

Women Count for Peace

Somalia is ranked as one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a woman according to Ilwad Mahamuud Ali from Elman Peace and Human Rights Center. “Women are extremely marginalised and neglected and they are not part of the decision-making process” she remarked calling for peace.

Ms Mahamuud Ali was among some 30 women representatives of grassroots and umbrella organisations from Somalia, Puntland and Somaliland, who gathered for two days in Mogadishu to participate in the annual UN Open Day: “Partnerships for Peace” facilitated by UNPOS’ Gender Affairs Unit with support from the UN Country Team, namely UN Women, UNDP, UNFPA, UNHCR and OCHA.

The Open Day, held globally since 2010, provides a platform for discussion between women affected by conflict and senior UN leaders on key issues of concern.

This year Somali women representing a wide range of professions addressed issues of access to basic services, such as livelihoods, education and health, promotion and respect of women's rights, prevention and protection against violence, women in politics and women's role in peace-building.

“Extremists have been opposing women’s development and empowerment, while there are cultural barriers that impede women’s livelihoods, rights and education,” adds veteran activist Hawa Ali Jama, who heads the ‘We Are Women Activists’ (WAWA), an umbrella Network from Puntland.

Ms Ali Jama, however, does acknowledge great progress made in recent years, especially with regards to security. “Now we can speak publicly, before we could not express ourselves.”

The Open Day also provides an opportunity to deepen understanding and local ownership of UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on Women, Peace and Security.

The resolution reaffirms the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction and stresses the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in promotion of peace and security.

At the Open Day women presented their recommendations to the UN, international community, Somali leaders, religious leaders and to women themselves, in order to set priority actions and help accelerate the implementation of 1325.

“Your presence here means that you are active and that you are representing other women and this is what we have been asking for: representation of women by women,” said Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) for Somalia, Augustine P. Mahiga while addressing the conference. “I am always impressed with the depth of knowledge and awareness that Somali women have about women issues and UNSCR 1325,” SRSG Mahiga added.

During his address to the conference, UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator for Somalia, Mark Bowden, called for an enhanced role of women in peace-building process. “The experiences of men and women in conflict are different; it is because of this that women should be given opportunities to take part in conflict resolutions,” said Mr. Bowden. “To rebuild a better Somalia, develop a strategy for effective reconstruction, women have to be involved,” he added.

Bringing about a change for women in Somalia following the election of a new president should be at the forefront of priorities for the New Federal Parliament, according to Hawa Ali Jama. “We expect security, increased women’s participation, improved livelihoods for women and improved education for girls” she said.

Although women were promised a 30% representation in the new Federal Parliament, the selection process brought their quota to 15%. “We should focus now on the rest of the government, the ministries, vice ministers, general managers, we need to increase female representation there and compensate for not achieving the 30% quota of women in the parliament,” said Amina Sharif Hassan, Voice of Somali Women for Peace, Reconciliation and Political Rights, a Canadian/Somali NGO.

SRSG Mahiga described the inclusion of 36 female MPs as “groundbreaking progress” and said the achievement should not be measured in numbers but in changing the mindset of society.

Over the years conflict has driven women and their families out of their homes in search of safer shelter, food and water. Displaced women often become victims of violence, with very limited access to property, wealth, education and health services. Out of 1.5 million internally displaced people, 600,000 are women of reproductive age but sadly Somalia has the highest maternal mortality rate in the world.

Zeinab Elmi from Galkayo Medical Centre says adequate care for reproductive health remains a problem: “I would like to see in the next few years women and children having free health access and hospitals basically equipped and with more human resources”.

The UN has also reported on an increase in violence against women in camps for internally displaced people an issue that Ms. Mahamuud Ali says has not been properly addressed. Participants at the conference called for more empowerment of women with better and increased access to education as one of the key recommendations of the two-day conference.

“As a young woman myself working with victims of gender-based violence, I really hope that in future girls get access to education and have a space where leadership is cultivated in them,” she said.

The Open Day culminated in prioritising actions to be implemented and assessed at 2013 Open Day to accelerate the implementation of UN SCR 1325 with the support of UN agencies.

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