

A Gendered Perspective on the Impact of Conflict in the Horn of Africa

By Cawo M. Abdi

This Policy Note focuses on the gendered consequences of the militarisation of the Horn of Africa. Despite being in different 'moments' of conflict, the countries of this region share features of extreme social, economic and political violence, which impact negatively on their citizens. Protracted refugee and refugee-like conditions, extreme disinvestment in social programmes, increasing militarisation and political repression adversely affect women, thereby further entrenching gender disparities. Concerted national and international efforts and resources should support local democratic initiatives to find political solutions to these protracted conflicts and advance the struggle against sexual and gender-based violence and discrimination.

This Policy Note focuses on the gendered impact of the ongoing conflicts in the Horn of Africa. Of the 35 million people assisted by the UNHCR around the world, five millions live in the Horn: Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti.¹ Hundreds of thousands have died in the armed conflict and as a result of famine in the Horn over the last few decades, while millions remain internally displaced persons (IDPs) within their countries, or refugees beyond the national borders. A combination of factors has contributed to this tragic situation: dictatorial regimes and ethnic conflict as well as external interventions during the Cold War, when the United States and the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics built fragile alliances with those in power. Regrettably, the end of the Cold War did not lead to peace and prosperity in this region. Rather, the American-led global War on Terror has perpetuated foreign intervention and militarisation, further fuelling bad governance and violent conflict.

Gender, Masculinity and Militarisation

Gender refers to the constructed ideals of femininity and masculinity. It is conceptualised as relational, as women's subordinate roles and exclusion in relation to men, who occupy higher positions of prestige and power in most spheres. An understanding of the construction of masculinity is a prerequisite for any discussion of gender. Con-

flikt and political turmoil erode spaces and opportunities to socialise young men so that they can be well-incorporated into society. Such conditions propel many young men to seek survival opportunities as well as pride within armed groups.²

Political instability exacerbates already entrenched gender inequalities in patriarchal societies.³ The subordination of women in the predominantly Christian and Muslim communities of the Horn of Africa, combined with protracted civil wars and regional conflicts, have had devastating impacts on women and their families. Although discussions of gender-based violence and gender inequality bring to the fore women's victimisation, they may overlook the resilience and resourcefulness of women in conflict zones.⁴

Despite this resilience, armed conflict and political instability adversely affect women's lives. The gender gap is writ large in the Horn in terms of access to healthcare, education, political participation and economic opportunities: countries in the Horn rank very low in these indexes. Ethiopia, for example, is the only Horn country included in the 2010 World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report, and ranked 122 out of the 134 countries profiled. However, on the gender inequality in educational attainment measurement, it was ranked 130, while it was placed

2. Large 1997, p. 27.

3. Campbell 2005; Abdi 2007.

4. Moser and Clarke 2001.

1. UNHCR. 2010.

132 in the gender gap in literacy rate. Given that Ethiopia is more stable than some of its neighbours (Somalia and Sudan), and also enjoys more international development aid than Eritrea, we can conclude that measurements of gender disparity are probably even more unfavourable in these countries than in Ethiopia.

Regional instability and its gendered consequences

Violence and insecurity impact all members of society, while context-specific gender practices, such as female genital cutting (FGC) and other Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV), mostly affect women and girls.⁵ As Eriksson Baaz and Stern cogently argue in their study on the Democratic Republic of Congo, “SGBV can neither be understood nor effectively countered if approached and studied in relative isolation.”⁶

Cockburn’s four stages of conflict is a useful frame for the Horn countries, which are in different ‘moments’ of conflict: before the eruption of armed violence, ongoing armed violence, peacemaking stage and postwar stage.⁷ Somalia and Sudan belong to the second category, as they are embroiled in ongoing armed clashes. Relentless warfare between the weak and corrupt⁸ Transitional Federal Government (TFG), supported by African Union Mission in Somalia forces (AMISOM), and Al-Shabaab, an extremist Islamist group vying for control of the Somali capital, has resulted in the killing and maiming of thousands, while displacing millions. Sudan is similarly mired in instability in Darfur, where government-supported militias and violent opposition groups wreak death, destruction and rape. Following decades of conflict, struggles for basic survival continue in Southern Sudan, which has only recently seceded from the North, with which it was engaged in protracted war, which produced immeasurable human suffering over three decades. Ethiopia is similarly involved in intermittent confrontation with liberation movements such as the Ogaden Liberation Front (ONLF) and Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), with government soldiers reportedly committing war crimes and crimes against humanity against the population. However, in the context of this Note, Ethiopia is grouped alongside Eritrea as being in the peacemaking stage, although the tenuous nature of this stage is acknowledged. Apart from armed opposition to the ruling regime in the early 1990s, Djibouti is the exception, in that it has not experienced any major war since independence in 1977, and is categorised in the first stage.⁹ However, it shares troubling features with its neighbours in terms of governance, gender equity and regional and global political dynamics.

5. Men, of course, can also be victims of sexual violence. See Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2010.

6. Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2010, p. 2.

7. Cockburn 2001.

8. Transparency International 2010 identifies Somalia as the most corrupt nation in the world.

9. HRW 2008.

Somalia/Sudan

The short- and long-term gendered consequences of the wars in Somalia and Sudan are immense. The targeting of civilian areas, the burning and pillaging of villages and the systematic rape of women and girls in Darfur by government-supported militias and opposition groups since 2003 have led to a major humanitarian crisis.¹⁰ Similarly, rape and dispossession characterises the Somali civil war that led to the complete collapse of the state in 1991. Warlords and their unruly militias imposed a reign of terror on Southern Somali regions, with women and girls’ bodies becoming pawns in political violence. International human rights organisations documented the continuation of this sexual violence by the Ethiopian forces who occupied parts of Somalia from 2006 to 2008.¹¹ The scope of SGBV in Somalia and Sudan has probably been underestimated, since rape carries enormous stigma within these communities.

The suffering Somali and Sudanese civilians experience does not end with flight, but rather extends to the insecure camps in neighbouring countries. For Sudanese women fleeing to Chad¹² as well as Somali women fleeing to Kenya,¹³ sexual violence in camps committed by militias, soldiers and camp police, international staff and refugee men testify to the fragile ecological context of the camps. Dependence on humanitarian aid with limited opportunities for employment and constrained freedom of movement contribute to women’s vulnerability to sexual abuse.¹⁴

The trauma of SGBV is aggravated for women in Sudan and Somalia, where FGC is a universal cultural practice. Men who sexually assault these women often use knives, cans and other unsterilised metals to open women’s vaginas, and this leads to tetanus and health complications and even death for some women.¹⁵ Despite these insecurities, women in IDP camps or refugee camps continue to care for their families and manage their needs, often single handedly, as their male partners may be participants in the conflict, or may have died or abandoned the family. Material deprivation and widespread violence mean that women fend for their children at great risk. The complete collapse of infrastructure in war zones results in limited access to economic opportunity, education and health-care. Whether women are in search of firewood or trading in the markets or at home, the absence of law and order exacerbates their subordinate position in these cultures and exponentially increases the risk of their being robbed, raped or killed.

The American War on Terror agenda also exacerbates the gendered consequences of the conflicts in the Horn. Contrary to the non-refoulement provisions in international refugee law, fear of ‘terrorists’ hiding among fleeing populations is leading to increasing border closures.

10. HRW 2005.

11. Amnesty International 2007.

12. HRW 2005.

13. HRW 2010.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

Given the apprehension that radical groups might commit terrorist activities against Kenya, it is becoming more difficult for Somalis to cross into Kenya.¹⁶ Kenya's efforts to prevent the Somali conflict from spilling across its borders and their impact on Somali refugees fleeing this conflict is further complicated by American interests in the region. These underlay US logistical support for Ethiopia during its invasion of Somalia in 2006, as well as funding for border-tightening measures in Kenya.¹⁷ These policy decisions impact women and their families, who confront direct physical danger during conflicts and/or become targets of SGBV at the hands of combatants and others.

Ethiopia/Eritrea

Many of the challenges and insecurities discussed above also apply to parts of Ethiopia, where liberation movements are waging war against the Ethiopian government. The government's continuing confrontations with local militias such as OLF and ONLF, its intervention in the Somali conflict and its border disputes with Eritrea divert resources from social and economic programmes that could help alleviate its developmental challenges. Militarisation, as a common trend in the region, also negatively impacts definitions of femininity and masculinity and further reinforces traditional gender roles.¹⁸ Thus, limited resources mean that families can only afford to educate some of their children, and boys are chosen over girls. Limited educational and economic opportunities for girls also increase their chances of early marriage. In a region with high maternal and child mortality rates, a 2004 UN report estimated that 30 per cent of girls aged 15 to 19 years were married, divorced or widowed.¹⁹ In spite of its criminalisation in the penal code, FGC in Ethiopia remains extremely prevalent, and domestic violence is widespread, with a World Bank report stating that 69 per cent of women in urban areas, and 88 per cent of rural women 'believe their husbands have the right to beat them.'²⁰ Entrenched patriarchal cultures, the absence of infrastructure to address women's grievances and the absence of refuge for those escaping violence restrict the opportunities to combat these gendered injustices in an environment where political repression and human rights abuses against dissidents reign.

Eritrean women's social and economic rights also remain precarious. The highly publicised instrumental role Eritrean women played in the liberation movement from the early 1960s to the secession of 1991 led to commendable gender gains during the conflict. Unfortunately, women have been pushed into subordinate roles in both public and private spheres since the war ended. Despite constitutional reforms that on paper guarantee gender equality, the regime in Asmara continues to trample on the rights of its citizens, including those of its female heroes. As in other countries in the Horn, very few women

occupy positions of power, despite their roles in the liberation movement.²¹ In addition to the social and economic insecurities flowing from the isolationist policies of this regime, domestic violence is pervasive, while over 90 per cent of girls are subjected to FGC.²² Moreover, 38 per cent of girls between 15 and 18 were married, divorced or widowed in 2000.²³ Unfortunately, continuing tensions with Ethiopia and Djibouti and political meddling in Somalia led to UN sanctions, which have further isolated this regime and consequently marginalised its population and their aspirations for democratic reform, including gender equality. This regime's repression is also fuelling youth disillusionment, which is leading to new waves of migration. Thousands of Eritreans escaping this regional instability (along with Ethiopians and Somalis) are perishing on the high seas in their attempts to get into Europe.

Djibouti

Djibouti has experienced relative stability. Its strategic location on the Red Sea guarantees this resource-poor nation a steady flow of foreign aid and a regular foreign presence. In addition to the French military base, the US has also now established a military base in Djibouti for its War on Terror. This has resulted in increased tensions between Djibouti and Eritrea. Despite the resources flowing from these military bases, Djiboutian women experience social, economic and political exclusion, as well as discriminatory cultural practices similar to those found in other Horn of African nations. While gender equality is enshrined in law, and Djibouti signed the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1998, the country has made little progress in achieving gender equality.²⁴ Limited access to healthcare facilities and educational opportunities, widespread FGC and extreme poverty adversely affect the well-being of women and their families. Moreover, widespread consumption of the culturally accepted drug khat, further strains poor families' resources, with an estimated 30 per cent of household incomes being spent on this drug.²⁵ Women continue to have little recourse to federal courts in confronting economic, psychological or physical violence, all of which are dealt with within the family sphere. Using these traditional methods of conflict resolution further victimises women, whose grievances are undermined by patriarchal structures.

Conclusions and policy recommendations

The recommendations that follow advocate interventions premised on advancing political stability and democratic reform alongside significant support for local civil society initiatives for peace and gender equality in the Horn of Africa.

16. Ibid.

17. Abdi 2007.

18. Enloe 1983.

19. UN 2004.

20. SIGI 2009.

21. Campbell 2005.

22. US Department of State 2010.

23. UN 2004.

24. POGAR 2007.

25. UNICEF 2008.

International Community

- The international community should pressure governments of Horn countries to become more accountable to their citizens and promote democratic reforms, which would include greater women's participation in local political dispensations and local peacebuilding processes.
- In Sudan and Somalia, attention should be given to adequate provision of fuel for cooking as well as water to enable women to avoid long-distance travel in search of these necessities and thus decrease the risk of violent attack.
- More pressure should be exerted on AMISOM troops in Mogadishu to stop indiscriminate bombardments and the killing of civilians in their confrontations with Al-Shabaab. Violence against civilians only fuels distrust of these peacekeepers and wins recruits for Al-Shabaab, a group that also terrorises women through its extreme interpretations of Islam.
- Systematic and targeted sanctions should be implemented against the Sudanese government to stop the atrocities against women in Darfur.
- The donor community should support civil society groups pushing for democratic reforms in Eritrea, including the promotion of gender equity. Caution should be taken so that UN sanctions don't further exacerbate the social and economic crisis, which disproportionately impacts women, children and the elderly.
- The recent release of Ethiopian opposition leader Birtukan Mideksa and the ongoing negotiations with opposition groups is a sign that this government is paying some heed to pressures to become more accountable to its people. Continuing such pressure on Zenawi's regime would hasten the process of democratisation and peace, which enhances women's position in society.

Regional Organisations:

- Countries in the Horn should respect international law, and not close their borders to refugees, including women and children escaping persecution.
- Increased international and regional efforts to support the nation-building efforts in Southern Sudan will contribute to curtail conflicts among the ethnic groups comprising this nascent nation and promote democratic institutions and gender equity.
- African regional organisations and the Arab League should play more instrumental roles in pressuring the Khartoum regime to stop violence against its own people, and speed up the reconciliation process.

References

- Abdi, Cawo, 2007, 'The New Age of Security: Implications for Refugees and IDPs in the Horn of Africa,' *Development* 50(4):75-81.
- , 2007, 'Convergence of Civil War and the Religious Right: Re-Imagining Somali Women,' *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 33(1):183-207.
- Amnesty International, 2007, 'Denied Refuge: The Effect of the Closure of the Kenya/Somalia Border on Thousands of Somali asylum-seekers and Refugees.'
- Eriksson Baaz, Maria and Maria Stern, 2010, 'Understanding and addressing conflict-related sexual violence: Lessons learned from the Democratic Republic of Congo.' Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute.
- Campbell, Patricia J., 2005, 'Gender and Post-Conflict Civil Society: Eritrea,' *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 7(3):377-99.
- Cockburn, Cynthia, 2001, 'The gendered dynamics of armed conflict and political violence.' In Caroline O.N. Moser and Fiona Clark (eds), *Victims, Perpetrators or Actors? Gender, Armed Conflict and Political Violence*. London and New York: Zed Books.
- Enloe, Cynthia, 1983, *Does Khaki Become You? The Militarisation of Women's Lives*. London: Pandora Press.
- Large, Judith, 1997, 'Disintegration Conflicts and the Restructuring of Masculinity,' *Gender and Development* 5(2):23-3.
- HRW, 2010, 'Welcome to Kenya: Police Abuse of Somali Refugees.' Human Rights Watch, 17 June.
- HRW, 2008, 'Collective Punishment: War Crimes and Crimes against Humanity in the Ogaden area of Ethiopia's Somali Region.' Human Rights Watch, June.
- HRW, 2005, 'Sexual Violence and its Consequences among Displaced Persons in Darfur and Chad.' Human Rights Watch Briefing Paper. 12 April.
- Moser, Caroline O.N. and Fiona Clark (eds), 2001, *Victims, Perpetrators or Actors? Gender, Armed Conflict and Political Violence*. London and New York: Zed Books.
- POGAR, 2007, 'Djibouti in Brief.' Programme on Governance in the Arab Region.
- SIGI, 2009, 'Gender Equality and Social Institutions in Ethiopia.' Social Institutions and Gender Index. <http://genderindex.org/country/ethiopia> [accessed on April 22, 2011].
- Transparency International, 2010, Corruption Perceptions Index 2010.
- UN, 2004, 'World Fertility Report 2003.' UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division.
- UNHCR, 2010, 'Figures at a Glance.' United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.
- UNICEF, 2008, 'Tackling khat consumption in Djibouti: a strong new political commitment.' United Nations Children's Fund. 4 September.
- US Department of State, 2010, '2009 Human Rights Report: Eritrea.' Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor.
- World Economic Forum, 2010, *The Global Gender Gap Report*.

Cawo M. Abdi is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Minnesota and a Research Fellow in the Department of Sociology at the University of Pretoria, South Africa. Her research interests are in gender and family dynamics, religion, transnational migration and development.