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Gender-Based Violence Galvanized Warlords' Foes – Somali Women Gave Crucial Support for Islamic Militias

By Craig Timberg, Washington Post Foreign Service

MOGADISHU, Somalia, June 17 – Sometimes, the women here said, it began with a knock on the door after dark or with a kidnapping in broad daylight. And sometimes, the gunmen who ruled this city would use a long, sharp knife to slice open the tin shacks of poor families and snatch their daughters away.

The girls would return – if they returned – in the morning, sobbing and marked permanently as castoffs in a traditional Islamic society that demands virginity at marriage.

“Four-year-old girls, 5-year-old girls were raped,” said Anab Mohamed Isaaq, 35, a solemn, long-faced widow who has two girls among her five children. “I was scared for my daughters.”

An epidemic of sexual violence during 15 years of lawlessness in Somalia was among the factors that strengthened opposition to this city’s notorious warlords, residents said. The Islamic militias who drove them out in months of recent fighting were embraced as keepers of public order, as a force strong enough and pious enough to keep Mogadishu’s daughters safe.

That helped the militias win the support of Mogadishu’s increasingly influential women, who in recent years had joined the job market en masse to support their families in the midst of a collapsing economy. On streets throughout this ruined city, they sold vegetables, plastic jugs of gasoline and khat, a popular, addictive leaf chewed widely here.

“Women were doing what men used to do here,” said Shariff Osman, 45, dean of the faculty at Mogadishu University. “They were paying the bills.”

When fighting broke out in January, the airwaves suddenly were full of angry denunciations of the secular warlords and support for the Islamic militias fighting them. Most of the callers were women, said Somalis who monitored the political upheaval as it played out on radio talk shows.

And though it was guns and not words that chased away the warlords, the intensity of the public revulsion for them provided crucial support for the Islamic militias as they advanced through this oceanside capital, analysts, activists and business leaders say.

“Somalia was saved because of the Somali women,” said Khadija O. Ali, 47, founder of a women’s group here and a graduate student in conflict resolution at George Mason University. “I think it is even something that the men acknowledge now. Finally.”

At the top of the list of their concerns, Ali and other women said, was curbing murder, robbery and rape in one of the world’s most dangerous cities.

In the absence of a central government – the last one fell to the warlords in 1991 – city leaders chose to deal with these problems by establishing traditional Islamic courts, with one overseeing the members of each of the city’s dozen or so leading families. The courts relied on Islamic law, which calls for thieves’ hands to be amputated, murderers to be publicly executed and rapists to either die or face public lashings, depending on the circumstances of the case. (Residents say that, in practice, jail sentences have been far more common punishments for crimes.)

One such court was set up last year, Ali said, after four gunmen knocked on the door of a home shortly before midnight and demanded that the man inside turn over his 20-year-old stepdaughter. She returned the next day in tears, said a neighbor, who spoke on the condition on anonymity.

A month later, the same gunmen returned to rape the young woman again, but she was already gone, said the neighbor, sent away in shame to a remote part of Somalia. So instead the gunmen demanded the man’s wife. When she refused, the gunmen shot the man in both legs, crippling him, and shot and killed his wife.

Few dispute there has been a dramatic decline in crime in Mogadishu since the fall of the warlords June 5, though in the absence of a police force, there are no crime statistics.

But not all women say their stature has grown as the country moves toward Islamic law.

Ubah Mohamed, 34, a widow with seven children, was among the women who joined Mogadishu’s workforce. But she said the beauty shop she opened a decade ago has been losing regular customers, from more than 300 to about one-third that number, as radical Islamic values appear to be gaining wider acceptance.

“The militias patrol our areas looking to see if girls are going out with boys,” she said. “So the girls don’t come to beauty salons like ours.”

Mohamed, meanwhile, began wearing a black hijab to cover her own hair out of fear of what the newly powerful militias might do. In a city where residents report that public viewing of the World Cup has been curbed, she predicted that beauty shops, including hers, would be closed soon as well.

Yet even for Mohamed, recent months have brought a kind of liberation. When the public mood began to boil, she called one of Mogadishu’s several radio stations and complained about the gunmen and their thirst for robbery and rape.

“I was one of those ladies,” she recalled. “We don’t need warlords.”

Isaaq, the widow who has five children, has mixed feelings about the changes in Somalia. She would rather have remained home with her children, as her mother did, she said. And the stray bullet that killed her husband last month struck him at their house, which, because he was unemployed, is where he spent most of his time. As Isaaq went door-to-door selling clothes, he had stayed home, watching the younger children.

Their two daughters – Nasteexo, 10, and Hamsa, 7 – also spent most of their time at home because Isaaq forbade them to walk alone outside. She grimly recalled a time two years ago when she saw the body of a girl of about 4, the relative of a neighbor, who had been raped and killed.

But now, Isaaq revels in watching her daughters leave the house, hand in hand, and without her. For the first time since she had them, Isaaq said, she worries not at all.

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