

Climate crisis, gender inequalities and local response in Somalia/Somaliland

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Various factors intersect when looking at the gendered effects of climate crisis on local communities in Somalia/Somaliland.

Climate-related shocks and humanitarian crises are closely inter-linked. As climate change becomes more extreme and unpredictable, hundreds of thousands of people living in poverty in Somalia are already paying a heavy price. As well as facing a fragile political situation after the collapse of the government in 1991, Somalia has experienced recurrent droughts which have in turn increased clan conflicts.¹ In 2018, 547,000 people (3.6% of its population) were newly displaced by extreme weather events² and it is expected that in 2020 6.3 million people will face acute food insecurity and 5.2 million people will be in need of humanitarian assistance, of which 1.72 million people will be internally displaced.³

Gender inequality in Somalia/Somaliland⁴ in general was already very high before the current climate crisis: women have less power and participation in economic, educational and political spheres, and gender-based violence, early girl-child marriage and female genital mutilation are all prevalent.⁵ Now, climate shocks – creating resource scarcity and stress on livelihoods – have shifted many cultural norms in Somali society and are having an impact on gender dynamics.

The loss of livestock because of drought has resulted in men being unable to secure income for the family. This is causing tension and conflict in households and driving domestic violence towards women and children. Many men also turn to chewing the stimulant qat, which all communities interviewed reported as increasing domestic violence. Domestic violence has also increased as women have, in many cases, become the breadwinners – either through keeping and selling goats, becoming street vendors in camps for internally displaced people (IDPs) or in villages, or by taking up casual

work in urban centres. This has caused a shift in gender roles and is perceived by some men as a threat to their role. In some cases, men leave their families to look for work in the cities, join the military, leave to escape clan violence, or die by suicide. Divorce rates have risen and female-headed households have become more common.

Caring and domestic work, traditionally the responsibility of women and girls, have become more demanding and time-consuming. Both firewood and water are increasingly scarce, resulting in women and girls walking longer distances to collect these resources. Girls are asked to support the increased daily domestic work, resulting in more girls dropping out of school. Furthermore, when parents cannot afford to register both boys and girls in school, they prioritise boys' education.

Resource scarcity has also increased clan conflicts as more groups compete over land, water and pasture. This is especially dangerous for men, who can easily become victims of revenge killings or armed clashes, and consequently limits their freedom of movement. Evictions and land disputes arising when people are displaced also cause violence, affecting mostly men.

Other forms of gender-based violence, such as rape, have also been on the rise. Women feel vulnerable at water points, open defecation areas, livestock grazing areas, areas where they collect firewood, on roads to markets and in their homes (because of lack of safe shelter and lighting). Perpetrators are men both from within and outside the community. Seeking justice for sexual violence or rape remains difficult as confidentiality is compromised when cases are reported in the community, the informal court system often imposes small fines on

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Women head to the water point in Eilmidgan village where Oxfam has built a water desalination plant.

perpetrators who are then released back into the community, and the formal systems are inaccessible due to distance and cost. Many women are raped during the night while sleeping, especially in those areas where clan conflicts happen frequently:

“My husband brought us here and left to find work. I have eight daughters and two sisters with me in this IDP camp. They are all under 17 years. I don’t sleep at night. I keep on watching them to sleep safely. I try to sleep at noon time.” (Woman from Fadhigaab IDP camp, Sanaag region)

When struggling to secure livelihoods, families will often marry their daughters to wealthy men and this was one of the main issues raised in focus group discussions, with many of the girls interviewed fearing early and forced marriage.

Communities have developed a variety of coping mechanisms to deal with the gendered effects of climate crisis and displacement. To avoid sexual violence and rape, women and girls travel in groups, change times they leave camps, do not share their movements with men for fear of being stalked, and carry

sticks and torches, while elderly women collect water or look for missing livestock. Men in fear of revenge killings stay away from homes at night, either sleeping in hiding, staying awake in shifts, or sleeping outside and posting guards. Many men carry guns for their protection, travel in groups, use torches and keep in touch to warn each other of potential danger.

Local response and programming

The response to rising humanitarian needs is being met largely by the UN and international NGOs (INGOs), to whom most of the donor funding flows directly. However, much of the response is delivered by local and national NGOs, especially in conflict areas, to which international agencies lack access. Through the Grand Bargain agreement and the Charter for Change, donors and INGOs have committed to localisation – giving local and national organisations and Somali government agencies more direct funding and more space to lead humanitarian responses by, for example, increasing their participation in decision making.

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However, while some progress has been made on localisation, the UN and INGOs still dominate the humanitarian system.

There are many local and national NGOs who are responding to the humanitarian needs caused by climate crisis in Somalia/Somaliland, delivering a variety of activities to tackle the gendered effects of drought. Protection activities are widely undertaken and several organisations have referral systems and counselling for rape and sexual violence survivors whereby community members are trained to respond and refer survivors to medical centres and to help those seeking justice for the survivors. Many also carry out protection awareness-raising activities, visiting households and speaking about various issues such as domestic and sexual violence and explaining what women can do when they face such issues. A few organisations also deliver community awareness-raising activities, such as community dramas – performances of various situations with the help of actors. Local organisations understand that Somali society has strong oral traditions and that dramas are a good way to raise awareness and to generate discussions and reflection. Local actors are better placed than international actors to do this type of work as they have ongoing relationships with affected communities and have deep understanding of the cultural and religious context.

Local and international NGOs (and, to a certain extent, the government) have mainstreamed gender across the various activities such as WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene), resilience and livelihood activities, unconditional cash transfers and cash-for-work programmes (serving both men and women). For example, when selecting beneficiaries, gender is carefully considered and female-headed households are taken into account. According to Nafisa Yusuf of the Somali women's rights network Nagaad: "In a drought those most affected are women and children [...] Women are the first to know when the disaster is going to happen. They are the provider of the family. They know."

Local NGOs encourage women's leadership and participation in decision

making, for example in IDP camp committees. Kamal Hassan Isak of local NGO HAVAYOCO explains that encouraging such roles requires a careful and culturally appropriate strategy: "We talk to men and women about women in the Quran, who are leaders, for example the Prophet's wife who was a business leader – people cannot refuse our Prophet." Many local organisations share that changing norms and perceptions of what women can and should do takes time, many discussions and the building of strong relationships. Given the limitations of both local and international NGOs when it comes to fully integrating gender in their work, it is important to make visible the gendered effects of the climate crisis. When the differences are researched, analysed and shared, all actors can more easily adapt their programming.

Localisation – still waiting

The absolute and relative amounts of funding available to local Somali actors (State and non-State) remains very small. In 2017, direct funding of local/national actors accounted for 3.5% of overall humanitarian funding for Somalia, with the majority of this going to the government.⁶ This has done little to change the power dynamics between international and national actors. All local and national NGOs we spoke with raised the fact that doing long-term work to shift norms is very difficult in a humanitarian system which often sees local actors as sub-contractors and where funding is short-term and project-dependent. "We have a programme [in women's leadership], it runs for a year, we train and engage, then it stops, and then we get new funding and we have to start again," says Nafisa Yusuf of Nagaad. Omer Jama Farah of local NGO Taakulo describes the humanitarian funding cycle and the slow dispersal of funding by saying "Aid comes when the rain comes".

Interviewees are worried about the long-term sustainability of efforts, and find it difficult to be able to lead in the sector when their access to decision-making spaces and their capacity to invest in their organisations remain limited. Restrictions

on how funds can be spent, which exclude work for organisational development, have a negative effect on local NGOs' managerial quality and technical competence and cause a vicious cycle that creates a deadlock for advancing the localisation agenda.⁷

More flexible and longer-term funding is needed for local organisations to create sustainable programmes and for these organisations to truly become leaders within the sector. Capacity building alone will not shift power but more and different kinds of funding and the recognition and inclusion of local NGOs as leaders could.

Climate justice advocacy

As the focus in Somalia/Somaliland thus far and for good reason has been on responding to humanitarian needs created by the climate crisis, there is not a large climate justice movement in the country. Local organisations currently do not have the capacity to mobilise and advocate for global policy changes, focusing instead on responding to the effects of climate crisis and the urgent needs of communities. But there is a lot of potential for local actors, and international agencies and local government, to build a coherent narrative around the climate crisis and to connect with global movements to reduce climate crisis effects. In countries like

Somalia/Somaliland large numbers of people are being displaced by the climate crisis, despite not bearing the greatest responsibility for the emissions that contribute to climate change. The international community needs to make progress in providing new funds to help poorer countries support men and women affected by drought and other climate shocks, taking gender fully into consideration.

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