

State tackling of violence against women and girls in Somaliland

**An Interview with Mrs Nafisa Yousuf
Executive Director, NAGAAD**

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Violence against women and girls is considered a human rights violation that sweeps many parts of the world as a dangerous epidemic that needs all joint efforts and resources combined together to put an end to it. Per the UN, seven out of every ten women has experienced physical and/or sexual violence at some stage in their lifetime and sixty million girls marry before the age of eighteen globally. These numbers illuminate the severity of the phenomena that we are researching, and leave no room for underestimating it, taking or dealing with it lightly or turning a blind eye to it. Despite all advancements made by human beings, unfortunately when it comes to violence against women and girls, we are shamefully lagging behind. Those numbers cannot be ignored or simply swept under the rug.

Violence against women and girls will not end in a day, and will take years and years to finally be eradicated. Like the millions of doctors who take pride in having eradicated ‘Polio’; this too can be eradicated, with dedicating sincere diligent efforts and through hard work. Violence against women and girls can be ended and eradicated, with billions of human beings taking pride that they have achieved that milestone.

Violence is defined as follows:

[T]he intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation. (WHO int, 2016)

Violence against women and girls is one of the most systematic and widespread human rights violations. It is rooted in gendered social structures rather than individual and random acts; it cuts across age, socio-economic, educational and geographic boundaries; affects all societies; and is a major obstacle to ending gender inequality and discrimination globally (UN General Assembly, 2006).

Therefore to examine the phenomena, what Somaliland’s intervention is, and whether it is enough or not, I carried out an in-depth interview with a prominent figure within Somaliland who works on women’s issue, Mrs Nafisa Yousuf – the executive director of NAGAAD a leading authority for women’s issues. Somaliland is no different to other countries that suffer from such human rights violations. From earlier works published by ‘NAGAAD’ in the form of reports the reader and researcher will be able to get glimpse and reach a conclusion that indeed ‘Violence Against Women’ is a problem in Somaliland.

From my point of view this may be due to many factors and issues that contribute to such phenomena, be it cultural, the position of women in the family and society, whether or not women are financially empowered, power dynamics between both genders, and patriarchy, in addition to many other factors.

Much hope is pinned upon the ‘Sexual Offences Bill’ which is a reformed set of laws to be added to the Somaliland ‘Penal Code’ which is outdated. It contains those laws relating to sexual offences which are not fully addressed and covered in the current Somaliland ‘Penal Code’.

Below is an edited transcript of the interview¹

Samia Hassan: How can you define what is meant by violence against women & girls?

Nafisa Yousuf: We have asked ourselves since Somaliland is stable why sexual based violence still exists? The root causes are unknown; this may be due to youth unemployment.

Samia Hassan: How does the Somaliland context define violence, taking into consideration the international community that funds the projects they implement and how they got their own set of definitions and perceptions?

Nafisa Yousuf: You have to take into consideration first before anything the context and the religion; therefore you cannot go about implementing the project without taking those things into account.

Samia Hassan: Can you share with us any examples and stories related to violence against women and girls that you came across during your work?

Nafisa Yousuf: There’re many victims that ‘NAGAAD’ supports and for legal aspects a caseworker is hired. Shelters are provided for the victims as means for protection, and they have ones at two areas (Hargeisa & Erigavo). For confidentiality and in order to protect victims from stigma their identities aren’t revealed, and yes we have painful Stories. Women peace coalitions were established who report to us.

Samia Hassan: what is the most prevailing type of violence that occurs within the Somaliland community?

Nafisa Yousuf: The one occurring most is sexual; its (SGBV; Sexual Gender Based Violence), which poses the biggest problem. It has many forms (there is FGM, there’s early and forced marriage); rural areas experience gender based violence more.

¹ See ‘Interview Notes’ below

Samia Hassan: What are the impacts of violence on women and girls in detail? And those who decide to flee the places that caused them disrupt?

Nafisa Yousuf: The violation to victims occurs in one location and the victim moves to another location within the region, that's why the law is needed. Victims are rehabilitated and livelihood projects are offered to them; small shops that generates income for living and to enable them to remain at their locations.

Samia Hassan: What needs to be changed?

Nafisa Yousuf: Youth attitudes need to be changed as we're experiencing a new phenomena 'Gang Rape'; a large number of guys raping one victim. The youth need means for employment, skills training and will of the government is needed.

Samia Hassan: How can we use Islamic values to eliminate violence against women and girls?

Nafisa Yousuf: People assume; especially women who are not educated when giving them human rights training, that it's something from outside with an international view and agenda. Religious leaders mix both the religious and cultural issues. They're the key people that the Somaliland people tend listen to, they can show their willingness by making announcements via Friday prayers, T.V. and radio to inform the masses.

Samia Hassan: How important is it that you have men, boys, society, local organizations, religious scholars, and government play an active role to stop violence against women and girls?

Nafisa Yousuf: We train different components within the society from both genders to different professions on human rights and being knowledgeable about their rights. A task force consisting of many components from the society plus stakeholders working with sexual gender based violence was set up. Meetings are held and at laws time there's a pressure group that joins us at the parliament. There's a sexual gender based violence working group, taskforce, meeting at the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. Along with the parliament we're working together on the Sexual Offences Bill, which is not yet passed.

Samia Hassan: Are you aware of any help that is offered by the state to victims of violence?

Nafisa Yousuf: I'm not aware.

Samia Hassan: The UN mentions that 1 in every 3 women have experienced physical/sexual violence at some point in their lives, are numbers available in Somaliland? And if so, would they help the case?

Nafisa Yousuf: In Somaliland women's numbers exceeds that of men. BaahiKoob, which serves under the government, is the custodian of such data, and you can't access them. To get numbers you're obliged to do your own research.

Samia Hassan: Can you mention what challenges have you come across so far as you have been working with the communities?

Nafisa Yousuf: Challenges arises from communities, who mention and think that because of the nature of your work you receive money on them. They lack awareness on many things especially ‘Female Genital Cutting’, which they assume protects youth, particularly girls.

Samia Hassan: Have you received assistance from the local community?

Nafisa Yousuf: They are cooperative, when they’re told MCHs (Maternal & Child Health) will be built they’re ready with their contribution. They do fund rising. Mainly they have fears from whatever issues are raised.

Samia Hassan: How does culture impacts violence?

Nafisa Yousuf: In the rural areas certain practices (wedding, songs, Somali culture playing) as female join them unaccompanied by someone or without a guardian they may face problems, such dance is a threat.

Samia Hassan: In an annual human rights report published in 2012 you’ve mentioned that the attitudes and awareness of the community and government in regards to violence aren’t as it ought to be, did they change?

Nafisa Yousuf: We make the reports public and available to government, the international community, universities, and youth. But our target group is women whom are 80% illiterate. This is the community that we want to respond and the problem we have is many of them are unaware, so we provide them with awareness raising rather than those reports. Community paralegals are trained in every region, and forty-six of our member organizations. The existence of three parallel laws (Sharia, Customary & Secular Laws) in Somaliland causes confusion to people. We’re working with the parliament to approve the ‘Sexual Offences Bill’ that was pushed by ‘NAGAAD’ and other stakeholders.

Samia Hassan: Having attended many events locally and internationally, can you briefly discuss the difference in tackling violence?

Nafisa Yousuf: Both methods have things in common but means of intervention depends upon the context. Locals know the context and the most appropriate ways to make interventions, while the international community aid with funding. Problems may arise sometimes due to the funders defining how things should be carried out.

Samia Hassan: Has patriarchy changed, now that women have attained more education and do work; for instance, some became ministers and even you are heading a leading organization?

Nafisa Yousuf: That’s a very small number; there’re two female ministries and one deputy minister out of forty-six male ministers. Of eighty-two parliament members only one is female – this can’t be called a percentage even; it’s zero representation.

Samia Hassan: Women and girls who face violence; where can they seek help?

Nafisa Yousuf: Culturally victims don't discuss this with anyone, and neither do families. Some raise this with clan leaders, when it fails to be solved they turn it to courts.

Samia Hassan: Has Somaliland signed any local or international conventions?

Nafisa Yousuf: Somaliland has signed the Child Right Convention and the Confession of Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)

Samia Hassan: Much of the work done by the civil society is funded; can you explain the cases related to violence that interest donors more? And do they tackle all forms of violence in the same way?

Nafisa Yousuf: The interest of the donors to such cases is because of the sex and age of the victims. It's unbelievable; makes even you shocked let alone the international community. It's very novel to us, we haven't seen before. It's different for us, for the international community as the victims are as young as 3-4 years of age. Our culture and religion prohibits such things. The one that gets more attention I think it is sexual gender based violence.

Samia Hassan: Do you think the government in general had done all it could have done for women and girls? If not, what needs to be done?

Nafisa Yousuf: No, they should their willingness as they're the ones responsible through passing the laws that reduces those cases.

Samia Hassan: Do you see significant progress in the near future for the cause of ending violence against women and girls in the Somaliland society?

Nafisa Yousuf: Yes, from 2011-2013 there was 'Gang Rape' which is ending due to raised awareness. Passing the laws is also an added progress.

Samia Hassan: What are the things you would have done differently to tackle violence against women and girls?

Nafisa Yousuf: To continue our awareness raising and advocacy related to all forms of human rights. And until we get this law passed, we can't give up.

Samia Hassan: Finally what would you like your legacy to be?

Nafisa Yousuf: I just like to leave a legacy at 'NAGAAD'; 50/50 women representation, to represent the marginalized groups. We're continuously advocating the 'Quota'. We're promised that the representation will be around 10%. What I want to leave behind at 'NAGAAD' is 50% female representation in Somaliland.

Interview Notes

Samia Hassan conducted the interview with Mrs Nafisa Yousuf at NAGAAD Office on **8th Aug, 2016**. It was recorded and has been edited. Some of the words and the order of some of the questions and answers have been changed in order to enhance readability. Every effort has been made to retain the original words, meaning, and intent and Mrs Yousuf has approved the final paper as a true representation of the interview.