for example] we talk a lot about FGM/C [female genital mutilation/cutting] but men need to be a part of this discussion. If you know the religion and have scientific education [evidence-based] you can make other choices. We see women who fight for women’s rights but are using it as a front to gain money. I agree, we need new means to verify a girls’ virginity. We need new methods. (Abdullahi Ibrahim Habone – Upper House (Senate) member, Somaliland).

Oral history (life history) testimonies were a valuable method of inquiry and allowed informants to discuss their experiences of Somaliland’s peace and reconstruction process in a linear, chronological manner. Many people began their life histories with where they spent their formative years and the various educational institutions they attended or when education was interrupted due to conflict. Among these narratives was Amal Haji Ahmed Misan who acted as the Somaliland President’s National Advisor on Women. Amal began her career as a local campaign manager and organiser for the Kulmiye Party in Borame. Amal’s narrative is as much about seeking to capitalise on her own political ambitions as it is about the generational gap in the women’s rights movement in Somaliland:

I was born and raised in Borame. I was not part of the Borame peace process (since I was a teenager at the time). The women that took part in that conference were just four women. At that time women were not organized enough to participate in these types of peace conferences.

While early female peace activists have contributed significantly to how the early peace conferences in Somaliland were operating, women who were present but not a part of major campaigns in the early-to-mid-1990s offer another perspective. Adding to the nuances in the campaign history of the umbrella women's organisation NAGAAD, Suad relates her perspective on the linkages between women's organising for peace in the early 1990s and contemporary campaigns to increase their visibility in institutions.

Suad: Compared with women's struggles now [2012] they have a harder time because the political parties that arose at the time [1997] brought about a women's wing in each of those parties. These spaces were used to incorporate women into formal politics and help these parties build a base to garner ordinary women's support as opposed to dealing specifically with women's issues. It definitely lost momentum from the early peace processes. Institutional politics did this, I don't know if it is intentional. Men look at women as the means to securing campaigns, seats and votes. They don't talk about how to empower these women to have roles and positions within these parties.

Amal and Suad are recipients of this legacy of early female peace activists, although they were not present during much of NAGAAD's campaigns and advocacy for greater representation. Though these narrators supported the efforts of early female peace activists, others, privately spoke on their disappointment with these same activists at not being able to effectively link women's marginalisation from institutional politics to women's poverty and economic exclusion in Somaliland at the time.

Narratives are not universal representations of truths in every instance but the power to generalise women's achievements is a political and strategic endeavour. In an effort to establish a 'women's history' of political organising, the issues facing women's lack of representation are diverse. As such, different perspectives are certainly present, yet these differing views beg the question of how elites are organised around single narratives or histories. Many of the women described as elite were educated prior to the collapse of Somalia in 1991 and came back to Somaliland engaging in various forms of activism. In many ways, as one generation of female activists gives way to a new generation, the power of a single narrative will give way to a multiplicity of narratives.

### **Somali poetry: a popular narrative form**

Narratives are an important part of unearthing women's everyday experiences of conflict and post-conflict processes, given that women are often excluded from formal peace negotiations as a consequence of their gender. Poetry allows us to incorporate a broader set of voices regarding different historical processes that would otherwise remain silent. In her work *Women's Voices in a Man's World*, [Kapteijns \(1999\)](#) discusses the use of oration and literary works (namely the emergence of pop songs,

plays and poems) to illustrate how the female characters in these works are situated within Somali 'tradition' and 'culture'. In a famous play by Hassan Sheikh Mumin (1968), *Leopard Among the Women (Shabeelnaagood)*, the female characters are more assertive than women depicted in other Somali plays, where customary laws and pastoral traditions are invoked to guide the behaviour of men *and* women. Kaptjeins asserts that even this propagation of tradition is a far more 'specific and limited interpretation' than one envisioned or practised by Somali pastoral communities continually referenced in the pre-colonial periods (Kapteijns 1999: 148–9). Notions of culture were perpetually referenced as the backdrop to many of the conversations with interlocutors as *the* principle barrier to aiding women in their cause towards equality and rights. Annab, as an early peace activist, brings her experience to bear on women's exclusion.

The culture is this: men used to make decisions under a tree. A man would consult his wife and whatever advice he gave sometimes he would take it with him to other men under this tree. Women now lack decision-making power. Men believe that God said they are better decision-makers than women. I used to say: 'can you bring life into this world on your own'? They said: 'no'. I said: ok, understand that if I gave you space to use your right hand, that I am the left hand. They would agree with me then.' Now what men bring out is that the laws and Islam does not prevent us but they are stuck on culture.

Yet women also propagated the ideas stemming from these same practices and norms.

Annab: A woman said to me once: 'oh women we are like pots and pans, what is poured into us is also poured out of us.' I said: 'listen, since when did you pay attention to what men say and forget what God has said.' Women do not have grassroots mobilization support or organizing.

Reconstituting gender relations in the context of popular narratives (poetry) where women's voices have been sidelined in favour of men's orations has meant that women's experiences of and as active proponents of the conflict, their role in peace processes and ongoing post-conflict challenges and triumphs are discussed very narrowly. Somaliland women cite the importance of maintaining cultural values and norms that have helped generate peace but they do not seek to be limited to them in their aspirations for equality.

Asha Halgan, despite being a veteran of the SNM rebellion, remarks on women's exclusion propped up by men and women.

Men rarely see the work we do and have done [speaking on her role as a combatant]. Yet women are still held hostage to the whims of men's demands and more because women hold each other back because of patriarchy. The culture holds women back but the religion is so freeing. Women have a high status in the religion and it has given women a sense of dignity through their manner of dress, speech and overall behaviour. But their [women's] minds are prisoners to patriarchy that mainly stems from culture.

The absence of women's voices in popular Somali poetry is not new. However, it is not merely the pastoral tradition that is referenced but also the status of women's rights (legally and discursively) during the Barre era that has contributed to the further erasure of women's roles in public and political deliberations (Kapteijns 1999; Gardner & El Bushra 2004). While Somaliland women's participation in the early peace processes is seen as progressive it is also complex since the acceptance of customary laws (excluding women from voting at the peace conferences) makes it difficult for women to suggest that they gained immensely from the peace conferences besides an end to warring clans and militias.

Annab Omer Eleye: Before the conference began [Borame 1993], men and women would be outside. I was one of two women from an organization called [the] Somaliland Women's Organisation<sup>4</sup> that sought to take part in the conference. The elders when they saw us would be distraught at the sight of us at such a conference asking: 'My God, what is this? What do you want in a space such as this?' After when I spoke at the conference, those same men who were shocked that we came were now asking us to remain with them. They mentioned that they cried at the power of the words we spoke saying 'we wept into our sleep at what you spoke on the other night' and they asked to remain for the duration of the conference but we said we could not stay.

Women also recognised that their presence and the acceptance of the *Guurti* as one of two law-making institutions in Somaliland was significant enough to point to women's gains from these conferences—meaning their concerns were finally being addressed in a meaningful way.

A poem composed and sung by Dudi Ahmed Duale, a Somaliland woman who was part of the organisation Allah-Amin that was quite active in the early 1990s in Hargeisa, is one illustration of a less popular poem referring to women's experiences of the early peace process.

*Be silent Ali, Be silent Asha*  
*Politics has instilled anger and sullied us*  
*Waiting for the weapons and the chaos to emerge*  
*And everyone running in panic*  
*Together we will all be left with nothing*  
*Be silent Asha, Be silent Ali*

This poem was sung during one of the peace rallies in Hargeisa. It was constructed prior to the Hargeisa Conference (1997) to lament the lack of reconciliation among clans and the presence of clan militias. While *baraanbuur*<sup>5</sup> and *sittaat* (religious songs) were popular among women, women's voices have been systematically silenced and erased, with very few means for 'memorisation and transmission' as compared with

<sup>4</sup> A grassroots organisation arising from women's participation during the peace process.

<sup>5</sup> Poetry specific to women and sung during celebratory events including weddings.

men's poetry (Kapteijns 1999: 21). Similarly, the poem at the start of this section, known only by Dudi and her colleagues at Allah-Amin, and its resonance is not captured in popular narratives on Somaliland's peacebuilding process. The author, its content and where it was recited can be seen as contributing factors for the lack of 'transmission' and retention of women-specific poetry drawn from the early peace process. Unlike other poems that were reiterated during peace gatherings and public forums organised by men and women, Dudi's was only sung during peace rallies organised largely by women.

Many of the poems that were referenced by informants were not popularised to the extent that many men and women could boast that they knew of these poems. Rather, the performance of the poems was localised to a select few organisers of the peace rallies; or those present during intense periods of conflict, especially after Somaliland ousted Barre's forces. Women said that was when the most personal instances of violence erupted. The inter-clan clashes in the early 1990s placed many women between their fathers, sons or husbands who belonged to warring and competing clans. We can see that narratives in their re-telling can express competing emotions, including those of women voicing their support for the SNM conflict with Barre's forces but also expressing their despair over the inter-clan clashes where one form of violence can be justified but the other is not. The latter involved more immediate family members as opposed to the former; however, the poems also disprove the assumption throughout the peace and conflict literature that women have an innate propensity to seek peace. Sahra Awe Usman Ige is a member of Allah-Amin and recited a poem during our conversation that she stated was among many to be sung during the peace rallies. She describes its origins and context below.

Gunshots went off in the middle of the streets and we saw women (dead bodies) lying there. After that we said to them [militias]:

*If you do not want to earn honour  
If a man who knows God gave birth to you  
If you do not want to earn honour  
Five have died today as well  
If that is all you have to say about it  
Is it not better for you to end this?*

What is being described is women's vulnerability during a time of widespread (in)security as violence was ongoing. The way that women conceptualised peace and (in)security is a means to prevent women's relative vulnerability in cases of violent conflict. Considering that militias were clan-based it is no wonder then that women sought alternative ways of addressing their (in)securities.



## Somaliland women and narratives of (in)security and violence

Experiences of insecurity and violence in post-conflict periods are not new (Enloe 1996). As evidenced from oral history testimonies and women's poetry, Somaliland women focused heavily on their experiences of insecurity during the early peacebuilding process in their advocacy. But not all narratives are equal, and many women's narratives of personal insecurity, sacrifice and violence are left untold. What can account for this? It is important to highlight the legacy of conflict on Somaliland women's lives during and after the early peace process. Post-conflict reconstruction and institution-building in Somaliland were in their infancy. Women's insecurities, including their experiences of personal violence, were some of the most compelling narratives collected. What Cockburn (2017) terms as 'the continuum of violence' is rife in Somaliland women's narratives when they speak to experiences of insecurity and violence. Peace, for many Somaliland women, is noted in many instances as the absence of violence and the conditions that lead to it.

Somaliland women, through their narratives, do not provide a single unifying definition of what security means but speak on it more broadly in normative terms—freedom from want or fear.<sup>6</sup> However, their narratives point to the formation of normative security actors (usually male) who operate sometimes within Somali traditional customs as well as outside of these customs. Awareness is growing though, through women's political organising of their need to participate in the operationalisation and conceptualisation of 'security' in post-conflict Somaliland. This is significant since many women saw limited gains from their participation during the early peace process but suffered uniquely during the following intra-clan conflicts in the mid-1990s. These experiences cannot be divorced from the broadening of women's political participation to include their activities in *all* spaces utilising their networks.

As noted earlier, narratives are representations of truths and constructs of meaning. Narratives also actively silence, universalise and randomise individual experiences, often simultaneously. The dominant actor in conflict and security narratives is the state, which is preoccupied with maintaining sovereignty as it seeks to organise its military and the policies it prioritises. The value of local narratives and the importance they play means that local narratives can reframe the notion of the state as the only force capable of maintaining peace and security. Often in direct conflict with militia or paramilitary groups (eg., Sudan, Congo, Liberia, Sierra Leone) local communities have pushed back against statist versions of authority. Rather, in conflicts in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Rwanda, communities articulated, for the first time, the need to take control of their lives. The state has often responded by using brutally violent tactics to suppress local authority (Richmond 2010). However, local narratives do

<sup>6</sup> Not unlike human security pedagogies.

not diminish the presence of competing visions over *how* to ensure peace and security after conflict, with many international organisations having dominated the needs of local communities during transitional justice processes.

The task of re-imagining narratives on state security and peacebuilding by scholars is monumental when we take into account how ineffective states and international bodies have been in bringing women's concerns to the peace talks or the reconstruction process. The set of UN resolutions relating to women's lack of inclusion in the peace process and their unique experiences of violence and (in)security (particularly UN resolution 1325) has sought to remedy that but its capacity to enforce its mandate is limited. Prescriptions for transformative changes are not clearly outlined other than to mainstream 'gender' as an analytical category throughout government institutions, civil society and formal peace processes. This involves ensuring that a number of seats and leadership positions are set aside for women. Nevertheless, it does not diminish the role of violence (personal and systemic) from conflict and post-conflict contexts. Sexual violence and rape are an example of violence that operates across the public/private divide. Part of this stems from the difficulty in integrating a gendered approach to how security operates within and outside of states.

The meaning of security has changed. In families, men were responsible for the family but now it seems that women are responsible for the family. The notion of security begins in the home. You see petty theft and violence throughout society. In the past, neighbours looked out for one another and security was a community concept. If something should happen to the child, the entire neighbourhood helped raise that child for you. This system is no longer in place. Security has to be a community-oriented concept. This child cannot just belong to his family he has to belong to the whole community since his mother is out working for him and his father is chewing khat somewhere outside the house. (*Shukri Haji Ismail Bandare, former Executive Director of Candlelight and Minister of Environment and Rural Development of Somaliland*)

Candlelight provided basic social services (basic education and health delivery), in the absence of effective state institutions. The issue though is that as narratives come to light that demonstrate the importance of security (physical, financial, economic), what is understood as 'protection, peacekeeping, or participation varies widely. Women see a diverse set of actors being responsible for each. Security, gender and Somali women's experiences (in Somaliland and Somalia) are limited and focused on violence against women in the form of sexual and gender-based violence (i.e. rape, FGM/C, domestic abuse). They do not consider Somali women's experiences engaging with security-sector institutions beyond the lens of addressing sexual and gender-based violence (which is still very important). As narratives by informants expanded on their experience with peace, reconciliation, violence and (in)security, the idea that (in)security is framed more broadly came into view.

Consider that among the narratives that is repeated throughout discussions with informant's involved widespread sexual violence against women in Somaliland (perpetrated by Siad Barre's forces) as a precursor to the start of the SNM's rebellion. Interestingly though, the links between sexual violence in the early 1980s, 1990s and into the 2000s present in Somaliland are decontextualised from the legacies of conflict as legacies of trauma that endure in times of peace. Members of the Somaliland Women's Lawyers Association engage with women/girls experiencing sexual violence and narrate the issues they are concerned with addressing in a time seen as 'peaceful' in Somaliland.

Rape was rampant we were told, leading up to the civil war [on the part of Siad Barre's forces]. But we still deal with a lot of rape cases in Somaliland now [2012]. How they are dealt with is different. We have common law, but we also have customary laws. Before with customary law [*xeer*], if a woman said she was raped, the elders would come together from each clan and work to resolve it. But now she has a choice and if she's raped, she has a choice to choose between these laws [i.e. going through the courts]. There are cases where the community can intervene if the case goes to the courts. If she receives compensation the community of elders takes it from her. This happens a lot, and many women lose their rights over this. The men are released and the compensation is taken from her.

How can a state respond to women's security concerns if it fails to enquire about and acknowledge women's precarious social, political and economic status? Narrations on violence and (in)security draw parallels between the norms that states and security-sector institutions (military, police, judiciary) adhere to and the political and economic marginalisation that women experience, contributing to their vulnerable status in society. To that effect, it is worth asking whether women benefitted from ongoing processes to maintain peace and build security.

[Physical] Security has definitely opened up public spaces. Back then, those women who worked were few but it was growing. The security of women in public spaces is precarious but for those especially who have little to no education means that they have to seek employment outside of the household. It's still a novelty for women to work en masse like this. This security and peace is vital to that.

Expanding upon notions of security and how it operates needs to be interrogated to recognise that gender identities/hierarchies impact men and women's lives on a daily basis. We cannot know the extent of how it prevents women from finding justice unless we recognise the connections between gender and the institutions responsible for protecting women from violence (Macklin 2004: 75–107). Asking the question 'security for and by whom?' allows academics/scholars to begin to politicise the issue of violence against women in a post-conflict context and points to how meanings are constructed and represented through narratives. Politicising the security and gender dynamics in post-conflict Somaliland lays out a framework whereby we can see the struggles for economic,

personal, physical and food security as not only a gendered experience but also a political one. It lays blame on policy-makers, politicians and the international community.

How men and women in society relate to one another has changed yes. When we think of culture, for example, divorce is normal now for us. But back then, a woman would say, kill me before you divorce me. Can you imagine that? It's changed a lot now. Every generation afterwards, many things have opened up for women.

By far the largest impact of justifying women's activities in Somaliland is the need to take ownership over their lack of security as opposed to a pursuit of a women's rights agenda.

To ensure that these narratives are incorporated at least discursively into security-oriented institutions and policies, they need to be seen as politicised by the spaces in which (in)security occurs (including the household). Violence and insecurity, as experienced by many women, were legacies of post-colonial statebuilding, civil war and post-conflict processes. These processes and periods offer numerous sites of contestation with respect to the narratives that have so far been highlighted and many that remain largely unknown.

### **Understanding narratives as sites of contestation**

Prior to the Barre regime, Somali women (comprising northern and southern clans) established the Somali Women's Association (1959) out of a growing frustration over the lack of political representation within the Somali Youth League. The organisation, led by middle-class urban women, transformed itself into the Somali Women's Movement (SWM) (1960). Both of these organisations were short-lived, as the dictatorship incorporated the SWM as a part of the 'Women's Section' within the 'Political Office' in the Presidency of the Supreme Revolutionary Council. The 'Women's Section' transformed itself in 1977 into the Somali Women's Democratic Organisation. It drew its members from the SWM and was led by Barre's wife Khadija Ma'alín. Its political and ideological project became less about women's socio-political and economic conditions than co-opting women's issues and serving as a monitoring outpost for maintaining the hegemony of state ideology (Gardner & El Bushra 2004: 176).

The Barre regime worked hard to advance the material conditions of women by first establishing the Family Law of 1975, guaranteeing women equitable distribution of property through inheritance and divorce (Kapteijns 2009: 118; Gardner & El Bushra 2004: 177). For the first time, women were provided with government scholarships to study abroad and incorporated into the formal labour sector. Opposition to the Family Law of 1975 largely came from religious leaders, who saw it as an affront to Islamic principles. Barre executed ten religious leaders who openly opposed the

changes to the Family Law and, as such, women's rights became closely associated with the Barre regime's oppressive practices (Kapteijns 2009). Consequently, women's rights occupied an ambivalent position in the public discourse on nationalism.

Somali women composed poems promoting, and later deriding, *Somalinimoo* as defined by Barre. They popularised their poetry through songs over the radio and discursively shaped the ambitions, as well as the eventual discontent, of Somali society in general from 1960 to 1990 (Kapteijns 2009). These songs also reinforced attitudes regarding women's roles and were layered with symbolism and hidden meanings. They had at least three characteristics: they were enjoyed and popularised mainly by urbanites; largely performed by youth; and they discursively shaped what it meant to uphold both morality and modernist attitudes and behaviours (Kapteijns 2009: 21). At the time, morality and conceptualisations of proper gender roles were both heavily influenced by Islamic principles and urban elites preaching socialist ideologies—that was in need of constant legitimising. Barre recognised this and in daily radio programmes inculcating listeners about the teachings of scientific socialism he often began with a Quranic recitation, followed by commentary on a particular issue, and then a Somali proverb, ending with speeches prepared by himself and his peers (Lewis 2010: 84).

The potential for narratives to transform the capability of women's voices on peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction is important to change the way policymakers evaluate and include women in these processes. As conflict provides spaces for renegotiating gender relations and dynamics, women may be framed in terms of traditional/cultural gender norms that may not necessarily be easily facilitated in the post-conflict context, especially as it relates to women's security concerns stemming from personal and political violence.

The potency of a single narrative to dominate the collective memory of a society is evidenced by the death in 1975 of ten religious leaders by Siad Barre, and points to the importance of studying narratives and their impact. Consider the two narratives below and the informant's re-recollection and relationship to government's policies on women's rights in the 1970s and how they resonate with opponents and supporters of women's rights in Somaliland today. Two different perspectives on the events reveal divergent views on the historical significance of Barre periods for women.

Informant (a): It depends on how you define liberation. If someone defines it as coming out of the home [*for women*] then yes. If you define it in terms of freedom of speech or participating in mass rallies or sitting with men then yes they were more emancipated ... Barre was advocating that men and women were equal according to the law with the Family Law [1975]. Some *sheikhs* were opposed to this and were shot dead in 1975 (ten in total). The main support he [Barre] was getting was from women because he gave the right to participate in any activity that was going on and every village had an orientation centre [to help facilitate this]. They had literacy campaigns; they were in government offices and were like men. Then

in big numbers they [women] came out to support him. [Back then] If you stopped your wife/daughter from going out she would accuse/report you to the security forces, so even husbands used to keep quiet.

The narrative below describes the same historical context in a different way. As a leading gender researcher in Somaliland, the informant was educated and participated in women's rights campaigns during the Barre dictatorship.

Informant (b): If the dictatorship is with you then you are good. If they are against you it is a problem. Four of us were the research arm of the women's organization. But many of those members did not understand how to do this. They did not understand research. We had this huge women's organization and in that a lot of work was happening ... the dictatorship was behind us in helping to eliminate Female Genital Mutilation ... We mainly use the radio since it was the main means of communication. Women were using the *Family Law*<sup>7</sup> which was progressive at the time. It was a basis for our work and at the district courts we got a lot of female judges at the courts using those laws. The dictatorship was seen as highly progressive and it was good when you have a government behind you even if they are a dictatorship. It's not true that they just used us—we used them too.

The various identities of the state are demonstrated through these narratives. Men and women were equal supporters of the Barre regime and the speakers point to the historical nature of women's activism during this time. Till this day, the Family Law (1975) is seen as a contentious policy interpreted in various ways. It is worth mentioning that often little attention is paid to the role that masculinity played prior to the outbreak of conflict (i.e. during the Barre regime 1969–91) and its link to post-conflict violence (by men on against other men and women). During interviews, when respondents recalled Barre's promotion of women's rights, they often cited that discursively in Somaliland parallels were drawn between the rise of Somali women's rights through legislation and the execution of religious leaders in 1975.

This experience has put the campaign for women's rights in direct conflict with the campaign to ensure peace and security in Somaliland. Opponents reference this period as exemplary of the disastrous attempts to import ideas and ideologies seemingly alien to Somali culture and Islamic principles. What is rarely discussed in an analytical sense is the sublimation of women's rights for violent ends. The complex relationship of authoritarian regimes with their societies is not new in an African context, especially as it relates to advancing social rights. What is necessary is linking this obvious contradiction to different levels of analysis and approaches (Tripp 2004).

<sup>7</sup> The Family Law of 1975 guaranteed women's equality under the law and equal access to property inheritance. When ten religious leaders in Mogadishu banded together in opposition to what they saw as a direct contention with Islamic principles, they were publicly executed.



## Conclusion

The narratives discussed here do not seek to entirely disassemble gender hierarchies but to demonstrate the need for a new dynamic altogether and to shed light on how interlocutors can be advocates *and* opponents of traditional gender norms or modernist discourses on women's rights. Feminist thinking has been significant to the study of violence and violent regimes. While researchers agree that oversimplified categories such as 'men as perpetrators' and 'women as victims' disguises men's and women's agency and participation in violence, nevertheless the focus still lies with masculine traits framed as aggressive, exemplified by the soldiers and police forces in any state, and femininity with docility and defenselessness, masking women's complicity and support of authoritarian regimes like Barre's (Enloe 1993). Moreover, work on gender inclusivity highlights the need to include analysis and evidence that suggests political violence is 'overwhelmingly directed at men rather than women' on the part of the state (as evidenced by the execution of the religious leaders by Barre's forces) (Jones 2009: 82). These perspectives are useful for establishing a distinction between 'violence' and 'conflict'. So while men and women can perpetuate conflict, violence is also about the power dynamics in a society (before and after conflict), which shapes how masculinity and femininity are expressed in a post-conflict society (Cockburn 2013). With narratives about conflict and violence, single events can have multiple meanings and perspectives, including who is considered the perpetrator/victim.

Consequently, subjectivities/identities are politically (re)shaped. The narratives in this paper are a small microcosm of a select few women and their experiences during the early peace process and subsequent post-conflict period. They illustrate that bargains are made on the basis of maintaining peace and security for communities as a whole in the hopes of reaffirming consensus on agreed-upon principles between men and women. Otherwise, women (or men) who singularly advocate breaking down traditional gender hierarchies are challenging widespread social structures. What has been a common feature is that peace and security are understood as the responsibility of the state but in the face of weak state capacity and infrastructure, many saw the re-emergence of violence (for example, the intra-clan conflicts of the mid-1990s). As such, security was now being thought of as much broader than merely the responsibility of the state but also the responsibility of social actors, including political elites, clan elders and ordinary men and women. Yet it was necessary to analytically situate these transformations into our understanding of peace, (in)security and violence from a gendered perspective to highlight the function of power, violence, masculinity and militarisation. While the myth of women as peacemakers or in need of protection is demystified, it does not solve the larger problem of violence against women in peace times or the structures in place that support their subordination (i.e. security-sector institutions).

These narratives do not point to a single definition for how Somaliland women view peace and (in)security. As social actors are produced by social processes, and as subjectivities emerge, no single narrative can capture a multitude of simultaneous processes at multiple levels (state to community). It is precisely because they are a part of the broader meta-narrative experience embedded in political act/actors. What these narratives offer is the emergence of an understanding by Somaliland women of their own agency and the tools at their disposal to frame their context, struggle and successes. As political processes have continued to shift, Somaliland women's experiences of violence, peace and reconstruction must be seen as an assessment of their relative power—power that we can see and is defined precisely at various sites of contestation, from the state to the community.

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