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Somalia: The situation of women without male support

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Situation

A report to the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council by the independent expert on the situation of human rights in Somalia states that approximately 70 percent of Somali homes are female-headed (UN 29 Aug. 2011, para. 40). The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) reports that within internally displaced-person (IDP) camps in southern Somalia, 50 to 60 percent of households are headed by women (ibid. 27 Aug. 2011). The rise of women as the primary or sole breadwinners is attributed to the fact that many women have lost their male family members to the long-running conflict in Somalia (Heinrich Böll Foundation 2008, 96; UN 10 Jan. 2011; Reuters 15 Jan. 2011; Human Rights Watch 19 Apr. 2010, 31).

Several sources also suggest that the conflict has led to the breakdown of traditional social structures, which, in turn, has contributed to women's increased vulnerability to violence (Heinrich Böll Foundation 2008, 94; UN 17 Sept. 2009, para. 55; US 8 Apr. 2011, 30). For example, a research paper published by the Heinrich Böll Foundation, an international think tank and policy network dedicated to democracy and human rights (n.d.), argues that, because of the state's collapse and civil war, women can no longer rely on society to protect them from violence (2008, 94). Additionally, the UN's independent human rights expert states that women in many regions no longer have access to formal or traditional protection from gender-based violence due to the disintegration of "formerly functioning clan structures" (UN 17 Sept. 2009, para. 55). Similarly, the United States (US) Department of State reports that weakened clan protection in the Galkayco region has made IDP women particularly vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence from local men who act with impunity (8 Apr. 2011, 30).

Economic activity

Somali women have traditionally worked as vendors in small-scale businesses (UN 10 Jan. 2011; UN 17 Sept. 2009, para. 53; Human Rights Watch 19 Apr. 2010, 30). The US Department of State reports that "women were not discriminated against in terms of owning or managing businesses" (8 Apr. 2011, 38). However, sources report that women's ability to earn a livelihood has been challenged by the conflict and violence (Heinrich Böll Foundation 2008, 88; UN 10 Jan. 2011; ibid. 17 Sept. 2009, para. 48-49), including gender-based violence (ibid. 23 Mar. 2010, para. 21; Save Somali Women and Children 2011). The UN's independent human rights expert states that, due to their economic responsibilities, women's presence in the marketplace has increased and exposed them to "vulnerable situations" (UN 23 Mar. 2010). An article published by the UN's Integrated Regional Information Networks explains that women in Mogadishu, forced to diversify their economic activities in order to earn a living,

often work in the most dangerous parts of the city where their lives are threatened by shelling and fighting (ibid. 10 Jan. 2011). The UN's independent human rights expert also reported in 2009 that businesses run by women were targeted and looted by uniformed personnel of the Transitional Federal Government (ibid. 17 Sept. 2009, para. 53), although corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

Women's ability to earn a living has also been restricted in areas controlled by the Islamic militant group Al-Shabaab (Reuters 15 Jan. 2011; Human Rights Watch 2011; ibid. 19 Apr. 2010, 27), which reportedly include "most" of southern and central Somalia (BBC 17 Oct. 2011; UN 9 Aug. 2011). Al-Shabaab considers women's participation in the workforce as un-Islamic (US 8 Apr. 2011, 38; Human Rights Watch 14 Aug. 2011, 34). Reuters reports that women in the port city of Kismayu were banned in January 2011 from bartering with ship crews, an activity that was a primary source of income for many, and from selling anything or working in an office (15 Jan. 2011). Human Rights Watch affirms that Al-Shabaab has banned commercial activity by women in many areas of the country to limit contact between women and men (2011), although it has also found that in some areas these bans are used as a means of extorting bribes from women who need to work (14 Aug. 2011, 34-35). Human Rights Watch also documents several instances of Al-Shabaab ordering women to be imprisoned or beaten, or both, for selling tea, and notes that women are not exempt from punishment if they are infirm, elderly, pregnant, or the sole source of income for their family (19 Apr. 2010, 31).

Forced marriage

Sources indicate that forced marriage remains a common practice in Somalia (Heinrich Böll Foundation 2008, 93; Somali Report 28 May 2011). An article published by Somali Report, a "privately funded, non-partisan website that hires ... Somali journalists inside the country" (n.d.), states that girls are forced to marry by their parents in an attempt to improve the girls' quality of life or to ease the parents' "burden of caring for a young daughter on into her teens" (28 May 2011). The article notes that young girls have no ability to challenge decisions made by their parents, including on the issue of marriage (Somali Report 28 May 2011). Additionally, according to the Heinrich Böll Foundation, male clan leaders within the Somali clan system have the authority to make decisions regarding the marriage of clan women and can negotiate the exchange of brides with other clans in cases of reconciliation, divorce, and death (2008, 92). Forced marriages also occur between victims of rape and their perpetrators, as rape and other forms of sexual and gender-based violence are considered by clans to be civil disputes that can be resolved through negotiated compensation, including the payment of "blood money" (UN 17 Sept. 2009, para. 56) or forced marriage (ibid.; UN 29 Aug. 2011, para. 41).

In areas under the control of Al-Shabaab, women and girls have reportedly been forced to marry Al-Shabaab fighters (AI 1 Nov. 2011, 3; BBC 7 Oct. 2010; US 2011, 396; Somali Report 28 May 2011; UN 11 Aug. 2011). The 2011 US Trafficking in Persons report states that Al-Shabaab abducts young girls as wives for its leaders, and also as sex slaves and to provide logistical support and gather intelligence (2011, 396). The Kenyan newspaper Daily Nation reports that Somali president Sheikh Sharif Ahmed accused Al-Shabaab of marrying the wives of civil servants because they perceive government employees as serving the enemy of Islam (20 Jan. 2011). The Suna Times, a Mogadishu-based "privately held news media company" (n.d.), reports that, according to Al-Shabaab, the wives of men who are regarded as enemies and who have fled Somalia should be forcibly married to foreign Al-Shabaab fighters (24 Oct. 2010).

Women have reportedly been accused of being non-Muslim for refusing to marry Al-Shabaab members (BBC 7 Oct. 2010), threatened with death (ibid.; Somali Report 28 May 2011), and, in some cases, killed (BBC 7 Oct. 2010; The New York Times 12 July 2011; Suna Times 24 Oct. 2010). Reports gathered by the BBC tell of women who were beheaded, with their heads sent to their fathers, for refusing to marry Al-Shabaab members (BBC 7 Oct. 2010). The Suna Times states that as many as 13 women and 10 men were executed in southern Somalia between February 2009 and July 2010 for refusing to marry or refusing consent to marry Al-Shabaab fighters (24 Oct. 2010).

Adultery laws

The UN independent human rights expert states that Sharia law, which includes execution by stoning for adultery, is applied "in an extreme form" in areas not controlled by the Transitional Federal Government (17 Sept. 2009, para. 52). According to media sources, under Al-Shabaab's interpretation of Sharia law, any ever-married person who has an affair can be found guilty of adultery (BBC 18 Nov. 2009; Daily Nation 18 Nov. 2009). In 2008, a 13-year-old girl was stoned to death by members of Al-Shabaab for adultery (BBC 18 Nov. 2009) after she was gang-raped and reported the incident (Daily Nation 20 Jan. 2011). In 2009, a divorced woman accused of adultery was stoned to death by Al-Shabaab in front of a crowd while her unmarried partner received 100 lashes (BBC 18 Nov. 2009; Daily Nation 18 Nov. 2009).

Support services to women

Amnesty International reports that armed groups closed some local women's rights organizations in 2009 and 2010 on the grounds that Islam forbids women to work (AI 1 Nov. 2011, 5).

However, sources note that the state collapse and civil war have fostered the growth of numerous grassroots women's organizations (Heinrich Böll Foundation 2008, 98; UN Aug. 2008, 22). The Coalition for Grassroots Women Organizations (COGWO) is a network of 30 women's organizations working in various sectors, including education, humanitarian relief, peace-building, agriculture, and health (COGWO n.d., 2). It also provides psychosocial support to victims of conflict and to women suffering from the effects of early childbirth or female genital mutilation, seeing an average of 80 cases per day in Mogadishu in September 2010 (UN 29 Sept. 2010). As well, it documents human rights violations taking place in Mogadishu and south-central Somalia (COGWO n.d., 2). The New York Times reported in July 2011 that a new organization, Sister Somalia, had been established to provide services to female victims of gender-based violence, including counselling, medical services, and business starter kits; it also opened the first sexual violence hotline in Mogadishu (12 July 2011).

In an article published by The Guardian newspaper in June 2011, Maryan Qasim, the former minister for women and family affairs in Somalia (The Guardian n.d.), stated that a women's centre had recently been opened in Mogadishu to provide skills development services to women (17 June 2011).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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Against Women, Women's UN Report Program & Network; United Press International; Women Against Shariah; World News.

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