

# The Invisible Clan: Is Somalia Ready for a Women's Revolution?

*To my daughter I will say,  
'When the men come, set yourself on fire'.*

-Warsan Shire

The gang rape and murder of 12-year-old Aisha Ilyas Adan, whose body was found outside her family's house in the town of Galkayo in central Somalia last month, has galvanised Somali women to fight against a vice that has often been described as a "normalised" epidemic. Under the hashtag #WeAreNotSafe, Somali activists are demanding that the authorities take rape cases more seriously.

Rape is one of the unspoken taboos in war-torn Somali society that few in the international development community, and Somalis themselves, have been reluctant to confront - even though it has become a constant feature of Somali women's lives since the collapse of the Somali state in 1991. Anarchy and lawlessness have embedded a culture of violence that allow men to rape with impunity.

Women paid a double price during Somalia's civil war: not only were they expected to become breadwinners, they also became casualties of conflicts as clans fought each other for supremacy and as the country's institutions collapsed. Rape was often used as a weapon of war. A survey by Trust Law, a project of the Thomson Reuters Foundation, has stated that Somalia is one of the worst places in the world to be a woman.

Most rapes in Somalia go unreported and unpunished. The few women who dare to report their cases to the authorities face a hostile audience. There have been cases of women being ostracised and even killed when they report being raped.

Women and children living in camps for internally displaced people are particularly vulnerable. In 2013, the United Nations reported nearly 800 cases of sexual and gender-based violence in Mogadishu's IDP camps within the space of just 6 months. While human rights organisations have been documenting an alarming number of rape cases in camps for refugees and IDPs, rapes in the wider Somali society go largely unrecorded. In reported cases, clan elders resort to

customary law (known as *xeer*) to dispense justice, which often involves the perpetrator paying a fine or the victim being forced to marry her attacker. Now women are demanding that customary law not be applied to rape cases and that there should be laws to bring rapists to justice.

## **How the clan system affects women**

The clan system, Somali society's main organising institution - which gained traction during the civil war when law and order broke down and when public institutions collapsed - represent a nightmare for women, say researchers Judith Gardner and Judy El-Bushra in their study titled "The Impact of War on Somali Men and its Effects on the Family, Women and Children". The corollary of this clan-centred siege mentality is an extreme imbalance in the power relations between Somali men and women.

Somali women enjoy few rights in a society where clan identity is passed down through male lineage. A woman who marries a man from another clan, for example, cannot pass down her clan identity to her children. It is for this reason that Somali women's rights activists often refer to Somali women as the invisible "fifth clan". (There are four major clans in Somalia - Darod, Hawiye, Diir and Rahanweyne.)

Yet it is this "invisible clan" that has sustained Somali society during the nearly three decades of civil war. While much emphasis has been placed on harmful practices endured by Somali women and girls, such as female genital mutilation (FGM), which is widespread in Somalia (it is estimated that 98 per cent of women aged between 15 and 49 in Somalia have undergone the procedure), little attention is given to Somali women's role in feeding and protecting their families during the civil wars years and beyond.

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During the conflict, women developed a deep resilience and a practical business acumen, partly because they had no other choice, and also because they could

more easily cross and access enemy territories than men, and therefore, were more likely than men to be able to trade and do business across clan lines. Woman-headed households in Somalia's war-torn society, and even in the diaspora, became more common, mainly because physical and social disruptions caused by the conflict had eroded men's gender roles as providers and protectors. Women became the main breadwinners during a conflict where battles between clans and "revenge killings" had decimated the male population. In cities such as Mogadishu and Hargeisa, it is common to see small-scale female traders selling *khat*, vegetables and even petrol.

However, while women have been running businesses and holding their families together, they still do not have decision-making powers, which are largely in the hands of clan elders and men. Somali women are expected to be strong and resilient, yet they do not enjoy the same rights as men, nor do they have real economic power even though the civil war forced women to take on a more important economic roles within the family. In the context of civil war, gender roles became confused and distorted, with women taking on greater financial responsibilities but with little authority within the family.

Gardner and El-Bushra found no evidence that the dominant patriarchal ideology underpinning Somali society has been substantially damaged by the civil war or state collapse, despite the increasingly important economic role of women. However, they note that not all clans in Somalia have similar attitudes towards women. Obedience to a wife is valued among the largely agriculturalist "Bantu" clans, for instance, but considered anathema amongst pastoralists.

## **Absentee fathers**

While much attention has been focused on the impact of the civil war on Somali women, particularly their changing gender roles as breadwinners, the impact of the war on Somali men has not been investigated as much. Ironically, United Nations and international NGO interventions to empower Somali women might have ended up disempowering Somali men, who are not only denied services (such as welfare benefits in which only female heads of households qualify as recipients) but who are less likely than women to seek psychological treatment or social support services, which are crucial for people dealing with trauma.

Somali women were literally left holding the baby. In Somalia's urban centres,

men tend to while away their time in coffee and tea shops (a phenomenon I have also witnessed in coffee shops in Nairobi) while their wives and daughters go off to work and take care of their families. A phenomenon observed among Somali communities living in places such as London and Minnesota is that of jobless or absentee fathers; they say that Somali women adjust better to their new environments in Europe and America, and are, therefore, more easily absorbed in the labour market. Men, especially those who held high positions in Somalia or who hold advanced degrees, find it much harder to adjust to working in low-paid or low-status jobs that are available to refugees or new immigrants. Hence, many remain jobless or resign to becoming recipients of the welfare state. The resulting marital discord has led to high divorce rates, particularly among Somalis in the diaspora.

Others desert their families out of shameful pride, leaving their wives to take care of the children. Researchers have found that the most common absentee fathers are those who may remain married but who are not physically present in their children's lives, those who abandon their families by re-marrying or those who are so addicted to *khat* that they become completely dependent on their wives.

*Khat* addiction and mental illnesses emerge both as causes and effects of male failure to fulfil family responsibilities. *Khat* dens are full of young married men who can't find jobs or who have simply become addicted to the habit. Medium- and long-term use of *khat*, the mild stimulant that is widely consumed in the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, has been associated with depression, aggression, paranoia, insomnia and mouth cancers; it has also contributed to parental absenteeism.

*Khat* has also been known to deaden emotions, such as guilt or shame. Some observers claim that it could have even contributed to prolonging the civil war in Somalia and might be a factor in the alarming cases of sexual violence. The negative social consequences of *khat* on Somali families and societies have not been widely acknowledged but they are gaining prominence, which has forced an increasing number of European countries to ban its importation.

### **'Bravery and dry eyes'**

Most Somali men will not admit to being addicts or emotionally traumatised, even by war, as "bravery and dry eyes" are considered crucial markers of a Somali

man. Admitting that one is suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder or mental illness is one of the biggest taboos in Somali society, as I came to learn. Most Somalis don't talk about or openly admit that they might be suffering from trauma, yet, as any psychologist or medical doctor would tell you, it is not possible for people who have endured prolonged conflict and forced displacement to not exhibit the anxieties and psychoses that sustained violence breed.

"When instability and conflict and mayhem have gone on for as long as they have in Somalia, not only is everyone suffering from some sort of mental illness, mostly chronic post-traumatic disorder, but there are certain habits that people develop as a result of the events," says Mulki Ali, a Swedish Somali blogger. Among these habits and attitudes are feelings of powerlessness, cynicism and a learned helplessness, also known as "victim mentality". Violence thus becomes a "self-fulfilling prophecy" and rape is normalised. In such a scenario, says Ali, traumatised young men and boys become susceptible to "cults" like Al Shabaab, which provide a sense of belonging and restore "manhood" among youth who feel otherwise powerless to change their situation.

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The civil war eroded and distorted men's *raganimo* (roughly translated as "manhood"), which in a highly patriarchal society, can be devastating for male self-esteem and dignity. In their inception study, Gardner and El-Bushra found that the definition of *raganimo* in Somali society is inextricably linked to men's ability to not just protect the family, but the clan as well:

*"Boys from pastoral clans are taught at a young age to show fearlessness and never publicly cry or show other signs of emotional weakness. To do otherwise is un-manly and humiliating, for the individual and by extension for his clansmen and women. A male's raganimo is enhanced if he survives an attempt to humiliate or intimidate him without showing fear... Findings also*

*make clear that a 'real man'...is one who excels in fulfilling both his family and clan responsibilities...How successfully an individual is able to attain and sustain his manhood depends on many factors but two conditions stand out as critical: his access to livestock or other forms of wealth, and being married with children, particularly sons."*

Inability to fulfil one's family or clan responsibilities deepens frustration, exacerbates trauma and can lead to depression and violent behaviour.

## **Women's resistance**

However, as researchers are quick to point out, even with women's relatively new status as breadwinners, the basic values attached to gender identity among Somalis remain unchanged; in Somalia's deeply patriarchal society, women are still believed to be inferior to men in all aspects, particularly in the political sphere, where women are discouraged from participating in public affairs.

Some younger Somali women, particularly those living in Western countries, are beginning to question Somali society's deeply patriarchal clan structures, and becoming more vocal about sexism. New female voices, such as the UK-based poet Warsan Shire and the writer Nadifa Mohamed, are redefining Somali literature with a female-centric slant. Others are openly questioning traditional practices that impact women's sexuality, a taboo subject among most Somalis. The prominent Somalilander, Edna Aden Ismail, for instance, has gained global recognition for establishing a maternity hospital in Hargeisa that treats women and girls who suffer from FGM-related ailments or who have been victims of sexual violence.

Yasmin Maydhane, a London-based human rights advocate, among others, are particularly critical of FGM, which is often portrayed as a Somali or Islamic practice, even though it has its roots in the pre-Islamic Egypt of the Pharaohs. While all religions are about controlling women's sexuality, she says, in Somalia "men use religion to police our vaginas, to control what it looks like, what it feels like and who is allowed to access it...Our brand of patriarchy is built around sexual control...Everything and everyone is silenced with deference to 'God's plan', a phrase that indicates that we are done thinking and talking," wrote Maydhane in a July 2015 edition of *Media Diversified*.

Yet many forget that before the civil war, Somali women enjoyed more freedoms

than they do today. President Siad Barre enlarged women's rights; women were not expected to stay at home or to cover their bodies from head to toe. During his "secularist" dictatorship (which he claimed was a form of "scientific socialism"), women held important positions in public life and as professionals. Until the full-body veil for women was introduced to Somalia in the early 1990s - when the deeply conservative Wahhabism imported from Saudi Arabia gained more influence - Somali women wore their veil "lightly"; they only partially covered their heads with scarves and wore long colourful skirts and blouses.

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Imported Wahhabism also entrenched a Sharia-focused mentality that shunned secular institutions. Al Shabaab, which purports to be carrying out an Islamic jihad in Somalia, has not made women's lives any easier; its strict code of conduct in the areas the group controls has significantly curtailed women's freedom and choices.

However, with growing resistance to a male-centric society, it is possible that a nascent women's movement will emerge in Somalia in the near future. Many Somali women have privately expressed to me their frustration with dealing with male-dominated politics in Somalia that is focused on political power rather than on addressing the many challenges the country faces, including high levels of illiteracy and alarming rates of maternal mortality. One woman told me, "Since our men have made such a mess of our country, maybe it's time for women to take over."

Somali women may finally get their #MeToo moment, which may encourage more women to demand the rights that they have been denied for so long, and to forcefully reject the notion that gender-based violence is "normal". Aisha Ilyas Adan's brutal rape and murder might just be the trigger that ignites this revolution.