

## Conference Report “Women for Peace in the Horn of Africa”

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Basic issues: discussion papers on development policies, international cooperation  
and south-north cultural exchange, as well as anti-racist campaigning.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the speakers, and not  
necessarily those of the editor/VIDC.

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## Welcome

Ishraga Hamid, Franz Schmidjell (VIDC), Rita Isiba (moderator)

Women from the African diaspora with different professional backgrounds met in Vienna to create a new network to promote peace in the Horn of Africa. The aim of the gathering was for participants to share their experiences about the situation in the region and to explore new strategies on how to implement national and international peace agendas on the ground. Attendees defined the aims and future priorities of the network and laid the groundwork for an organisational structure. The meeting was hosted by the VIDC with financial support from the Austrian Development Cooperation.

In her introduction, Ishraga Mustafa Hamid explained how she had long dreamed of creating such a network. After attending a conference of Eritrean women in Rome, she began to consider it again, however it was hard to implement that time. She started to build a feminist network named after a female anti-colonial freedom fighter Banat Mendy Bent El Sultan Agabna from Nuba mountains. Today, no one knows about Banat Mendy. Students in Sudanese schools learn never about women like her and the feminist struggles. Because of the pandemic, the first “Mendy shines from Vienna with Global Visions” conference had to be held online. The new network refers to the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security and aims to contribute to its implementation in the Horn of Africa. It is made up of a diverse group of women from different countries, with a wide range of experiences and manifold expertise, yet all with a common vision.



On behalf of the VIDC, Franz Schmidjell welcomed the participants attending the conference live, as well as those joining via Zoom and Facebook. For the VIDC, this conference was an important gathering as it deals with two focal areas of the institute's work: firstly, the gender perspective and role of women in peacebuilding, and secondly, the transnational engagement of diaspora communities. Mr Schmidjell thanked the Austrian Development Cooperation for its financial support and Dr. Ishraga Hamid, the initiator of the Diaspora Women Network for Peace (working title), for their constructive collaboration.

Moderator Rita Isiba (Aphropean) emphasised how academics and activists in the diaspora can influence and mitigate developments in their former home countries in the Horn of Africa. She introduced the speakers, asked them for their contributions and whether they had any concrete message for the audience.

## Opening Panel: Conflict and Peace in the Horn of Africa – Women’s Perspectives

The first panel focused on the analysis of conflict patterns, their structural and historical roots, the EU approach towards the region and the role of women not only as victims, but also as actors.

### The dynamics of instability in the Horn of Africa and the Sudanese revolution

*by Eiman Abulgasim Seifeldin*

*“During the Sudanese revolution, women represented 60 % the protesters. Yet in the transitional governing bodies they are again marginalised.”*



Eiman Seifeldin sees today’s conflicts in the region as a legacy of colonial rule, which led to the disintegration of various regions of the country and imposition of authoritarian rule after independence. The latter resulted in resistance from the people and gave birth to rebel groups. These conflicts have exhausted the country’s resources.

Environmentalist and social activist Eiman Seifeldin emphasised the correlation of conflict, migration and climate crisis. The drought around Lake Chad has forced people to migrate towards Sudan, while others have come from Eritrea and Ethiopia. Sudan is a fragile state however, unable to accommodate these refugees or provide them with a future. Environmental degradation has become one driver of conflicts. Other triggers include the battle over resources, the contested processes of state formation and/or identity struggles. All these factors result in human rights violations, which affect women in particular.

The 2018/19 revolution in Sudan was orchestrated by Sudanese Professional Associations (SPA), an umbrella association of different Sudanese trade unions from all over the country.. Women and youth were in the forefront of the struggle and many sacrificed their lives. Three thousand martyrs died or disappeared without a trace, other women were imprisoned and raped. Today, the representation in the transitional bodies of women remains low: of 14 members in the Supreme Council only two are women. Within the executive body, out of 20 ministers only four are women. The armed rebel groups have no female representation.

Eiman Seifeldin was critical of the EU's engagement: "One of the most repressive forces, the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), leads the Supreme Council. Their members committed atrocities and war crimes in Darfur and during the revolution. Under the al-Bashir regime, they also controlled the borders. According to Eimen Seilfedin, a part of the EU funds for migration control certainly went to the RSF. The EU-initiated Khartoum process worsened the human rights situation and led to the enslavement of migrants in Libya. There were many human rights violations in refugee camps in Sudan which were controlled by the militias like RSF.

According to Eiman Seifeldin, the European Union should include the role of women in peacebuilding in their talks with governments and provide more programmes for training in technical and negotiation skills.

*Eiman Seilfeldin is the initiator of the Solidan campaign for democratic transfer in Sudan ([www.solidan2025.org](http://www.solidan2025.org)) and founder and member of the Sudanese Environmentalist Association. She has a degree in environmental science and lives in Germany.*

## The Tigray crisis: The importance of strengthening of women-led CSOs to achieve sustainable peace

*by Asia Abdulkadir*



*"The same men who are the perpetrators sit in the peace negotiations. Victims like women are not included. We want to give women a voice within the talks."*

After more than 20 years of a "no peace, no war" situation between Eritrea and Ethiopia, the leaders of the two countries signed a formal treaty in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, in September 2018. For the first time, Eritreans were able to travel freely to Ethiopia, and thousands made the journey.

One year later, however, the situation was reversed and without further explanation the borders were officially closed and repressive measures increased. The regime in Asmara targeted religious groups, cracking down on a Muslim school in Asmara, disrupting Christian prayer meetings, arresting members of "unregistered" churches and even outspoken priests and monks. The government closed 33 hospitals, clinics and health facilities run by the Catholic Church of Eritrea, in apparent retaliation for pastoral remarks calling for the opening up of democratic space.



In Ethiopia, tension between Tigray and Abiy Ahmed's administration grew daily. In November 2020, Abiy Ahmed ordered a military offensive against Tigray. Two million people have been displaced by the conflict and more than 60,000 people have crossed the border into Sudan. The UN reports that around 4.5 million people in the region urgently require aid. There have been multiple reports that Ethiopian and Eritrean troops are committing unspeakable atrocities, indiscriminately killing civilians and raping thousands of women.

The peace process between Eritrea and Ethiopia failed to adequately consult local stakeholders, including the TPLF (Tigray Peoples Liberation Front). We have seen repeatedly that peace deal is unlikely to last without the buy-in from all relevant stakeholders, including women-led initiatives. It is undeniable that UNSCR 1325 represents a milestone in the fight for women's fundamental human rights, however, it lacks enforcement measures.

Asia Abdulkadir stressed that women in the Horn of Africa region have a very strong focus on community rather than on themselves as individuals, so they are able to bring crucial community perspectives to the table during peacebuilding discussions.

The international community needs to fully commit to promoting women's meaningful participation, yet to date, while there has been much talk about supporting women there are scant concrete results on the ground to show for it.

*Asia Abdulkadir is Somalian country coordinator for German Kindernothilfe. She is the former chairwoman of the Network of Eritrean Women and was gender advisor for different UN organisations.*

## Conflicts over power and resources in the Horn of Africa and their impact on livelihoods of women and migration patterns

*by Mariam M. A. Wagjalla*



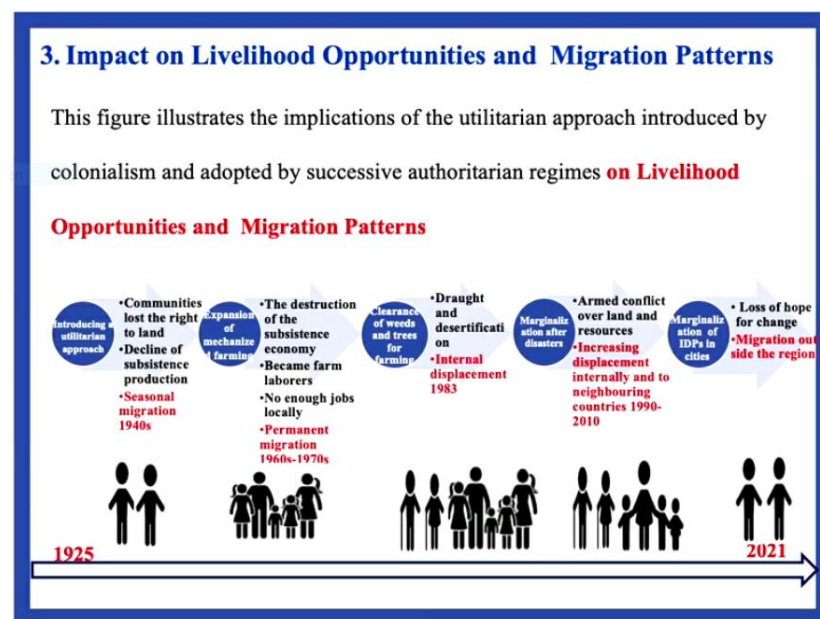
*"It is important to analyse the root causes of conflicts and to identify entry points for sustainable peacebuilding."*

Conflicts in the Horn of Africa are not new and have been going on since ancient times. But in the modern era they have become more complex and show more diverse patterns.

Many conflicts are portrayed as having ethnic or cultural causes. But the deeper roots lie within the control over resources, regardless of whether these resources are on the earth's

surface, such as agriculture, pastureland, surface water and waterways, or inside the earth, such as minerals or oil. Agricultural production patterns in Sudan were changed through colonialism, resulting in the disappearance of communal land ownership and traditional conflict resolution mechanisms. Colonists introduced the requirement for land to be registered to the government, leaving only two percent for the communities. The mechanisation of agricultural production began and the traditional subsistence economy was replaced by cash crop production.

The practice of considering profits over community needs was continued by the authoritarian regimes which followed independence. The lack of services, infrastructure and alternative jobs contributed to the further marginalisation of the rural population and



precipitated waves of urban migration. Initially these migrants were young men, but after 1970 entire families had no option other than to leave for the city to find jobs and food. During the Darfur crisis, women, children and the elderly were forced to flee due to widespread violence. With little or no education they found themselves stranded in the informal economy.

Mariam Wagialla has carried out extensive research into the origin of the urban poor in Khartoum, who live without infrastructure, health facilities and formal jobs. The youth have lost hope and some have started to migrate to neighbouring countries or to Europe.

Mariam Wagialla gave a critical review of the situation: “The utilitarian economic approach is a root cause of conflict, environmental degradation and forced migration.”

*Mariam M.A. Wagialla is an architect and spatial planner. She has worked many years for the Khartoum city development. Today, she lives in Austria.*



# Security and justice for the Horn of Africa. A critical analysis of EU and AU politics

by Rachel Ibreck

*“The regional approach of the EU is positive but it should include civic and women’s networks and it should end its inconsistent policies.”*



According to Rachel Ibreck, the interventions of the European Union (EU) and its member states in the politics of the Horn of Africa are fraught with inherent contradictions. On one hand, the EU has supported the regional human rights and justice architecture of the African Union (AU) and Intergovernmental Authority for Development (IGAD), as well as boosting opportunities for civil society engagement. The regionalism itself is a progressive and strong

element of the EU policy. Furthermore, the EU has committed to support women in leadership positions, funded programs to fight against sexual violence and assisted the region with humanitarian aid.

On the other hand, they have established alternative regional platforms to ‘govern’ migration, fostering security actors prone to the kind of ‘law enforcement’ that produces violent conflict and displacement. There are inconsistencies, such as the heavily-disputed Khartoum process and the securitisation of migration. Such double standards undermine efforts to advance progressive norms, principles and institutions at the regional level.

Referring to the African side, Mrs Ibreck said that regional organisations are important to mitigate with the complex and interlocking conflict systems in the region. She referred to a book by Adom Gatechew, who wrote that anti-colonial intellectuals in Africa who fought for an egalitarian world were not solely or primarily nation-builders, but promoted the idea of regionalism and Pan Africanism. But due to various factors, the regional approach has failed in the past to address these conflicts (note: see AU campaign “Silencing the Guns”).

Rachel Ibreck proposed that the EU should develop a Human Security Strategy for the Horn of Africa, which goes beyond the regional bodies and includes regionalised civil society organisations, especially women’s networks, yet still adheres to its own principles.

*Rachel Ibreck is a researcher with a focus on the politics of human rights, justice and civil society in the context of conflict at the Goldsmith University in London. She is part of a research network of scholars and activists on the Horn of Africa.*

## Women for Peace: Protection and support of women in conflict regions

The focus of the second panel was to learn more about the situation on the ground and to link this with diaspora engagement and cultural interventions.

### South Sudan: Strategy for peacebuilding and security from views of women between communities' borders

*By Karima Anthony Madut*



*“Three lessons to be considered: Provide economic opportunities for women, address root causes of inter-communal conflicts and review patriarchal laws and traditions.”*

Karima Madut with the humanitarian crisis in South Sudan. Since South Sudan gained independence in 2011, the civil war has resulted in the displacement of 4 million people. Furthermore, two thirds of the population are in need of humanitarian aid. Women face additional challenges as a result of many factors. They are more likely to face food insecurity, lack adequate healthcare and access to education, despite the government's efforts to enroll girls in schools. This leads to many women getting married before the age of 18. Without sex education, many girls and women are not informed about ways to avoid unplanned pregnancies and sexually-transmitted diseases (STDs). Furthermore, gender-based violence (GBV) is a significant problem, with around 41% of women saying they have experienced GBV. Many customs, and also some laws, preserve a patriarchal system that maintains male power over women and results in a lack of female participation in politics.

Karima Madut explained that throughout the war, women have played various roles. While some were directly engaged in fighting, most participated by cooking and singing for soldiers and treating the wounded. With regards to peace efforts, women often acted as “bridges” between conflicting parties by marrying an “enemy” and thereby resolving the conflict.

According to Karima Madut, multiple strategies are necessary to effectively engage women in the peace process. Firstly, women should be generally encouraged to participate in governmental and political affairs and to contribute to drafting the country's new constitution. Another issue is that much misinformation surrounds the peace agreement, meaning that it is essential to increase public awareness. In additional, gender equality within political parties and organisations must be fostered and women's and youth wings of

these parties need to be established. Another key element are Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), which help to mobilise people around a cause. Furthermore, grass-root conflicts, such as land disputes between two communities need to be linked to R-ARCESS. The establishment of cross-border women's and youth networks is also crucial.

In conclusion, Karima Madut emphasised the three key lessons that she has learned: "Women and displaced people in these conflict situations need more economic opportunities. This, along with addressing the root causes of intercommunal conflict, is key to establishing peace. Finally, many customs have to be reviewed and laws need to be rewritten, because they preserve a patriarchal system and marginalise women."

*Karima Anthony Madut is sociologist and a civil society activist focusing on women's rights and children based in Juba, South Sudan. She was involved in the peacebuilding process between Dinka Ngok and Meseria.*

## Sudan: Peace and security from the perspective of internally-displaced and refugee women in the Blue Nile region

*By Nahla Elbedry*

*"Legal responses against sexual violence and the creation of safe spaces for women are vital for their well-being."*



Blue Nile State and South Kordofan are the regions most affected by the war in Sudan. According to Nahla Elbedry In Blue Nile State, 350.000 people have been displaced, the majority of whom are women. They live in and outside refugee camps in Sudan, as well as in Ethiopia. Certain areas have no health facilities or other infrastructure. Women face harsh humanitarian conditions and are left alone without any protection. They are often the only

breadwinner in their families, yet have no real job opportunities. Many resort to collecting and selling wild fruit or work in contaminated gold mines without proper protection or safety regulations. Women living in camps face domestic violence, which is frequently tolerated due to local cultural norms which consider such violence normal. While INGOs, NGOs and CBOs (community based organisations) have made efforts to intervene, their influence is limited due weak mechanisms in implementing protective policies. The dangers

faced by women are not limited to the camps. In big cities as well, women are at risk of becoming victims of domestic violence. One reason for the lack of protection is the dearth of women's representation in security committees. The inadequate influence of women's institutions and the poor economic situation further contributes to the suffering endured by women in these regions.

Nahla Elbredy stressed the necessity of addressing women's problems by implementing serious measures. Firstly, there must be a warning system to respond to gender-based violence. The next important step is to review and reform old rules and laws that allow discrimination and gender-based violence. Art and media must also be utilised to push back against old, misogynistic views, and a promotion of gender equality must take place on these platforms. Furthermore, the creation of safe spaces for women is vital to their well-being. Finally, there needs to be more support for civil society efforts to advocate for women.

Mrs Elbredy concluded that the protection of women is a core responsibility of the local, regional and international community, as it is a grave humanitarian issue concerning one of the most vulnerable groups of people, displaced/refugee women.

*Nahla Elbedry is an author, peace activist and head of the Women's Awareness Initiative in Blue Nile State, Sudan.*

## Diaspora contribution to the development of their countries of origin

*By Fatumo Farah*

*"Diaspora women have freedom of speech, can travel and reach an audience; things that women engaged in grassroots efforts in Somalia do not have."*



Fatumo Farah referred to the war and situation for women in Somalia. In the early 1990s, civil war broke out in Somalia; warlords sought to take power and tribal fighting ensued, leading to the wide-scale violation of women's rights. They were harassed, tortured and subjected to the most cruel forms of gender-based violence. Women were vitally important for the informal peacebuilding process, acting as bridges between conflicting parties and as glue holding communities together. Despite all this, women were never included in the official peacebuilding process.

Women in the diaspora showed their support in various ways. They sent money to Somalia to be used for education and to fund women's organisations. The advocacy of women in the diaspora also played a key role in improving the situation of Somali women, for example in fighting for equal access to education for girls. Additionally, women in Somalia were encouraged to participate in decision-making within communities and to negotiate with the men. All this progress came from the diaspora, as they have the freedom and ability to speak their minds and voice their concerns, and most importantly, to campaign for Somali women on various stages, including at the UN and human rights organisations.

Fatumo Farah informed conference participants about an ongoing good practice example. "Some campaigns have been successful, such as "Vision 2016", which sought to bring more women into parliament. These efforts eventually led to a parliament where 24 per cent of members were women. This does not however mark the end of the diaspora women's campaigns. "Vision 2021" now seeks to expand upon the achievements of its predecessor."

According to Mrs Farah, women in the diaspora have opportunities denied to those engaged in grassroots efforts in Somalia, namely the freedom to speak their minds, to travel, and to be heard by an audience. Farah: "That is why it is so important for the diaspora to work together with the women directly affected."

When it comes to cooperation however, there are still problems. Many diaspora organisations do not have the necessary connections with women on the ground. As an example, during the 2021 parliamentary election in Somaliland, no women were elected. This was due to miscommunication and the lack of connection between diaspora organisations and the women who were voting.

This is why efficient cooperation is necessary, to foster the productive exchange of information and mutual advice. This connection should not be limited only to one diaspora organisation, but rather there must be cooperation between multiple diaspora and grassroots organisations to develop and act on a unified platform and strategy.

Fatumo Farah *is* the founder and director of HIRDA - one of the pioneer diaspora organisations in Europe. She is a key member of the GFMD (Global Forum for Migration and Development) civil society committee.

# Role of arts in conflict resolution and peacebuilding

By Mihret Kebede



*“The perception people have about other countries is mainly constructed by mainstream media and the internet. Cultural exchange is key to engaging with other people to create other images.”*

Mihret Kebede began her contribution with a general remark about the roles men and women play in society. It is usually male disputes over power that trigger wars and other atrocities. Women are rarely initiators. Sometimes they are passive participants, but mostly they are the victims. They are also the main reason why social life and society at large holds together during troubled times. Their bravery is incredibly important, but sadly it has been taken for granted over the course of human history.

According to Kebede, the arts and the artist should remain apart from outside influence of the powers that be. But arts can also be used to inspire people and bring about necessary changes in the world. The arts have a strong emotional quality, which can foster discussion between different peoples, communities, and nations etc.

Back in 2013, Kebede was invited to perform at a ceremony where she met many professionals and artists. This was the starting point for her art project. She asked people in Ethiopia about the first thing that came to their minds when they thought about other countries. For example, when asked about Italy, people said pasta, mafia or football, about Jamaica, they replied Rastafari, about the United States, Obama and NASA, about South Africa, Nelson Mandela, and so on. These are all the pictures one receives through mainstream media. She wanted to see how media transports such images. She took the answers to their respective countries, presented them and in return she asked people what they associated with Ethiopia. The first thing that came up was famine. Other answers included coffee, Lucy and beautiful women.

Kebede argued that the reality people perceive to exist in other countries is a picture we get through the lens of mainstream media and the internet. This is why we need to build up networks to get an accurate image of other people’s cultures and better our understanding of other countries, beyond the few buzzwords we hear from the news or internet. Cultural exchange is key to engaging with different people and appreciating each other’s cultures.

Mihret Kebede is a multi-disciplinary artist and poet, a co-founder of Tobiya poetic Jazz, Netsa Art Village Artist Collective, and Addis Video Art festival. Currently she is a PhD candidate at the Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna.



## Women for Peace: Local conflicts, UNSCR 1325 and the Maputo Protocol

The presentations gave an insight into the challenges that women's organisations on the ground are facing in implementing the UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 and the Maputo Protocol on Women Rights, and about shortcomings within these documents.

### Implementing resolution 1325 in the Horn of Africa and the challenges for women's organisations

*By Sarah Ogbay*

*“Women's organisations need to make sure that women in power actively represent the interests of all oppressed women.”*



According to Sarah Ogbay, the main obstacle hindering the effective implementation of UNSCR 1325 is the current political, economic and social power structure that preserves male dominance over women. Many men see gender equality as a threat to their masculinity. To prove and preserve their notion of masculinity they exert force over women, including through the use of gender-based violence. A big problem

is that civic organisations are not strong enough to stop the violence endured by women or to hold the perpetrators accountable.

Even when women participate in government structures, there is still a major problem according to Mrs. Ogbay: “Many elite women do not have the necessary connections to grassroots organisations. When looking at Eritrea, the country has a huge women's organisation, the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW), and three female ministers, including the minister of justice. Despite this, women in Eritrea remain subjected to frequent gender-based violence and are often victims of atrocities which go unpunished.” Due to the influence the government exerts over people's lives, for example by taking a family's father as a militia member, many women have little power, even within their own households.

In Ethiopia there is a similar situation. Although the president, the attorney general and half the cabinet ministers, including the minister of peace, are women, there are still senseless wars being waged and atrocities being committed, which disproportionately harm women. Women being nominally in power alone does not lead to the necessary changes.

Improvements are necessary in order to be successful in the future. Firstly, women's organisations must strengthen their ties with other organisations in the region and build cross-border alliances. Secondly, women must stop being the victims of war and become active bringers of peace and security. Women's organisations must ensure that women in power are actively engaged in building peace and are genuine representatives of all oppressed women. Furthermore, there must be coordination and engagement with development funds and aid to ensure that these resources benefit women.

Urgent measures: Mrs Ogbay proposed that cooperation between women's organisations and the international community be strengthened, and that research be carried out into how women who are victims of war can become leaders in a movement for peace and security.

*Sarah Ogbay is a co-founding member of the Network of Eritrean Women (NEW), an academic and activist.*

## Gender and genocide in Darfur: Lessons learned and prospects for future peace and security

*By Amira Osman*

*"Through the Sudanese revolution, the victims of sexual violence got to some extent a voice."*



Amira Osman criticised the fact that the gender-specific aspects of genocide have been absent in earlier genocide conventions, despite the frequent disparities between the violence and suffering endured by women and girls in comparison to that of men. When politicians and/or the media address the issue, the suffering experienced by women is typically ignored, or seen as lesser than that of men. She quoted American professor Catherine

Mackinnon, who used the term "genocidal rape" to describe large-scale sexual violence in Bosnia, Rwanda, and Myanmar, among others.

When it comes to the genocide in Darfur, the perpetrators used different approaches to terrorise people and to legitimise their actions, Amira Osman said: "When carrying out

killings, the victims were ascribed racist epithets like “you are slaves” by the committers.” This was done to dehumanise the victims and give the genocide a form of legitimacy in the eyes of the perpetrators. Gender-specific racist language was also used, such as calling women “whores” and “black prostitutes”.

The women and girls who survived rape, not only suffered physical harm, but also psychological damage. Another issue is that rape is not necessarily seen as a horrific act by the rapist, but rather as a failure of the male relatives of the victims to protect them. Furthermore, the effects of rape were not limited to the victims and those close to them, but frequently affected the whole neighborhood or community.

Although the perpetrators of these atrocities have been out of power for two years, justice has not been served and the victims are still suffering from the consequences, as well as from a lack of social/material reconstruction and reparations. According to Amira Osman, there are three relevant actors at play. Firstly, the media. The perpetrators and pro-government elites at the centre used the media to fuel their war propaganda, twisting survivors’ stories and experiences to fit their own narrative. Secondly, the victims, especially in the peripheral regions, had no way of making their voices heard, which may have contributed to a lack of support. This changed to an extent during the Sudanese revolution, when protesters could speak out even on international outlets. Finally, international actors provide humanitarian aid and can help to rebuild infrastructure. Due to the destruction and displacement that has taken place, a generation of girls has missed the opportunity to attend school. To survivors of gender-based violence, psychological assistance is also crucial. The UN, in Resolution 1325, also urges countries to ensure a higher representation of women in decision-making.

In conclusion, in order to bring about lasting peace and security, women’s work and activism, especially during the revolution, needs to be acknowledged and included in a larger strategy for peace.

*Amira Osman is a conflict researcher living in the UK. Her research interests include Horn of Africa communities in the diaspora, gender and forced migration, humanitarian interventions, conflict resolution and peacebuilding.*

# The impact of family separation and reunification on women and children during conflict: Lessons for Tigray

By Kassaye Berhanu-MacDonald



*“The UNSCR 1325 and the Maputo Protocol are important but make very little mention of family preservation.”*

Kassaye Berhanu-MacDonald began her talk with the current war in Tigray. Many UN workers have described it as the worst crisis they have seen in many years. One problem which arises during and after conflicts that unfortunately does not receive as much attention as it should is family preservation and reunification. Resolution 1325 and other documents such as the Maputo Protocol (The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa), although important, make very little mention of family preservation. The latter emphasises reproductive health, to which most women in Tigray have little or no access to, as most hospitals were destroyed. The one remaining hospital is extremely underfunded, meaning women are unable have abortions or HIV-treatment if necessary. For this reason, many women are forced to give birth to the children of their rapists.

During times of war, family separation is not an uncommon occurrence. It is however a huge problem that is not discussed enough. To achieve the broader goal of peace and securing the well-being of women and their children, it is vital to keep family members together. Despite being such a serious issue, family separation is often a taboo topic as there is a huge stigma about losing children.

Mrs Berhanu-MacDonald explained that reunification is possible through family tracing. She referred to an example in South Sudan where around 13,000 children were separated from their families. Although many of these children were orphans, within months 5000 others were reunited with their families. The situation in Tigray is more difficult. Family tracing in this region is impossible as phone lines were cut, many people are on the move and active fighting is continuing.

To ensure women’s physical and mental health, preserving their families is extremely important. Losing a child causes immense psychological distress and adds to the mental suffering they have already endured. Therefore, it is vitally important to include family preservation in the peace initiatives in the Horn of Africa as well as in peace efforts globally.

*Kassaye Berhanu-MacDonald is a writer and adoptee with roots in Tigray, Eritrea and Ethiopia, currently living in Canada. She is passionate about family preservation and ensuring mothers and family members have the resources to care for their children rather than having to give them up for adoption.*

## Women for Peace: Reflections and recommendations by Austrian stakeholders

Austrian stakeholders in the Women, Peace and Security agenda were invited to share their thoughts on the issue and the new network.

### Africa: The Development of the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda in Theory and Practice – Food for Thought

*By Melissa Mujanayi*

*“Find your entry points according to your strengths in one of the four pillars of UNSCR 1325”*

The UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) framework was adopted 20 years ago. It is based on four pillars and has been adapted over time. It includes a range of issues, which have changed according to political priorities and concrete experiences. The four pillars are relevant to the defence forces. From their perspective, “participation” means that women should be encouraged to join the security and armed forces. Female soldiers strengthen trust-building with the local populations, and take care of security, including human security. The “protection” pillar means not only the physical protection of women, which became very important during the Congolese wars, but also the legal protection of women’s and human rights. As an example, security forces should be trained in civil protection according to international humanitarian law. The third pillar, “prevention”, includes a relatively new discourse about women within the context of violent extremism, for example, how women can prevent radicalisation within the family. The fourth pillar is “relief, recovery and rehabilitation” and includes the role of women in post-conflict situations such as reconciliation processes.

Mrs Mujanayi proposed that women’s activists look to these pillars to *find potential entry points for interventions based on their capacities and strengths*.

She referred to the recent EU Council Conclusion for the Horn of Africa of May 2020, which stated that it is a strategically important region, and that the EU wants to deepen its relations in different areas, including people-to-people ties and active diaspora engagement.

*Melissa Mujanayi is working at the Federal Ministry for Defence Austria, International Security Policy - Africa. She was in Mali as a human rights and gender advisor for the EU Training Mission.*

## Austrian Development Cooperation in the Horn of Africa in the context of UNSCR 1325

*By Corinna Pröll*

*“Women’s participation in peace processes makes humanitarian aid and recovery policies more efficient.”*

Women, Peace and Security is a longstanding priority of ADA. It funds 16 projects in the context of women, peace, and security, with a total amount of 47 million Euro, including projects in Horn of Africa. ADA supports projects to strengthen the participation of women in decision-making and peacebuilding, to improve protection against gender-based violence, to promote the localisation of the UNSCR 1325 within the cooperation countries by supporting the development and implementation of National Action Plans. Another area of action is engaging men and boys in order to raise gender awareness among them, as well as supporting health and mental health programs. The projects are implemented in cooperation with UN organisations, international NGOs and grassroots women’s organisations. Another priority is the integration of the gender dimension in the Triple Nexus on humanitarian aid, development and peacebuilding. ADA entered into a successful partnership with the “Global Network of Women Peacebuilders” (<https://gnwp.org/>), a coalition of over 100 women’s rights organisations from over 40 countries. Austrian supported interventions to take place in South Sudan, Uganda, Kenya and other countries. Another partner is the “Women’s Peace and Humanitarian Fund” (<https://wphfund.org/>), a pool fund to finance women’s participation, female leadership promotion and the empowerment of women’s organisations which have difficulties to access funding. In February last year, the Global Women’s Forum for Peace and Humanitarian Action (GWF 2020) took place in Vienna and brought together women from different networks. The forum created an open space for the exchange of experiences, for the discovery of similarities and for the definition of common priorities (see [Vienna Declaration 2020](#)). One main challenge towards gender equality is breaking the silos on the ground and empowering local women’s organisations. Corinna Pröll proposed bringing the new network together with the mentioned ADA partners.

*Corinna Pröll from the Austrian Development Agency talked about Austrian engagement in the context of UNSCR 1325 and the EU Gender Action Plan.*



## A Perspective from a European Feminist Network

*By Janine Wurzer*

*“Be clear what processes we can influence – and which ones we can’t.”*

Janine Wurzer raised practical but important questions concerning network building. One value of the European WIDE networks is to offer safe spaces for regular exchanges and for providing mutual support. The network has more experienced organisations which assist in capacity building of newer groups, or support women’s groups which are under pressure as is currently the case in Poland. A significant challenge for smaller organisations is access to funding, as funding instruments are mainly designed for larger organisations. This is also a challenge for WIDE, however they do receive support from some foundations.

For WIDE, it is important to know the specific priorities and needs of local women’s groups to make their voices heard on the international level. Janine Wurzer mentioned another challenge in organising women is due to limiting factors like a lack of time or security. Another important issue is to be clear as to which processes women’s activists can influence – and which ones they can’t – in order to make them more efficient for women.

*Janine Wurzer works at WIDE Austria which is part of the European network of associations and activists for women’s rights and feminist perspectives. Their members see their engagement as part of a larger struggle for social justice, sustainable livelihoods and human rights.*

## Deliberative dialogues and possible fields of action

Moderated by Rita Isiba, after each input session there was space for the exchange of ideas and a discussion about common positions on different subjects. This section provides a summary of some of the issues discussed and possible fields of action for the network.

### Make their stories heard



An important problem to be addressed is that women who were victims of war, atrocities and gender-based violence have no opportunity to tell their stories, and even less chance to receive help, meaning they must live with this burden for the rest of their lives. There is a lack of public health services, especially for mental health issues. It is also important to go beyond victimisation and respect women as actors for change.

### Fight for an end to impunity

The perpetrators of horrific acts frequently do not face justice and impunity invites others to repeat the same crimes. There is a need to review laws and create special courts, as well as to establish sexual assault centres, sensitise lawyers, religious leaders and police.

### Combat all forms of violence

Violence exists in many forms, including domestic violence and structural violence. It was also emphasised that rape is not only used as tool of war but also as a tool of torture in detention centres and/or in police stations. The concrete situation on the ground will set priorities for the new network.

### Include mental health in the discussion

Another very important topic that is unfortunately not talked about enough is mental health. After witnessing atrocities and experiencing violence, young people in particular are highly susceptible to mental health problems such as trauma and depression. The solution to

this problem goes beyond resolving a violent conflict, but also requires the building of an infrastructure to provide physical and mental healthcare, education as well as offering economic opportunities and security. All these factors are important to ensure psychosocial wellbeing.

It is therefore crucial to include the topic of mental health in future networking initiatives, because in many countries psychological illnesses such as depression are not recognised and therefore not adequately treated.

### **Look for innovative tools to engage and connect with youth in social and political changes**



Youth initiatives have ideas for change, but lack access to decision-making processes on the local, national and international level. Young people are already highly engaged in climate politics as was visible during the Fridays for Future protests. They have the ability to effectively utilise social media. When it comes to the question of how to engage youth in a movement, sport can be a useful element. To link social and political change with sports is a very practical way of getting young people to participate in a cause.

A vital step for women's and youth organisations is to connect with each other in order to broaden their constituencies and expand their influence. A key step towards this is to address and overcome stereotypes and traditional perceptions of masculinity. Many young people in the Horn of Africa are mobilised to participate or even fight in violent conflicts because they do not have adequate educational or economic opportunities.

### **Support refugees and migrants with opportunities**

Lessons on how not to deal with displaced people can be learned from the situation in Khartoum. Many people fled from South Sudan and began living and working in informal neighbourhoods. The Sudanese government however began to demolish these neighbourhoods and push the people out of the city into the desert where they were given a small strip of land without water or electricity. For future initiatives, it is vital to provide displaced people with basic needs and/or give them an opportunity to support themselves, rather than punish them for trying to survive.

### **Diaspora – raise your voices and stay connected with women in the Horn of Africa**

For diaspora women it is easier to raise their voices because they live in countries where they enjoy freedom of expression. Women in the Horn of Africa however understand the reality of their situation and their needs, but have no access to mobility and resources. This complementarity is a value added by diaspora networks. Many women in exile are professionals and can take these issues from the ground to the international level. Ishraga Hamid's initiative is a good practice example of using social media to bring women in Sudan and the Horn of Africa together to exchange knowledge.

### **Make use of the international women's rights agenda**

The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol) remains an important legal instrument providing a comprehensive set of human rights for African women. Another reference document is the UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security. But although National Action Plans exist, they mostly remain on paper and there must be more effort made to make them work.



### **Expose the inconsistency of EU policies**

EU and member states have done a lot in the Horn of Africa however the positive impact on the ground is barely visible. There is inconsistency in EU foreign policy. The migration issue has changed the discourse and strengthened notorious security forces. In Darfur and other conflict areas, EU institutions mainly talk to powerful men, while women on the ground and diaspora groups are sidelined.

## Who should tell the stories to the world if not us? - The way forward

The last day was devoted to organisational matters. The meeting was headed by Khedijah Ali Mohammed-Nur and Ishraga Hamid.

Beside practical issues about the future of the network various aspects of the network have been discussed: the value added of such a platform, its core values and principles, the question of formalizing as association and elaborating a constitution, the priority themes and the fields of action. Draft statutes were drawn up shared with to the members of the network.

The diversity of professions of the members, their vast experiences and different origins, the various contacts within the Horn of Africa and the diaspora, the collaboration with women organisations on the ground as well as the inclusion of creativity through culture and arts (and sports) for raising awareness will provide a strong starting point for the new network. All three days, there was a special commitment felt, not only by the participants in the room but also by the participants who could not come to Vienna this time.



*Khedijah Ali Mohammed-Nur is a founding member of the Network of Eritrean Women and has been a women's rights activist since she was 16 years old. She is a member of UK WILPF (Women's International League for Peace and Freedom) and is involved with their Voices of African Women Campaign. Khedijah Mohammed-Nur works as a Specialist Community Public Health Nurse (Health Visitor).*

*Ishraga Mustafa Hamid is a writer, translator, political analyst and human and women's rights activist. She is the initiator of the "Women for Peace in the Horn of Africa" network. Dr- Ishraga Hamid studied Journalism and Communication Sciences both in Sudan and Vienna and has also completed a PhD in Political Science at the Institute of Political Science, Vienna. In 2020, she was awarded the Golden Medal of Merit of the City of Vienna.*

