

Women of the Horn in Diaspora: From Victims to Powerful Actors

For more than two decades the number of people from the Horn of Africa seeking refuge, abroad, has increased dramatically. Several conditions such as armed conflicts, lack of democracy and widespread human rights abuses in these countries have generated substantial refugee flows to neighbouring countries such as Kenya and Tanzania as well as to remote destinations such as Europe, the USA, Canada and Australia. All have contributed to the emergence of new Diaspora populations.

These new Diaspora populations have faced many problems and challenges. This paper highlights problems and obstacles facing women of the Horn in Diaspora. These problems include the hostile environment towards refugees that has been perpetuated by the right wing media in the West. The paper also explores challenges facing women of the Horn in Diaspora and how they managed to tackle them. It also looks at the positive role that they play to build up their countries and to promote peace, security, human rights and development.

Problems

Generally Diaspora population, notably asylum seekers and refugees, face many problems before they settle in. Women in particular face huge problems during their displacement process and even after they have settled in.

In Diaspora women find themselves in a relatively alien environment without a relative or kinship support. Some of them feel less empowered due to language barriers, loneliness, unemployment and racism. Refugee Action, an independent charity that works with refugees to build new lives in the UK has documented different stories about women asylum seekers and refugees from the Horn of Africa and elsewhere who have undergone many problems including lack of safety, particularly after the Home office introduced its

Dispersal policy.¹ (Refugee Action 2004). The dispersal policy was meant to reduce pressure on London boroughs and the Southeast, therefore, asylum seekers were sent to northern cities such as Hull, Glasgow and Sunderland. In these cities it seemed that many people were not tolerant of other races and culture. In Sunderland, for example, more than 100 'racial incidents' have been reported in there after an Iranian asylum seeker was killed. Later the Home Office stopped dispersing asylum-seekers to Sunderland (Women's Asylum News 2002: 7). In such a hostile environment women asylum seekers feel vulnerable and unsafe. A study by (Dumper 2002: 6) reveals that sending women's asylum seekers to areas that have many incidents of racial harassment increases women's vulnerability and makes them feel unsafe. Her study shows that nearly 83% of women asylum seekers rarely go out due to fear of racial attacks.

Women asylum seekers and refugees also feel unsafe when they are accommodated in mixed sex hostels because such accommodation exposes them to high risk of sexual abuse (Women Asylum News 2002). In particular, women victims of rape and torture feel terrified by sharing accommodation with males (Refugee Media Action Group 2006).

These problems have become a concern for many pro-asylum organisations and a number of attempts have been made to tackle them. One example is a programme run by Refugee.

The media

In recent years asylum has been the subject of the media. Refugee Action (Refugee Action 2005) in the UK has pointed out that the media coverage on asylum in the UK is negative and misinformed. This misrepresentation of asylum has been exploited by the right wing activists who campaign against asylum. Anti-asylum campaigners often refer to asylum seekers as 'bogus asylum seekers'. All create a hostile environment against asylum seekers and refugees and increases racial attacks on them.

1 This policy was introduced by the Home Office in 1999. It was meant to send or disperse asylum seekers to different regions. A new department, called the National Asylum Support Services (NASS) was set up to coordinate the dispersal arrangement.

Action and St. Peter Church in Nottingham. This programme aims to provide a space for women in Diaspora to reunite, socialise and to discuss barriers facing them in their new settlement. The programme also provides help in different areas such as housing, schooling, training, employment and legal advice to women asylum seekers and refugees (Refugee Action 2004).

Moreover, many women asylum seekers and refugees from the Horn of Africa have worked there as volunteers. They hold different qualifications, possess rich experience and speak different languages. Their expertise is crucial in assisting new comers who seek help before settling down. This is a positive contribution which illustrates positive images of women from the Horn in Diaspora. It is also a challenge to the negative images shown by the right wing media discussed below.

Yet, the media ignores the other side of the story. The enormous contribution that women asylum seekers and refugees make to social, economic and cultural life in the UK (Refuge Action 2005) as well as to their homelands in terms of development, conflict resolution and peace and building.

Positive contributions

Experiences of women in Diaspora, in particular women asylum seekers and refugees show positive contributions to their homelands. These include their financial contributions to their relatives and communities at home, building their own women's organisations abroad, being active members of community-based organisations in exile and challenging the patriarchal system that perpetuates women's subordination.

Financial contribution/remittances

It has been argued that remittances have reached \$100 billion in 2000. This is regarded as a large proportion of world financial flows. About 60% of the global remittances went to developing countries (Van Hear 2003).

However, literature on remittances tends to focus more on labour migrants, ignoring refugees' contribution. However, refugees do send remittances to their homelands using similar channels within the international finance system as labour migrants to move money freely (Thomson 2005: 14).

It has been acknowledge that refugees and other migrants have a positive economic influence on the homeland by sending remittances to their relatives and communities. Yet not much has been done to investigate such experiences.

Remittances from Diaspora to their families are used for family needs, health care, education, and housing and to pay debt. In other words, to promote welfare of families and communities. In Sudan, for example, many families rely heavily on remittances sent from abroad to meet their basic needs and as well as to pay for funeral, wedding and '*Eids*' (religious celebrations) expenses.

Many people in Diaspora prefer to send money using informal channels because they are quicker and cheap. Moreover, as is the case in Sudan and Somalia many people do not trust banking system. Therefore, sending money with friends is perceived as easy, more reliable and trusty than using banks. It also has no taxation fee to pay.

Women's Organisations

In Diaspora women from the Horn have formed their own organisations such as Nuba Mountains Women Group in London (Alrasheed 2006: 14), Southern Sudanese Women Group in London, Sudanese Women's Group in Brighton and Hove and Sudanese Women's Voice for Peace in Nairobi. These women's organisations are involved in many activities such as training on gender issues, conflict resolution and peace building.

In the United Kingdom, notably in the East Midlands (Nottingham and Leicester) Somali women have challenged the male-dominated perception which portrays women as housewives with little contribution to the public arena. They have developed a web of social relations and formed their women's only organisations to discuss issues affecting their new lives in exile including their gender roles. In this sense these women's only project could be seen as an informal forum developed by women to help them challenge their social exclusion and to empower them.

In the city of London Ethiopian and Eritrean women have improved their entrepreneur skills and become engaged in different small business activities such as restaurants and cafes to generate income to help them to support themselves and to improve their living standard as well as to send remittances to their families and communities in their homeland. Thus, challenging the economic exclusion that many women in Diaspora are exposed to and also giving them financial independence and economic power. Moreover, gaining economic power could lead to decision-making power at household level. Thus, challenging the patriarchal system that perpetuates male's domination.

In Sweden, where a large population of Somali people have settled, many Somali women have gone home for a few months to offer their expertise. They have engaged in different community activities such as capacity building programmes for women's NGOs, training and teaching and income generating activities (Personal communication, Sweden, August 2006).

Women's organisations in exile also network with different organisations particularly those which work for peace to share information and also to promote the role of women in peace processes and peace reconstruction. They also lobby the international community for support and help in reconstructing war-torn areas in their countries.

Community organisations

It is well known that in Diaspora community organisations flourish. These organisations are established to provide different services and support to its members. An example of these community organisations is Diaspora, a South Sudanese organisation

based in the UK. One aim of this organisation is to promote positive images of asylum seekers and refugees and to achieve integration and social inclusion. The organisation is involved in a wide range of activities such as challenging discrimination as well as facilitating access to legal services (Diaspora 2006). The organisation also runs a project aiming to use skills and education gained by the Southern Sudanese Diaspora while they were abroad to improve health and education facilities in Southern Sudan (Diaspora 2006).

Galia (community group) is another form of community organisation among Sudanese people. The *Galia* acts as an effective forum for cultural, literacy and community information. In *Galia* Sudanese women are active members and are involved in a wide range of social and cultural activities. Moreover, they have taken a leadership role in these *Galia* as is the case in Birmingham and Glasgow where women have become Chairperson of *Galia* demonstrating a leadership capacity in a male-dominated sphere.

Conflict resolution and peace building

Women of the Horn of Africa have realised the heavy cost of armed conflicts. In exile they have mobilised and organised themselves to promote conflict resolution and peace building and formed their own peace building organisations. For instance, Sudanese Women's Association in Nairobi (SWAN) has set up its agenda for peace and engaged in many activities related to conflict resolutions and peace reconstruction such as women's human rights, political participation as well as psychosocial trauma management. The organisation also provides training for women and equips them with skills needed for the development of their country.

Changes in gender roles and gender relations

It seems that life in exile, particularly in the West, has led to changes in gender roles and gender relations. Research done by Benesova (undated) on Sudanese Diaspora in North East Florida shows how gender roles have been affected by the new life in the USA. The study looks at Nuer people of Southern Sudan who, traditionally, have well defined gender roles embedded in their culture. However, these traditional gender roles are not necessarily practiced among Nuer people in the Diaspora. In Diaspora Nuer male superiority is challenged. They are no longer the sole breadwinners of their families. By contrast, women have set up in new gender roles and become more

independent. This might cause tension at the household level and stress to males who resist change.

Another study by Hassan (2002) reveals how Somali women in the UK rejected their traditional culture that gives husbands authority over their wives. A traditional power relation at the household level that allows husbands to control their wives is no longer accepted in the UK. A Somali woman narrates "Men should learn how to cook, do the laundry and change the nappies" (Hassan 2002), a new male role which used to be a female role in Somali. This led to an increase in marriage breakdown. However, women have become shapers of their lives.

On the other hand men seem not happy with the new culture that they need to understand and to respond to positively. They put religion to stop women taking new roles. Men "are using religion as a scapegoat when they say that women are abandoning Islam. This is the way this country is, and we should adapt to it", said a female interviewee (Hassan 2002).

The above Sudanese and Somali experience was not exclusive to them as other women of the Horn in the UK and the USA have similar experiences. However, it seems that little has been written to document them.

Conclusion

Women from the Horn in Diaspora, notably, women asylum seekers and refugees face many problems such as loneliness, racism and isolation. However, women have come together to challenge these obstacles and to empower themselves. They have also been able to make enormous contributions to development, conflict resolutions and peace building in their countries of origin.

Women in Diaspora have also explored new opportunities open for them and become economically independent and able to contribute financially to their relatives and communities at home by sending remittances.

At community-based organisations women in Diaspora have become engaged in different cultural and social activities. Furthermore, they have launched their own organisations and developed active forums to influence peace, democracy and human rights in their homelands, as well as lobbying the international community to respond positively to peace reconstruction process in their homelands. In other words, they have become active actors rather than powerless victims.

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