



## Research brief

# Women, conflict and peace — learning from Kismayo, Somalia

Women play many roles in war and peace. Traditionally women have primarily been seen as victims of war. In many cases, women have also played a critical leadership role in preventing violence and building peace. Less attention has been given to understanding the ways in which women may contribute to cycles of conflict.

In the Somali context, women are simultaneously highlighted as victims, as well as peacebuilders by the international community; however, they are rarely viewed as protagonists in conflict. This narrative is challenged by research undertaken in 2016 by the Life & Peace Institute (LPI), Peace Direct and the Somali Women's Solidarity Organization (SWSO) which presents local insight into women's experiences of conflict and peace in Kismayo.

The study included focus group discussions with women and men, key informant interviews with a range of civil society and government stakeholders and personal accounts provided by women affected by conflict. It shows that women are not only victims, nor are they natural peacebuilders — they are also political actors, fundraisers and mobilizers for conflicts, and on occasion combatants and killers. The ability of Somali women to move along the spectrum of conflict protagonist and peacemaker generates a new rationale and previously overlooked challenges for their inclusion in formal and informal peace processes.

*“Women have so many roles in peacebuilding.”*

Male focus group 1



## Women and conflict

Somali women across all clans and socio-economic groups have experienced violent events as a result of the conflicts in southern Somalia since 1991.

Many women experienced multiple traumas, including forced displacement, beatings, looting and loss of loved ones. Sexual and gender-based violence has been extensively used as a weapon of war. Clan identity has been the basis for rape

of women and sex-selective massacres of male children, youth and men.

Most women have taken action in response to the impact of violent conflict in their communities. Many of these actions could be described as humanitarian, in the sense that they were undertaken to relieve the suffering of others. Other actions could be considered proactive and pre-emptive, such as arming themselves for protection.

## How women contribute to violent conflict

This research shows that women are neither simply victims, nor natural peacemakers. Somali women, like men, are expected to further their clan's struggle for supremacy and revenge appears to be a significant motivation for the use of violence.

Women of all ages and social backgrounds identified multiple ways women themselves promote and mobilize for violent conflict.

***“Everyone participated. No one is clean. Even if you did not support by holding guns or help during the fighting, you were supporting in your heart.”***

Life story, Respondent A

This involvement ranges across non-combat and combat roles:

- Mobilizing men by humiliating those that refuse to fight or encouraging those that take up arms;

- Fundraising for, and financing, conflict;
- Taking up arms and joining a militia or acting as lone combatants;
- Being complicit or instrumental in the rape of other women.

Women have been able to transgress gendered roles, dressing and behaving like male counterparts, operating as assassins and militia fighters, then returning to peripheral supporting roles based on personal choice. This ability to move in and out of conflict, and to alter one's role based on individual motivations emerges as a critical ability held by women in Somalia.

***“When the militia wanted to target a specific woman — maybe she was a mobilizer or a financier for her clan — then they would send a woman to do it.”***

Validation meeting 1

### Describing how she supported conflict, a woman who is now a civil servant recalls:

***“During the years of the State collapse, I supported the militias of my clan. You know, to take part, you do not have to necessarily take up a gun. You can take part in many ways. You can take part by supporting your clan community when it is fighting against another clan community. You can contribute financially. I personally contributed financially by buying and bringing milk and water to the fighters. I also used to nurse the wounded, help carry them and bring them inside the house. I used to give information too, I'd say, ‘These people are there! Defend us!’ or ‘Beware! They are coming! They are going to attack!’ That is what I use to go and tell the men. I wasn't scared at all. I used to walk among them in the battlefield, while they were shooting at each other. I became like plastic. Like plastic. I didn't feel anything at all. I did a lot, in fact, to support the conflict and I also used to encourage it. A lot, in fact.”***

## Women and peacebuilding

The research shows that women's influence and agency in peacebuilding remains greatest in the home. Yet, their position is one of contradictions – while they are expected to mobilize sons and husbands, and arm them for violence, they are equally associated with teaching and parenting against violence, stepping in and disarming their kinsmen. The loss of multiple family members tends to be the tipping point to the realization of the futility of violence.

*“Conflict begins at home. So, after you solve it [there], you can participate in peacebuilding activities.”*

Female focus group 3

Women know that their agency for peace is greatest when it is collective, but they lack the social institutions available to men. Instead they describe a process in which they construct their peace institutions as they go along, while simultaneously working to end conflict. Working collectively, women have also targeted warlords

and politicians from rival clans with the aim of opening dialogue between them.

For women in Kismayo, one of the first steps to building peace is overcoming internal hostilities and clan division between women. Different forms of women-to-women reconciliation, such as the SWSO-LPI women's dialogues for peace, are ongoing and appear to be widely welcomed.

However, some women are also blocked from participation in women-to-women peacebuilding in practical ways. Participation is supported by certain characteristics such as literacy, networks of associates and access to resources. Some women, particularly those from marginalized groups, may lack the basic resources to participate.

*“In the first days of the women's dialogue, I used to cry. Now I feel cleansed...Now I can talk about my experiences and preach the uselessness of war.”*

Validation meeting 1

**A woman, who was a militiawoman until she voluntarily demobilized, describes taking part in a major effort by women to bring the warring parties together to negotiate for peace:**

*“But after a year, political instability erupted again and gunfire started. Each of the five Jubbaland presidential candidates had an army. Their soldiers started firing at each other, with each candidate proclaiming, ‘I am the president! I am the president!’ The conflict lasted 64 hours. After that time, women of the region, we took mats and microphones to the football stadium and we gathered there. We said, ‘We are the Somali women. We don't want conflict. There was conflict for 25 years. Here are the peace mats.’ We called all of the five presidential candidates to join us. We kept calling their names and finally after three months they came together and started a dialogue. We went to them. We welcomed them. What we did there was not something easy.”*



## Implications for the inclusion of women in peacebuilding processes

Due to the critical role of women in conflict and their history of active participation in interclan violence — their inclusion in peace processes is not only about fulfilling a policy requirement or reaching targets of international frameworks. It is fundamental

to securing long-term peace and stability in Somalia.

Insights from the contributions of research participants, provide recommendations that can be applied in policy and practice.

### Peace Direct Recommends:


- Reframe and broaden the rationale for women's inclusion in formal and informal peace processes in Somalia to recognize the various identities and social roles in peace and conflict.
- Challenge cultural practices that perpetuate harmful patriarchal gender norms and exclude women from formal and informal peace processes.
- Encourage and support the formation and consolidation of women's networks that can develop strategies; propose key issues for the agenda and advise on solutions to women participating in the peace process.
- Support processes which afford women equal voice about what peace looks like and how to achieve it. Such processes must not box women into traditional 'women's issues' such as health and education, but allow them to input on security, economic and political issues as well. Additionally, any inclusive process must not sideline women or any other marginalized group, in separate processes or spaces.
- Support and encourage women-to-women reconciliation within wider peace building processes by providing appropriate funding and political backing to such efforts.


Full report: 'Increasing women's participation and inclusion in Jubbaland peace processes. Women, Conflict and Peace: learning from Kismayo' (2018), available at:


[www.peacedirect.org/publications/women-conflict-and-peace-learning-from-kismayo/](http://www.peacedirect.org/publications/women-conflict-and-peace-learning-from-kismayo/)



Peace Direct is an international non-governmental organization dedicated to supporting local people to stop war and build lasting peace. Peace Direct supports 14 partners in 12 countries around the world to stop violence escalating and build long term peace.

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**Somali Women Solidarity Organization (SWSO)** is a

community-based organization engaged in promoting solidarity and increasing women's participation in decision-making processes. SWSO has actively engaged in peacebuilding, in particular at the grassroots level to enhance the capacity of communities to understand and respond to insecurity.