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## CASE SUMMARY

# AGENTS OF CHANGE: TRANSFORMING GENDER ROLES AND EXTREMISM IN SOMALIA

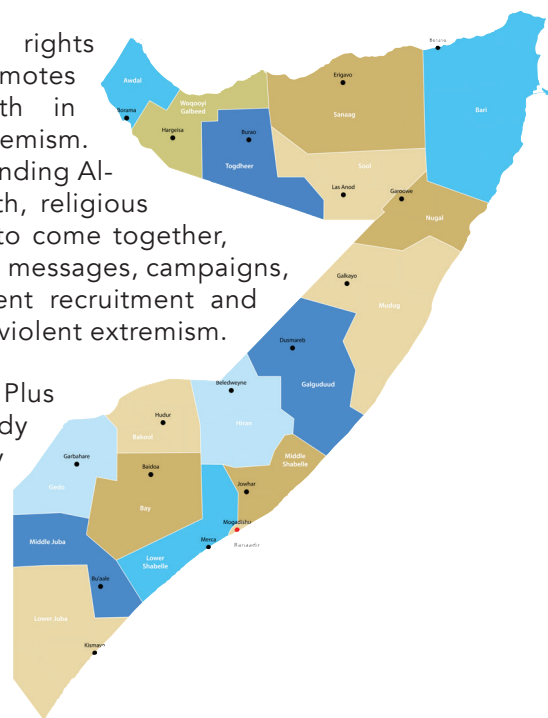
A Case Study on the Role of Gender and Identity in Shaping  
Positive Alternatives to Extremisms<sup>1</sup>

## SUMMARY

Witness Somalia is a human rights organization that engages and promotes the roles of women and youth in preventing/countering violent extremism. They have broken the secrecy surrounding Al-Shabaab and enabled women, youth, religious leaders, artists, and police officers to come together, share their experiences, and develop messages, campaigns, and community systems that prevent recruitment and help people heal from the impact of violent extremism.

Taking a Gender-based Analysis Plus (GBA+) approach,<sup>2</sup> this case study focuses on how expanding socially accepted gender roles for all identity groups challenges violent extremist rhetoric and creates new spaces for engaging in prevention work.

In the 1990s, Somalia endured state collapse and war, caused by post-colonial governance and international economic policies. Somalia's traditional, clan-based culture suffered severe blows. The resulting corruption and chaos allowed several Islamist extremist groups to gain a foothold, providing alternative governance systems and applying strict Shariah law. The resulting marginalization, lack of opportunity, and exposure to violence for youth and women helped push them to join extremist groups. Since women and youth experience some of the most severe impacts of violent extremism, there is a growing recognition of their critical roles in its prevention.



1. The International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) was commissioned by Global Affairs Canada to produce this set of case studies on the role of gender and intersectional identities in countering violent extremism and counterterrorism. For more information or to contact the authors please email [info@icanpeacework.org](mailto:info@icanpeacework.org).

2. Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) is an analytical process that provides a rigorous method for the assessment of systemic inequalities, as well as to assess how diverse groups of women, men, and gender diverse people may experience policies, programs and initiatives. More info on the GBA+ approach is accessible [here](https://www24.international.gc.ca/gba/gba-eng.aspx).

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Expanding the socially accepted roles for all groups -- women, men, and those with marginalized identities -- challenges the rigid, narrowly defined gender roles maintained by violent extremist groups** and creates new spaces and actors to engage in countering and preventing violent extremism. Gender-responsive approaches to counterterrorism (CT) and countering violent extremism (CVE) should engage women, men, and those from marginalized identity groups comprehensively and with consideration for evolving gender roles.
- **Violent extremist groups leverage traditional gender roles centering around familial relationships and economic functions to help recruit people and run their campaigns.** While engaging traditional gender roles can be effective for CT and CVE, this approach is risky as it can reinforce the same social norms that violent extremist groups play on, thus constraining prevention efforts. Considering the multiple dimensions of individuals' identities can provide new openings for engagement. For example, a woman may be a mother and a wife but also a journalist or entrepreneur.
- **Gendered gaps in security responses, from failure to address gender-based violence to the lack of access to women in communities, undermine the relationship between the police and the public.** As the police represent the state, relationships with them are critical, both for CT and CVE efforts to succeed, and as indicators of and avenues to build trust in government and respect for the rule of law.
- **Gender is intertwined with other marginalized identities.** Young women, for example, are particularly vulnerable to exclusion, recruitment, and victimization by violent extremist groups due to "double marginalization". Along with gender and age, being internally displaced or from a minority clan can reinforce this dynamic.
- **People can also draw strength from their identities.** Claiming civic space by organizing groups and networks of people with different identities and affected by violent extremism in different ways is an effective strategy for prevention. With adequate protection measures, the solidarity within such groups encourages individuals to reclaim their agency, often by speaking out against violent extremism and becoming agents for change and peace. Interaction among these groups helps create a safe space to address conflicts and build social cohesion.
- **Artistic expression, especially public art, is a powerful mechanism for healing and change.** Art reflecting the voices of women, children, and men impacted by violent extremism and conflict can reveal the cost of violence to the society, challenge extremist narratives, and expand gender roles to reclaim civic space for women, youth and those with marginalized identities.

## CONTEXT ANALYSIS

### Markets and Marriage: The Diversity of Gender Roles in Violent Extremism

Weak government institutions, corruption, unemployment, and poverty are all drivers of extremism in Somalia.<sup>3</sup> Women experience high levels of violence, exacerbated by widespread impunity throughout the larger society.<sup>4</sup> Women have long been marginalized from political life and the public sphere through the rigid gender norms of cultural, religious, and clan-based traditions.<sup>5</sup> With worsening conditions of ongoing conflict, the economic incentive among other gendered experiences in Somalia can lead women to join Al-Shabaab.<sup>6</sup>



Witness Somalia provides safe spaces for women to share their experiences with the impact of violent extremism and discuss their roles in promoting peace and security

3. Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in Somalia: A Mapping Report. (2020). Life and Peace Institute. ([access here](#)).

4. Ibid and Supporting Civil Society and Women's Rights Organisations in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Contexts Somalia Report. (2020). Saferworld and Gender Action for Peace and Security UK. ([access here](#)).

5. Now and the Future: Gender Equality, Peace and Security in a COVID-19 World. (2020). Saferworld. ([access here](#)).

6. Stern, O.M. (2019). The Invisible Women of Al-Shabaab. Adam Smith International. ([access here](#))

In Al-Shabaab, women fulfill several roles, including recruitment, fundraising, weapons storing and transport, and intelligence.<sup>7</sup> However, women also are often well positioned to mitigate the dangers of violent extremism because they can detect early warning signs. As they witness and experience the impact of extremism in their communities, they understand the need for a holistic, whole-of-society approach to prevent and counter violent extremism.<sup>8</sup>

Women's roles within Al-Shabaab support their gendered narrative of arranging brides for young male recruits and

enforcing "wife inheritance" where in the case of a man's death, any Al-Shabaab member can inherit his wife.<sup>9</sup> Women's kinship ties work both ways, however. They can use the same skill set to engage husbands and sons to disengage from violent extremist groups or prevent them from joining in the first place. While many women, including peacebuilders, draw upon their kinship relations, it is also critical to recognize the multitude of roles that women embrace as agents of change. The local organization Witness Somalia exemplifies this approach of expanding civil society roles to prevent and counter violent extremism.

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## Witness Somalia: Breaking the Silence and Reclaiming Civic Space for Social Change

Witness Somalia works to promote peaceful alternatives to rebuild a society free from violence. They document and report human rights violations, demand accountability, and protect the rights of vulnerable groups. They focus on expanding civil society's role to resolve conflicts and transform local communities. Spurred by Al-Shabaab's devastating impact, Witness Somalia seized opportunities to work with students, religious leaders, police officers, journalist, artists, elders and other community activists to prevent violent extremism.

Witness Somalia provides a safe space for women to share their experiences with Al-Shabaab and the impact of violent extremism, and discuss their roles in preventing extremism and promoting peace and security. In their community engagement, they pay particular attention to including women from minority clans and internally displaced persons. Witness Somalia understands the importance of women's inclusion in the security sector and their capability to mitigate violent extremist incidents. The group established contact, built trust, and supported cooperation between local police officers and the community, who now meet regularly to share information, report critical incidents, and organize community events.

Witness Somalia has capitalized on art, music, drama, and sports to engage youth in alternative forms of expression and self-development.



Witness Somalia recognizes art as a form of expression and understands the role of artists in raising public awareness around complex issues.

Witness Somalia increases awareness around violent extremism through public messaging and religious interpretation. They recognize the religious leaders' crucial role as interpreters of Islamic texts and traditions, and include such leaders in their work. They use a gender-responsive approach to expand the role of women in society. They train youth to challenge religious militancy and violent extremism. As a result, young people have mobilized to respond to their communities after terrorist attacks. To reach the public, Witness Somalia launched a radio program to discuss gender equality, women's rights, and their role in peacebuilding.

Despite the taboos surrounding art in the larger culture, Witness Somalia recognizes art as a form of expression and understands the role of artists in raising public awareness around complex issues. They trained a small group of artists in advocacy, freedom of expression, and the intersection of the arts and peacebuilding. They have capitalized on art, music, drama, and sports to engage youth in alternative forms of expression and self-development. Through such programs, Witness Somalia has reached 32 youth groups and NGOs and 218 youth (including 135 women). The arts have enabled people to resist extremism and raise their voices to transform their society.

7. Ibid and Women and Al-Shabaab's Insurgency. (2019) International Crisis Group. ([access here](#)).

8. Invisible Women: The Gendered Dimensions of Return, Rehabilitation and Reintegration from Violent Extremism (2019), International Civil Society Action Network and United Nations Development Program. ([access here](#))

9. Ibid.