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Somalia: Building women's leadership

by Sarah McGregor by Inter Press Service

BAGAMOYO, Somalia -- The moderator raps her pen on the table to hush the boisterous assembly of Somali women gathered in Bagamoyo, on the Indian Ocean coast of Tanzania. Their voices drop for a moment before the sound level rises again to a heated crescendo.

This group of 60 is being given a rare public forum to share their thoughts on the role of women in the peace process of war-ravaged Somalia, a nation without an effective central government since 1991.

Seventeen years of civil conflict, serious food shortages from frequent droughts and deepening poverty has created what the United Nations calls one of the world's worst humanitarian disasters.

Through it all, women in the largely conservative Horn of African nation have largely been prevented from voicing opposition.

"The war is being fought by men and it is men leading the politics in the country," said Zahra Mohamad, of the women's empowerment NGO Gender, Education, Empowerment and Leadership Organization (GEELO) based in Nairobi Kenya, in an interview with IPS.

"The women involved in politics are very few and their voices are not very loud. Most are struggling with daily security, daily food, daily work and they don't have time for much else," Mohamad said.

Women have been almost completely excluded from the peace and state building processes in Somalia, according to a statement from the UN International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (UN-INSTRAW).

That is slowly starting to change.

This year new efforts are being made to involve Somali women in bringing stability to the country ahead of national elections planned for 2009, which may have to be delayed because of the unstable security situation.

Two seminars bringing female members of Somalia's transitional government together with women from inside the country and the Somali diaspora took place in Italy earlier this year. Like this week's conference in Bagamoyo, they were organised by UN-INSTRAW and the Milan-based Association for the Diaspora and Peace (Associazione Diaspora e Pace -- ADEP) with funding from the Italian government. ADEP works to protect the rights of Somali immigrants in Italy and to empower women in Somalia.

"Women are the ones in charge of the households while the men go out fighting. Now, women need to find ways to build peace, influence politics... and vote in democratic elections," said Carolina Toborga, acting director of UN-INSTRAW based in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic.

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"What we're trying to do is help women living in Somalia to start building bridges with (women) the diaspora who have the resources to help make change inside the country and a connection to the international community."

The fact this formal dialogue had to be held outside Somali is significant. Somali women are frightened to speak out in a society characterised by pervasive gender inequality, according to Sahra*, a Somali activist living abroad.

"It's a Muslim culture where women are rarely given the right to talk over men," Sahra said. "The challenge is to empower every woman to tell her husband and brother to stay at home and stop fighting."

None of the women who traveled to Tanzania from Somalia for the meeting would agree to an interview with the media. An event organiser circulated questions and sent replies to IPS on condition of anonymity for this story.

"Somali women need to create their own political party. We don't want to repeat the mistakes of the past," one woman responded.

Life getting harder

Almost every aspect of life for Somalis -- especially women and girls -- is steadily growing worse, said Mohamad of GELO.

War has demolished infrastructure including classrooms and hospitals. An average of 45 women die every day in childbirth and the primary school enrolment rate for girls of 15 percent is one of the lowest in Africa, UN statistics show.

Clashes between Somalia's government forces and armed opposition groups have driven at least 1 million people from their homes, according to a report by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre published in July. More than 3 million Somalis have sought asylum in other African nations, the Persian Gulf, Europe, Australia and North America, the UN High Commission for Refugees said.

Quality of life in one of the world's poorest nations ? about half in a population of 9 million live below the poverty line of less than \$1 a day -- is further deteriorating, it added. Cultural restrictions prevent some women from working in the formal economy.

In a climate of general lawlessness, rape and other forms of sexual abuse are on the rise as a deliberate conflict tactic.

Only eight percent of lawmakers in Somalia's transitional government are females, below the 12 percent gender quota enshrined in the interim national charter.

One of key aims of the internationally-sponsored dialogue for Somali women is to help implement the UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which outlines measures to improve women's role in peace-building.

Some of the steps include recruiting more female envoys and army officers, and providing services for women in conflict situations.

Activists say the Somali diaspora, which is already trying to take an active part in rebuilding the nation, must work hard to support family and friends in their homeland.

"This diaspora is starting to reinvest in Somali as a country, working on infrastructure and to discuss priorities and needs," Farhia Aidid Aden, of the Association for the Diaspora and Peace, said.

The diaspora has "resources like money, education and the mindset of democratic countries. Women in Somali are coping to survive on the local level."

*Not her real name

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