Beat: News

UN ACTION AND IOM HELP EMPOWER SOMALI WOMEN REBUILD THEIR

LIVES AFTER ESCAPING AL SHABAAB

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USPA NEWS - Sexual violence against women and girls is a silent human rights violation in Somalia. A crime compounded by social taboos, which prevent survivors from seeking help, and one that largely goes unpunished. If a woman reports sexual violence, she is usually blamed and stigmatized for it. And if the woman lives under the control of the Al-Shabaab, speaking up can cost her life.
While significant advances have been made to reduce violent extremist activity and increase resilience to violent extremist influences, the presence of Al-Shabaab continues to fuel conflict and instability. It has been documented that regardless of their roles within the group, women suffer systematic violence, including conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV), and that sexual violence is use

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With the support of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), in 2013 the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) developed the National Programme for the Treatment and Handling of Disengaged Combatants, with the aim of establishing a comprehensive process that allows for low risk disengaged combatants to rehabilitate and reintegrate back into their communities. This programme is implemented as a tool to counter the threat of continuous insecurity and is coupled with a declaration by FGS that low risk Al-Shabaab combatants who voluntarily defect from the group will be granted amnesty.
At first, the programme focused only on men as it lacked the capacity to respond to the complex needs of women associated with Al-Shabaab, many of whom are survivors of CRSV. This changed in 2019 when IOM started a unique project within the Women, Peace and Security framework in close partnership with the FGS, women-led civil society organizations, and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM). The project is the first of its kind in the East and Horn of Africa. Since the pilot phase of 2019, the female component of the National Programme has provided 475 women with means to rebuild their lives in their communities.----------
“Through this Women, Peace and Security project, IOM supports the rehabilitation and reintegration of women formerly associated with violent extremist groups,“ says one of IOM Somalia´s Project Officers involved in the project. “We support the women to recover from their traumatic experiences and provide them with opportunities to build their capacities and to actively contribute to peacebuilding processes in their communities.“
GAINING RENEWED RESILIENCE----------
Women, too often survivors of CRSV, who disengage from Al-Shabaab have diverse hopes and dreams. While their stories are unique, many parallels remain. Many of these women often find themselves as head of households, caring for young children, and yearn for safety, security and a better future for themselves and their families. On this journey, however, women often encounter stigma, isolation, displacement, and struggle to find a sense of belonging in their communities. Harmful coping strategies compound these struggles and worsen mental health outcomes.----------
Through transitional rehabilitation centres and women-led civil society organizations, IOM is providing holistic and gender-sensitive services to vulnerable women, including basic education and case management to improve their mental health and wellbeing, as well as business development and livelihood skills training to support with rebuilding their lives. The programme strives to contribute to reconciliation efforts within communities by promoting economic and personal resiliency, social integration, and community engagement. Hafso* is among the women at one of the rehabilitation centres who arrived seeking a better life for herself and her family. She is now participating in the activities organized at the centre, where she feels she has finally found a safe place to recover from past experiences and rebuild her resilience.----------
“I am happy to be enrolled in this rehabilitation programme. I have a chance to build a network and share the secrets and the shame I have been hiding my whole life,“ she said. “This feels good. Here I am not judged. I finally feel as if a burden has been lifted from my shoulders.“
WOMEN RECEIVING SURVIVOR CENTRED SUPPORT----------
Using survivor-centred psychosocial approaches, IOM has created opportunities for women to explore their identities, establish a

sense of belonging within their communities, and build trust with other women. Leveraging IOM´s close partnership with line ministries, women-led civil society organisations, and UNSOM, these interventions include art-based workshops and other psychosocial support activities, funded through the UN Action-Conflict Related Sexual Violence Multi-Partner Trust Fund (CRSV-MPTF).[3]

“When survivors come to safe spaces like these, they are still in a traumatic state and are seeking opportunities to recover and heal,“ says the IOM Director General, Mr. António Vitorino. “It is, therefore, essential that interventions with survivors consistently strive to create a safe and empowering environment, through an integrated and survivor-centred approach.“

Ms. Pramila Patten, UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict and Chair of the UN Action Network highlights that “the UN-Action network through its CRSV-MPTF can transform survivors´ lives. The results are tangible and visible. In my last visit to Somalia in July 2019, I gained first-hand knowledge of the immense protection challenges faced by survivors, particularly in displacement settings. My dialogue with the national authorities was frank and constructive; they did not deny or downplay the gravity of the crimes of sexual violence. Such acknowledgement is critical as no problem in human history has ever been resolved through silence and denial.“ Through this project, it becomes clear that it is only by engaging Somali women on their own terms that we can begin to understand how to mitigate the consequences of conflict and contribute to sustainable peace. (Source: UNSM, IOM)

*Launched in March 2007, UN Action represents a concerted effort by 18 UN entities to improve coordination and accountability, amplify advocacy, and support country efforts to prevent sexual violence and respond more effectively to the needs of survivors. Invited by the SRSG-SVC, who chairs UN Action, IOM joined the initiative in March 2018. IOM is working towards many priorities of UN Action: Through community-based strategic interventions, IOM builds local capacities and promotes national ownership and leadership to safeguard the rights and recovery of survivors. In tandem, IOM fosters a longer-term approach focusing on resilience of persons at risk, identification of capacities and resources to self-protect, and ensuring that deep-rooted social, economic, and cultural shifts required to reduce CRSV move towards prevention. (Source UNSRSG)

*The name of the individual in this story has been changed to protect their identity.

[1] Orly Stern, 2019. “The Invisible Women of al-Shabaab: Understanding the role of women in, and their influence on sons, husbands and brothers in, the processes of joining al-Shabaab, defecting from al-Shabaab, rehabilitation, and reintegration“.

2 United Nations Secretary General, Conflict-Related Sexual Violence, report of the United Nations Secretary General, S/2020/487, 03 June 2020, available here.

3 The CRSV-MPTF supports projects jointly implemented by UN Action Network entities to catalyze new initiatives and programming in order to enhance prevention, response and accountability efforts on CRSV through a survivor-centred approach.

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