

# Enough is Enough!

## *Voice of Somali Women for Peace,*

BY ANNE ADELSON, AMINA SHARIF HASSAN, AND SAFIA JOWHAR

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*En Somalie, comme dans presque toutes les zones de conflit, les femmes souffrent sans commune mesure, mais on n'entend jamais leur voix dans les décisions qui affectent leur vie. Cet article décrit un projet qui implique les Somaliennes du monde entier dans la quête pour la paix dans leur patrie.*

The women of Mogadishu have taken to the streets and gate-crashed a meeting the warlords were holding in one of the hotels. The women demanded them to offer peace and stability to their children in the new millennium. “Enough is enough!”

they shouted. They said their children need peace, health care and education. (“Women Power”)

In this article, we will offer an account of a project organized by the Toronto-based initiative, Voice of Somali Women for Peace, Reconciliation, and Political Rights (vswp), which includes a conference held at York University, Toronto on July 11-13, 1999. The conference attracted over 150 participants. It highlighted Somali women's opposition to the civil war, and developed international strategies and support for an end to the Somali conflict.

### **Background to the Somali conflict**

Somalia,<sup>1</sup> the country whose long coastline on the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden forms the Horn of Africa, has been in active conflict for almost a decade. The current strife has its roots in the decision of colonial powers to carve the country into five pieces, two of which were united to form the Somali republic after the country gained independence in 1960. General Siad Barre seized control of Somalia in a military coup in 1969, and his regime, allied to the Soviet Union, brought in bold reforms like national literacy campaigns, the modernization of the legal system and the introduction of a written Somali language. By the mid-1970s, however, the regime had lost support and become increasingly authoritarian.

In 1976, seeking to exploit pan-Somali nationalism and regain popularity, the Barre regime invaded the eastern region of Ethiopia, home of ethnic Somalis. The war proved disastrous, and in its wake the Barre government resorted to savage clan-based “divide and rule” tactics, enforced by police terror, jailing, and human rights abuses.

Opposition groups were established in different regions of the country. However they were not united, and while they were finally able to topple the Barre regime in 1991, they were not able to form an alternative government. Further efforts to unite the country have been unsuccessful, and today, the population has fractured along clan lines aligned with power-seeking warlords so that no neutral political space exists. Opposition to the warlords is extremely dangerous, and has resulted in the muting of ordinary Somalis.

Somalia, a “failed state,” has been without a national government for a decade. The civil war has continued and intensified, with warlords vying for power and resources, and perpetuating indiscriminate terror and violence against the people. The presence in the country of a large amount of arms and munitions, much of it obtained through military aid from the Soviet Union and later from the West, has exacerbated the situation. Current tensions are heightened by the influx of arms and troops from neighbouring countries, mainly Ethiopia and Eritrea (“More than 5,000 Ethiopian troops seen passing through Somalia”) and a lack of food security which resulted in famine in 1991-92, and which continues to threaten large-scale starvation and hunger (“UN reports on potential for ‘starvation on a large scale’”).

Somali culture is traditional and male-dominated, and women have historically been invisible in politics. But after years of waiting for positive change, women are increasingly aware that male leaders endorse division. Recognizing that women and children, in particular, are affected by this stance, women are ever more vocal in demanding a say in Somali politics.

### **Voice of Somali Women for Peace, Reconciliation and Political Rights**

Efforts have been made to support a women's peace initiative from within Somalia, but the myriad problems caused by the lack of a central government and the ongoing civil war have mitigated against this project. The

# Reconciliation and Political Rights

priority of many of the non-governmental organizations that continue to work in Somalia has been on capacity-building and economic development, rather than on peace-building work.

War-displaced Somali women living in western countries may have easier access to education, to human rights discourse, and to international peace networks than their sisters in Somalia. They have been especially energetic in making women's voices heard, and many have found that working to improve the situation in their homeland is an effective way of dealing with the conflicting emotions of guilt and gratitude at having themselves, escaped the war.

Voice of Somali Women for Peace, Reconciliation and Political Rights (vsWP) is an initiative of a group of Somali women currently living in Toronto who have remained activists for peace and stability in their homeland and demanded women's inclusion in decision-making processes. This project draws from supporters in Toronto and Canadian at large, and is connected to initiatives in Somalia and internationally.

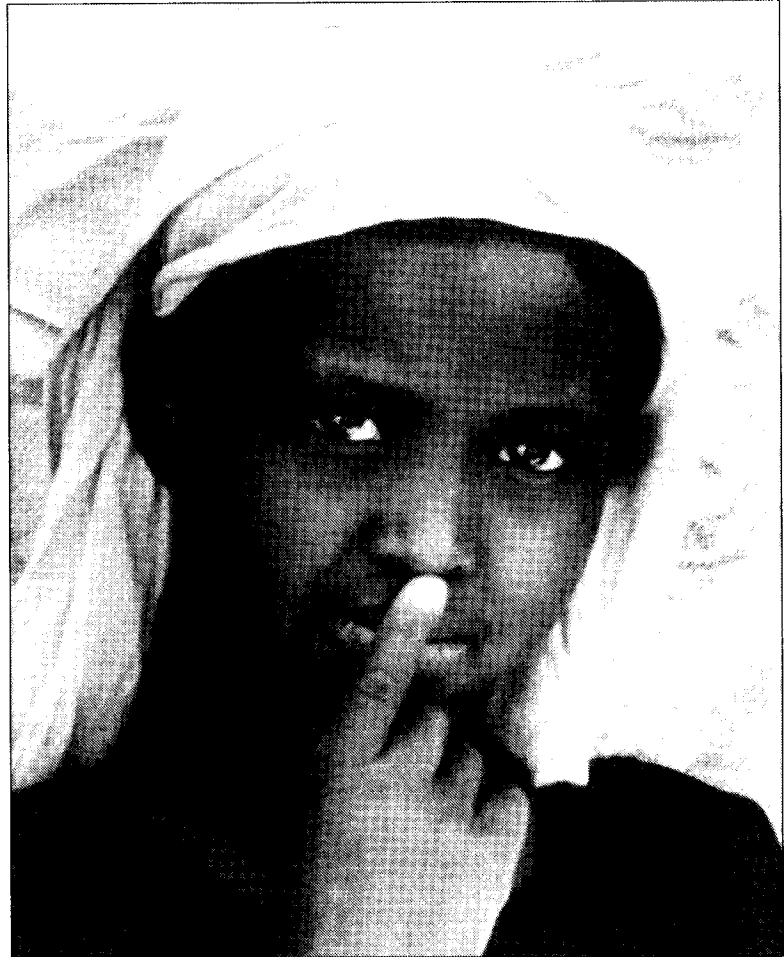
With the support of Voice of Women (vow), Amina Sharif Hassan decided to investigate the possibility of holding a Somali women's peace conference after the tri-annual International Somali Studies Congress. This would facilitate international participation in vsWP's peace-building work.<sup>2</sup>

## Voice of Women

The oldest Canadian women's peace organization, Voice of Women (vow)<sup>3</sup> was approached for assistance in organizing the conference. vow aims to achieve the following:

- To unite women in concern for the future of the world;
- To protest against war or the threat of war as the decisive method of exercising power;
- To provide a means for women to exercise responsibility for the family of humankind;
- To appeal to all national leaders to cooperate in the alleviation of the causes of war by common action for the economic and social betterment of all.

vow has a long tradition of bringing together women from different sides of warring situations and has a history



with the Somali community in Toronto, having arranged community fora and conflict resolution sessions in 1993. Further, the organization has experience in holding international women's peace conferences and has taken a leading role in Canada's participation in the UN women's conferences from Nairobi through Beijing to the ongoing *Beijing +5* preparations. It is also significantly involved with the UNESCO Culture of Peace program. All of these factors mean that vow welcomed the opportunity to collaborate on the vsWP project.

## The conference

Delegates came from all regions of Somalia, with a particularly strong representation from grassroots women's organizations. International and Canadian participants, many of whom had attended the academic confer-



Participants at the Voice of Somali Women Conference, York University, July 11-12, 1999

ence that preceded ours, came from Finland, Sweden, Holland, Denmark, France, England, United States, South Africa, Kenya, and Tanzania. The diverse mix of participants made for a very rich discussion, and also laid the groundwork for further co-operation in the local, international and Somalia-based arenas.

In panel sessions and small group workshops, participants examined the impact of war and the barriers to peace. This groundwork was followed by a plenary session and workshops entitled "The promise of peace," which focused on solutions and proposed future avenues of work.

The following issues emerged:

*There is lack of women's participation in politics and decision-making.*

Participants noted that women's marginalization from public life in Somalia is aggravated by their exclusion from discussions and negotiations about the future of the country. They are further frustrated by infrastructure problems which make it difficult to network with women's groups in Somalia and elsewhere. Delegates agreed that women's lack awareness of their human and political rights and are therefore less able to fight male domination. It was noted that men abuse Islam to undermine women's role in public life. While the war has opened opportunities to women by changing their economic role in the family, they are inexperienced and do not know how to translate this economic power into political power.

Several concrete suggestions were made whereby So-

mali women could overcome these obstacles. It was proposed that initiatives be set up to facilitate women's movement across clan and group lines. Their ability to form coalitions would be exemplary for Somali society at large. Existing opportunities must be used to develop strategies and a vision to transform economic gains into political power. A precedent has been set in Puntland, whose women members of parliament are an example of the broad-scale political representation needed in other parts of the country. Capacity-building was an important focus, with emphasis on education for women and girls, training for political participation and leadership, and developing better networking and information-sharing strategies so that women can build on their increased participation in the economic sphere

and demand a say in social policies on health care, education, and food security.

*The negative impacts of the war are severe and wide-ranging.*

As Somalia is a largely agrarian and nomadic society, the depletion of livestock, the destruction of agriculture and fisheries, the lack of food security, and damage to the environment are amongst the most severe effects of the war. Industry and commerce have also been destroyed. The displacement of people has resulted in a loss of human capital, and even in the diaspora, age-old tensions affect people's capacity to build new lives.

Solutions to these problems include enabling women, in particular, to enter the small business sector. Encouraging and funding women-owned small businesses through increased micro-credit would support an already successful trend. Participants noted that women are more likely to do business across clan lines, which builds trust and increases cooperation. Specific attention was paid to ending the war through advocacy, information-sharing, and helpful interventions from the community in the diaspora, who were urged to take responsibility for building appropriate international interventions.

*The human rights of women are not respected.*

Human rights is a complex issue in Somalia. Customary law is not always consistent with human rights; moreover customary laws and practices vary widely across the country and violations are exacerbated where the conflict is

most intense. Female genital mutilation and the issue of outcast groups were highlighted.

To address these issues, delegates were urged to find out more about customary law in order to distinguish between customary laws and popular practices and to discover the best practices which could then be advocated for the whole country. It is especially urgent that women are educated about the core values of Islam, which uphold their human rights. Islam also supports women's roles in peace interventions and can form a basis for them to oppose practices that violate human rights, even if this means taking a stand against men.

Delegates also observed that the lack of a central government is, paradoxically, a site of opportunity to build a culture of greater democracy and human rights from the ground up.

### The ongoing work

At present we are engaged in disseminating the conference report, especially to Somalia. In it are the recommendations which form the blueprint of our future work, covering areas such as research, international collaboration, advocacy, and capacity-building in both Somalia and the diaspora.

We continue to work on the creation of an international Somali women's peace-building coalition that was begun at the conference and in activities which preceded it. Anne Adelson and Amina Sharif Hassan attended the UNESCO Pan African Women's Conference on a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence in Zanzibar, Tanzania in May 1999, and used the opportunity to organize further meetings in London, England, Dar-es-Salaam, Zanzibar, and Nairobi, and coalition-building work with the Somali community in Toronto is ongoing.

We believe that an international working group will be important to the success of our long-term organizing, and have set up an internet discussion group to facilitate this. Local initiatives are being set up, and even where these do not exist, contact is being maintained. We hope this will be a catalyst for local action. We have also recruited individuals with particular expertise to serve in an advisory role.

Another of our future plans is the production of an international newsletter, *Batula*, named in honour of Amina's grandmother who was an inspiring role model for her. This publication will be available in print and email versions, and we are negotiating to have it posted on the VOW and Somalinet web sites. Because of its role in sharing information and resources, *Batula* will be very helpful in the work of the international coalition. The Toronto group is responsible for the first issue, and the responsibility for future issues will circulate among member groups of the coalition.

At present, we have prioritized concretizing our international connections, and continue to work on the development of the Toronto-based group and Canadian-wide

connections. We are also continuing to plan a centre which we envision as a comfortable place where women can gather to talk, take courses, and access information and resources. We want this centre to be accessible and contain resources for advocacy work and for people and groups wanting to do their own research on topical issues. We have not resolved the question of whether this centre should be shared with women from other war-torn countries.

We are also planning pilot projects in collaboration with women in Somalia. The projects will be based in the south and in the northern part of the country and will focus on low-income women. One will emphasize training in economic self-reliance and social and political participation, and will incorporate a focus on how to deal with the effects of war. The other will involve the education of youth and children for a culture of peace.

### Effects to date

Even at this early stage, our work has already had an impact on developing awareness and activism for peace. International groups have been formed, and in Somalia, women are demanding a stronger role in politics and peace issues. We are proud to see that among the activists are many women who attended the Toronto conference or other of our coalition activities, and these have been credited as an important influence. The organizer of a "Somali Women's Night for Amoud University" in the United Arab Emirates, told us "your activities have been a guiding light" (Email correspondence).

The Toronto conference was timely and significant in focusing women's activism for peace in Somalia. Participants expressed their appreciation at being able to hear, first hand, the experiences of women peace promoters in Somalia, and many Somali women found the opportunity to express their views at an international conference very empowering. We are also proud of our achievements in educating delegates about Islam's views on women's rights, and in facilitating male delegates' recognition of women's potential in peace building endeavours.

Attending the UNESCO Culture of Peace conference in Zanzibar in May 1999 allowed us both to meet local activists and to build connections with groups and organizations working in the Horn, including the Life and Peace Institute in Nairobi, UNIFEM, and Project Ploughshares' Horn of Africa project. In Zanzibar, our project has received effective media coverage, including from the BBC radio, Somali section. This is the most effective medium to reach people in Somalia. We were also able to fulfil a specific goal of the Toronto conference when we supplied the names of Somali women who could participate in consultations and planning activities to the Women Peacemakers Programme of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation and the organizers of the Beijing +5 preparatory committee.

An article in the latest journal of the Canadian Human Rights Foundation newsletter, *Speaking About Rights*, highlights our project, and we have been asked to participate in a summer school on the Culture of Peace at the Peace Research Institute in Dundas, Ontario in July of this year. We have also been networking with Science for Peace's new working group on warring communities and assisted at VOW's training session on Women, Peace and Human Rights in January 2000.

### The challenges of our work

We continue to face many organizational challenges, including a lack of money, resource, and infrastructure. We are also constrained by the fact that Somalia has been shifted off the international agenda since the end of the Cold War. The lack of a central government means that Somalia has no postal service, a fact that makes communications difficult and expensive. The ongoing hostilities in parts of Somalia have also proved an obstacle to organizing. There are vested interests, both in Somalia and in the diaspora, in continuing the war. In the official peace processes, priority is still given to the warlords since they are seen to hold the power. The war has divided people, leading to lack of trust, and even in the diaspora this makes organizing for peace a challenge.

### Moving forward

We have resolved to bring these conflicts to the surface and learn from them, using them as a way to advance our initiative. Without neglecting our differences, we are trying to work in a way that focuses on our commonalities and our priorities. In particular, we want this project to continue to participate in international efforts by women in war-torn areas to bring about peace and harmony among their people. While we recognize that much remains to be done, it is clear from their support of the VSWP project that we are a voice for Somali women and give force to their statement that "enough is enough!"

*Anne Adelson, Amina Sharif Hassan, and Safia Jowhar, members of the group Voice of Women, co-ordinated the project, Voice of Somali Women for Peace, Reconciliation and Political Rights.*

<sup>1</sup>Even the name of the country is contentious. When we use the name "Somalia," we refer as well to Somaliland and Puntland. We use the term "Somali women" as an inclusive one.

<sup>2</sup>A report of the conference can be obtained from Voice of Women, 761 Queen Street W., Suite 203, Toronto, Ont. M6J 1G1, tel. (416) 603-7915, fax (416) 603-7916, e-mail: vow@interlog.com

<sup>3</sup>Voice of Women celebrates its fortieth anniversary in 2000.

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## ELISAVIETTA RITCHIE

### Sand Hill

—for Elizabeth Ann Ritchie

"If you get on top of the hill  
 you'll never die," says the child  
 patting sand, damp from a week of rain.  
 "You have to be able to touch the peak."

Around it she builds a wall too high  
 for wingless insects to cross,  
 they keep tumbling back in her moat.  
 She crowns the crest with a feather.

The sun, hidden by fog curling over the shore,  
 enfolding wavering figures in scrim,  
 still pours onto our heads.  
 Observing death waft in quietly,

harming no one yet, I know: in climbing  
 this particular alp I'd only smash  
 the mound to infinite grains of sand,  
 myself to finite splinters of bone.

When we leave the beach  
 all that's left are footprints,  
 finger trails, traces of moat,  
 rays of recalcitrant light.

*This poem was first published by the Potomac Review and later added to the author's collection, The Arc of the Storm (Signal Books, 1998). Reprinted with permission.*

*Elisavietta Ritchie's books include In Haste I Write You This Note: Stories & Half-Stories; Flying Time: Stories & Half-Stories; The Arc of the Storm; Elegy for the Other Woman: New & Selected Terribly Female Poems; Raking the Snow; Tightening the Circle Over Eel Country; and In the Folds of Abandoned Clothes: Thrift Shop Poems.*