Building the Base of the Community
A Narrative of the Life and Work of
Zahra Ugas Farah of Somalia

By Carmen Dyck
Peace Writer

Edited by
Emiko Noma

2003 Women PeaceMakers Program
Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice

Table of Contents

Heading	***Page #***
Acronyms	3
The Story of Arraweelo	4
Camels and Codes of Conduct	5
Tradition and Culture	6
The Barre Regime and Cold War Politics	7
The Base of the Community	10
Pressure Groups and Faction Leaders	16
You Have to Look for Hope	19
Bibliography	20

Acronyms

CUV	Common Understanding and Vision
FERO	Family Economy Rehabilitation Organization
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
NGO	Nongovernmental Organization
SNM	Somali National Movement
SYL	Somali Youth League
TNG	Transitional National Government
USC	United Somali Congress

The Story of Arraweelo

> There was once a Somali queen named Arraweelo who ruled what is now Somalia. When she was young, Arraweelo witnessed many wars and conflicts between Somalis. She had also seen how the council of elders had, on many occasions, made some very unwise decisions. She thought that perhaps some of the men on the council . . . did not have the skills to be in positions of leadership. Her recommendation was that these men should be replaced by women who were intelligent and competent to make decisions, because women's decisions would be of benefit to the community.
>
> Arraweelo's husband disagreed with her ideas and felt that conflict resolution and leadership roles were better off in the hands of men, and that women were better left to do what they did best: housework and child care.
>
> Arraweelo decided that it was not in the best interest of the Somali people for women to maintain these traditional roles, so she took action to obtain a leadership position. . . . She organized the women into withdrawing from doing household chores. Men became responsible for the cooking and housework and children. While the men were preoccupied with women's traditional responsibilities, Arraweelo took over the leadership, declaring herself queen. From then on, there was peace and prosperity in the land.[1]

The story of Arraweelo, the "first feminist Somali woman," resonates with many women in a country still reeling from civil war. These women have watched as their country, clans, and communities have been violently ripped apart. Yet like Arraweelo, they have not been passive in the face of war and conflict, as the distinction between the war front and the home front has been dismantled. Somali women like Zahra Ugas Farah decided that women must do something to help diminish and resolve the violence in Somalia. "Women's roles have risen up. Women can do things that men cannot do. Women can find ways to make peace. Men cannot deny it. They know that it is women who are holding what is left of the country together."[2]

---

[1] Affi, Ladan, "A Role Model for Somali Women," in *Pour une culture de la paix en Somalie: actes du second congrès international des études somaliennes*, eds. Mohamed Mohamed-Abdi and Patrice Bernard (Paris: La Direction, 1997).

[2] Quotations not cited in the text or part of dialogue sequences are taken from interviews of Zahra Ugas Farah conducted between September 29 and December 5, 2003.

Camels and Codes of Conduct

The land in central Somalia was dry, the soil parched, the fields fallow. Zahra's hometown, the ancient village of El Bur (also known as Ris), like the surrounding areas of the Galgudud region, was experiencing a severe drought that year, 1962. A man named Ali came to the area in search of water for his camels. He finally found some, but in an area inhabited by a rival sub-clan. With few resources to share, tension between the sub-clans was high and a clash quickly broke out when Ali tried to water his camels. Ali was killed in the fighting.

News of the clash reached Zahra's father, a traditional clan chief, or Ugas, in El Bur. Demonstrating impartiality, he sent an envoy both to Ali's funeral to express condolences, and to the rival sub-clan in order to hold a meeting and discuss compensation for Ali's death. The latter group refused to meet with the envoy.

Ugas urged calm and patience on all sides. He sent a message to Ali's family, asking them not to seek revenge; he would need a little more time to solve the conflict. He sent another envoy to the other sub-clan and, again, they refused to see him.

Zahra's father knew he must exert more pressure on the obstinate sub-clan. He went to the local police commissioner's office where there was always a large group gathered. Proceeding to the front of the gathering and addressing the police commissioner in front of them all, he said, "Tonight before six o'clock, I need a number of policemen to be ready to invade the home of those people who killed Ali and who refuse to discuss compensation payments." He promptly left the office without another word.

By sunset, the commissioner had readied the policemen and sent word to Ugas that they were prepared. But Ugas went to the commissioner and told him he actually had no intention of invading, but knew that if he made his request known before the gathering at the office, the people would tell the sub-clan about his plan and they would then acknowledge his entreaties to meet and discuss compensation. After a few days, Zahra’s father received a message from the sub-clan: they were prepared to compensate the family for Ali’s death.

After several more days, the sub-clan brought camels to the area and asked Ugas to give them to Ali’s family. He presented the camels to them and offered a prayer of forgiveness for the two fighting groups. He also facilitated the development of a code of conduct between the sub-clans. Ali’s group was permitted to come to the area peacefully for water three times a week. “After that, there was no more fighting in that area, and that code of conduct worked there. People lived peacefully there for many years.”

Tradition and Culture

> Somalis are originally pastoralists, so water, grazing, and land were always conflict issues for the old Somalis. You would already have a relationship of respect with each other. Our ancestors had norms, customary law, and good rituals to solve problems and conflict. When clans used to be in conflict, say fifty years ago, leaders would come together to reconcile. Traditional clan chiefs used to act as mediators, but new Somalis do not respect them and their roles anymore.

Zahra holds up her father’s example in contrast to contemporary Somalia, when civil war and inter-clan strife have ravaged the country since 1991 and conflict resolution based on cultural norms and customary law has been discarded.

“Somali people are homogenous people. They have the same religion, the same culture, and the same language. They are one ethnicity.” Society is structured around clans, of which there are four grouped as nomadic-pastoralists—Darod, Isaq, Hawiye, and Dir—while the Digil and Mirfile clans and some of the minority groups are traditionally agriculturists or agro-pastoralists. Clan systems are complex and flexible institutions; they are taken into account in transactions, affiliations, and professional associations—for instance, maternal clan lines are often used in business and security issues. Therefore, most Somalis can identify their own primary clan and trace their genealogy through thirty or more generations, which also allows for the identification of sub-clan factions.

> There is a ritual of intermarriage between the clans: they exchange some of the girls. It’s an example of peace, this intermarriage, so that in the next year or two years, they have blood relationships and are now related. They do the same on the other side, so the fighting won’t happen again as easily. That’s the idea behind it. It changes the friendship and protects the clans.

With this notion of intermarriage, as well as the mediator roles held by respected clan chiefs like Zahra’s father and other traditional modes of conflict resolution, the Somali people appeared immune to inter-clan war. But decades of foreign rule that divided their land and clans, and later a harsh military dictatorship, would usher Somalis into years of seemingly incurable violence.

The Barre Regime and Cold War Politics

It was nearly ten years after Somalia gained its independence from British and Italian colonial rule when Zahra’s father received the news that a military coup had taken place. The radio wasn’t working that day, but an elderly neighbor came to tell the family that Dr. Abdirashid Ali Sharmarke, the president, had been killed and the army had taken over the government. “Immediately Ugas stood up and said that military rule would be very bad. He started praying.”

While Zahra’s father foresaw, that day in 1969, what a military regime would do to the country, “other people were celebrating and happy that the military were in charge.” The soldiers had overthrown a corrupt administration that had rigged elections and done little to unite northern Somaliland (previously under British rule) and southern Somalia (a former Italian colony). Indeed, the new military government installed progressive social infrastructure for the development of the country.

> The military was doing good things at first and the security became very good. They made the written Somali language and most of the people at that time learned how to read and write. The socialist government provided free schools, universities, and hospitals. They are given credit for this.

Zahra, who was just a young girl when the military dictator General Mohammed Siad Barre came to power, received free education for a time as part of the socialist system. Barre, as head of the Somali Supreme Revolutionary Council, adapted “Scientific Socialism,” hoping to eliminate clannism and promote nationalism through a communist framework that was supported by the Soviet Union. “The military regime under communism gave women opportunities to be teachers and nurses. They weren’t high positions, but women came out to work. That was new.”

However, he also banned all political parties and replaced the national constitution with a charter that regulated all Somali affairs. Barre’s despotic governance led to the deterioration of the economy and social situation. He centralized control in the security services and the judiciary, which wielded absolute power and instilled fear among the population. Furthermore, the communist ideology conflicted with belief systems, including Islam, fundamental to Somali culture. Public discontent with the Barre regime grew throughout the 1970s.

Another aspect of Barre’s political strategy was the uniting of “Greater Somalia,” those lands in the Horn of Africa where ethnic Somalis lived—Somalia, the Ogaden region, Djibouti, and parts of northeastern Kenya. After World War II, the Allied powers had granted the contested Ogaden to Ethiopia; Barre and other pan-nationalists believed the region belonged to the Somali people. After minor skirmishes throughout the 1960s and ‘70s, Barre and his forces invaded the Ogaden. Prior to the war, Somalia had been backed by the Soviet Union—the area was strategic during the Cold War, with its proximity to the Arab states, Persian Gulf oil fields, and the U.S.-backed country of Ethiopia. But in early 1977, a communist military government led by Mengitsu Haile Mariam came to power in Ethiopia, and the Soviet Union began supporting Somalia's neighbor to the west. "The Somali government recaptured the Ogadenia land from Ethiopia, but the victory was in vain because the Soviet Union intervened and insisted the Somali troops leave the land.[3] Russia is a big power—what can you do?" Though the Somalis controlled up to ninety percent of the Ogaden during the war, Soviet supplies of weapons and finances to the Ethiopian troops held off a complete Somali victory and eventually turned the tables of the war. Barre withdrew his forces from the area in March 1978.

In the aftermath of defeat, several rebel groups formed, primarily in the northeast and northwest, and were based along clan lines, in opposition to Barre. With the Soviets supporting Ethiopia, the U.S. sent millions of dollars in arms to Somalia in exchange for the use of military facilities. Additionally,

> arms were being brought across the border and rebels were fighting against Barre's administration from Ethiopian territory. Arms started to spread throughout the country, the economy of the country went down, and unemployment increased. People started to starve and opposition to the government was growing day after day.

To help maintain his grip of power, Barre played different Somali clans against each other, planting the seeds of mistrust. "Siad Barre started to worry, so he brought his clan members into the government: cousins, brothers, relatives. So the government became full of only one clan—it was nepotism." Violent disputes and clashes continued throughout the 1980s as the centralized government had weakened traditional Somali structures which ordered society.

By January 1991, the country completely collapsed as Barre was overthrown by several groups, including the Somali Salvation Democratic Front and the southern region's United Somali Congress (USC), a Hawiye clan-based group with Mohamed Farah Aideed as its leader.

---

[3] Some Somalis refer to the land as "Ogadenia."

But a fellow USC leader, Ali Mahdi Mohamed, was elected “president” and Barre’s successor, and fighting continued. The northern rebels, of whom the Somali National Movement (SNM) was the most formidable, declared unilateral independence from the country.

> Between 1991 to the present . . . Somalia was torn apart by battles among clan factions and militias, widespread looting, banditry and human rights violations. . . . The civil war that intensified after the collapse of the regime led to the fleeing of 1.5 million Somali’s abroad as refugees, 2 million internally displaced and approximately 1 million dead through starvation or the bullet.[4]

It was amid the civil war that Zahra, a devout Muslim, saw the desperate need for peacemaking work in her war-torn country.

> And hold fast by the covenant of Allah all together and be not disunited, and remember the favor of Allah on you when you were enemies, then He united your hearts so by His favor you became brethren; and you were on the brink of a pit of fire, then He saved you from it, thus does Allah make clear to you His communications that you may follow the right way.[5]

The Base of the Community

“This war in Somalia has become usual and a part of everyday life. Kidnapping, murder—we never had these things before. There is so much destruction and violence. People are killed, displaced, looted, raped, and more. Every day you see something you have never seen before.” In the civil war that has been raging since 1991, faction leaders, or warlords, are essentially running the country.

> Some of the faction leaders have airstrips, armies, and militias of small armed boys. The small boys are the tools of the faction leaders. They are the ones who are always dying. This one boy, he became paralyzed from fighting. He was fighting for the sake of the clan, but no one cared when he was wounded.

---

[4] *Report of Committee Six on Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation* (Eldoret-Nairobi, Kenya: Somalia National Reconciliation Conference, Phase Two, 2003), 13-14.
[5] Qur’an, 3:103

As warlords increase their wealth and control their own spheres of influence, civilians, like this young boy forced to be a soldier and the small community that must now care for him, suffer most from the ongoing violence. “Most Somali people have had family members killed in the civil war. This has mostly affected the women, so they decided that they needed to organize something to establish and promote peace.”

Zahra and other women went into the medinas, or neighborhoods, of Mogadishu to speak face to face with the militias who were destroying their communities. The majority of the militias were boys, starting from thirteen or fourteen years old, “just teenagers.” Throughout their conversations, the women learned that the kids were either orphans, who had lost their parents in the war, or impoverished, with families who could not feed them or send them to school. “The women asked the boys what they wanted; they wanted the boys to tell them how they could help them so that they didn’t have to kill and loot. The boys all said they wanted to study.”

The group of women asked the boys to trust them and they would find a way to educate them. Many women in the medinas went door to door asking for just 5,000 shillings to contribute to a fund so they could get the child soldiers off the streets and into schools.[6] Several members of the business community also donated to the cause—“It became something great.” But the women did not just give the money to the boys without asking something in return. “So, then the women said, ‘Give us your weapons.’ And the boys gave them their guns and knives. The women turned the weapons over to the elders. The result was that the medinas and several areas of Mogadishu were safer places and the boys were getting training.” Women later mobilized these same boys to be security guards in parts of the capital, thus helping those areas become peaceful as well.

---

[6] In June 1991, 5,000 Somali shillings was the equivalent of about two dollars and fifty cents in the United States.

Women were finding creative and entirely logical ways of bettering their country. They were simply building on what women had historically done in Somalia, but often without visibility.

> Women were the ones who contributed to get our independence from British and Italian colonialists. Women were the ones who sold their gold, earrings, and necklaces to get independence. They were the ones who mobilized and contributed their wealth and time. Women told the men that they could not marry them unless they fought the colonialists, and some even became part of the SYL [Somali Youth League]. Women created songs, recited poems and *buraanburs* concerning freedom, and encouraged men in the fight for independence day and night.[7]

As the civil war raged, as "people were suffering, the shelters were falling over, and missiles were passing over the houses," Zahra began organizing meetings with other women to discuss what they could do while their country collapsed around them. "We knew each other, but we didn't have access to come together. It was not easy. The area was not safe; there was fighting and no government and no security. We managed to come together, but our efforts were limited."

The first few meetings were small gatherings, but they began listing the names of other like-minded women who could help. "We went looking for these women to see if they were still in Somalia. When we found them we were happy to find each other alive and we asked them to work with us." The group decided that the most pressing need for society was food and medicine.

> In Somalia we have a proverb. When you are cutting trees, you pile them on top of each other. You can't pull the bottom one out of the pile because of the weight of the ones on top. So, you have to start at the top and take them off one at a time.

With the objective of trying to fulfill the basic survival needs of families and fellow victims of the war, the group formally declared themselves an organization, the Family Economy

---

[7] *Buraanburs* are special songs created by Somali women, especially for encouragement, praise, and prayer.

Rehabilitation Organization (FERO), and began seeking funds to carry out their plans. "We started with trying to do something about starvation. We tried to look for contributions, but it was difficult because no one was working and most people didn't have anything." Eventually, however, FERO managed to raise some money and gain credibility in the humanitarian aid community: within a year of their founding, 1992, FERO was appointed the deputy head of food distribution in Somalia, working directly with the World Food Program.

As the organization continued its relief work, the women realized the importance of connecting and collaborating with other groups, specifically those working for women's empowerment and raising awareness of issues of peace. In 1994, Zahra traveled to Dakar, Senegal as a representative of Somali nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to attend a meeting of the African Regional Preparatory Committee for the Beijing Conference on Women. The United Nation's Fourth World Conference on Women and a parallel NGO Forum was to be held in Beijing, China the following year, and the Dakar meeting allowed African NGOs to network and provide input on the regional action plan that would be submitted in Beijing. Zahra felt a sense of sharing among the African women, and the issues she voiced as a Somali woman were recognized and acknowledged. With her new regional network, she was able to attend the NGO Forum in Beijing in 1995, "where women were talking about peace and development"—and where she developed new ideas for how FERO could expand its work.

> We were targeting women. Why? Because women are the base of the family and the family is the base of the community. We wanted to build economic and social areas for women. We wanted to give them an awareness of how to get peace. Our aim was to provide corresponding information on peace and development for women so they would withdraw from the war and support peace instead.

The organization recognized the need for women to be able to support themselves during the war as well as change the mentality behind both clan loyalty and violence itself. One issue complicating the ability of women to carry on the work of peace and stop the conflict was the lucrative trade in a drug called miraa, also known as khat. The hallucinatory and addictive leaf is chewed, making people “high” as they “sit and chew it for many hours. It makes people sleepless; it makes them nervous and angered easily. It causes family fights, economic problems, and is bad for the health. It also flames the fighting.” In an area of no governance, there was also no regulation on what was brought in or taken out of the country. Miraa was imported from Kenya and Ethiopia, and

> everyday, an estimated $200,000 to $300,000 of miraa was going through Somalia. Local people were buying it and mostly women made a retail business of it. Women justified it by saying that although miraa causes problems, they were using it to make money because they were trying to feed their children and families. The miraa consumption was high and it affected the economy. So, you see, the miraa was fighting us also.

In addition to resorting to the drug trade in order to provide for their families, women were directly affected by U.S. policy toward the country since September 11, 2001. “Fingers are pointed at Somalia. It’s a Muslim country.” In the immediate aftermath of September 11, the Bush administration froze the assets of the predominant money transfer service in Somalia called al-Barakat, accusing its owners of having ties to Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda. “The Somali diaspora sent money to their families who live in Somalia through this service. Al-Barakat is performing the services that a government or a bank would be responsible for, but we do not have these things in Somalia.” Many women whose family members were abroad relied on the remittances for extra income—sometimes their only income in a crippled economy.

Zahra and the women of FERO took action in this restricted and restricting climate to guarantee that women, as the backbone of the family, had access to income-generating projects and basic education. Through a Peace Center they established in Mogadishu, FERO members “gave women training for skills like tailoring, sewing, computer study,” and seminars in nutrition in order to teach them how to “use cheap food to feed their children,” while still ensuring they receive proper nourishment. FERO further expanded its objectives to include HIV/AIDS awareness, as well as public education on female genital mutilation, a practice that Zahra believes “the religion does not support.”[8]

In 2002, FERO conducted workshops for Somali women in Mogadishu which focused on a Common Understanding and Vision (CUV) for possible solutions to the dire situation in the city and nation. The CUV workshops, intended for professional and influential women who were respected in the community, became educational and empowering spaces for these leaders.

> When the women came out of the workshops, they said they would never again support the war. They talked to the men, they talked to the boys, and they mobilized themselves. At that time, there was fighting near Mogadishu, but they made an appeal for the fighting to stop. They said, ‘Why are you fighting? If you die, where can we get men? You kill our brothers, our fathers, our husbands. Please stop fighting. And stop the rapes and abductions.’

Despite these successes in education, strengthening women’s involvement, and recognizing their contributions to peace, Zarah believes these initiatives are not enough if they are not paired with stable peace and significant development. “Without peace, these will not work. There should be something parallel.” Organizations like FERO are doing considerable work on the ground in the capital, whereas international NGOs are reluctant to base their offices in Mogadishu.

> We don’t get much support from donors because some areas in Somalia are not safe. It’s the local NGOs that are working inside Somalia. The international donors, UN agencies, and international organizations mostly have offices in Nairobi for security reasons and their support to Somalia is limited. The problem is escalating and our needs are so big; the support from the donors, international communities, and UN agencies is very little.

---

[8] Zahra refers to a specific Hadith, or tradition of Mohammad, to defend this belief. “Do not cut severely as that is better for a woman and more desirable for a husband.” (Sunan Abu Dawu‘d, 41: 5251)

But even with this lack of support, Zahra and the members of FERO know that if they do not continue their work, the community will suffer. “Each stitch holds together the bag that catches the milk that feeds the family and supports the community.”

> Women are vulnerable and they are the ones who lost their beloveds in the civil war: their husbands, sons, brothers, and fathers. Besides that, they struggled to provide for their children, families, and elders. In addition to this, Somali women are contributing and participating toward peace, security, and stability. Women can play brilliant and unforgettable roles in peacebuilding. Somali women are dedicated and will continue to seek peace.

Pressure Groups and Faction Leaders

Zahra’s involvement in the creation and management of FERO has been only a small part of her contribution to helping Somali women recover and thrive during and after the war. In 2000, an official peace process began in Arta, Djibouti. Zahra attended the Somali Peace and National Reconciliation Conference as a member of civil society, a “minority” group at the conference, which was attended primarily by political leaders. “There were delegates who represented the Somali people and other groups who came to be involved in the peace process. The aim is to have a government. Every Somali person wants to have a working government.” Of the thousands of delegates in Arta, around 100 of them were politically active women. Zahra and her colleagues mobilized “pressure groups” from among these women, with the objective of ensuring that the stakeholders in the conference would not walk away from the negotiating table. Using their tradition of reciting poetry, or buraanburs, the women persuaded the delegates to sort out their differences and pursue resolution.

> I remember there was one big clan who said they would not go back to the conference. The next day, women went to where they were staying. We made up poems and songs and really showed them enthusiasm and told them they couldn’t leave. Believe me, they came back with us. We took them to the venue of the conference. People welcomed them back, and people talked about how the

> women had brought them back. It was the women delegates who organized these groups and meetings.

By August, a Transitional National Government (TNG) was formed and had elected a president to govern the country during the ongoing peace process.

However, the Arta conference was boycotted by faction leaders, the warlords essentially running the country.

> In Mogadishu, there are six faction leaders and they have supporters, staff, territories, and armies. In addition to that, the faction leaders have weapons and ammunition from neighboring countries. They were invited to participate in the Arta conference, but they refused to attend. They were not interested in the newly created government, as their interests were not being met. The result was that the government's control and power in Somalia was limited.

With these lessons learned, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the East African regional organization that convened the Arta conference,[9] sought to reconcile the faction leaders and transitional government in a series of meetings in a fresh initiative to stop the fighting: the Somali Reconciliation Conference, held in Eldoret, Kenya, beginning in 2002. "This was a very delicate conference because it was the first time in history that all faction leaders, the TNG, and civil society sat together to participate in the peace process. The conference was the future of the country and the people. It was very big." The objectives at Eldoret were three-fold: to obtain a ceasefire,[10] for six specific committees to create outcome documents for good governance, and to develop a plan for clan-based power sharing. Zahra, as an official delegate and representative of civil society, also became a member of one of the six committees, the Committee on Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation, and thus, one of only five women leaders chosen to participate in an official capacity at the negotiating table. "It looks like the role of women is coming out."

---

[9] IGAD consists of seven countries: Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan, and Uganda.
[10] A ceasefire was agreed in October 2002.

The tension between the faction leaders and the TNG, however, continued to overshadow any progress at the conference. Zahra attended a meeting of the faction leaders, what was known as the Leaders Committee, and tried to bring the voices of women in civil society to the gathering. She was eager and willing to attend, as this was the first constructive communication between people in violent conflict. But mistrust pervaded the room, and the warlords could not agree on a chairperson to conduct the meeting. Eventually, the men looked to Zahra, finding her impartial and non-threatening. “They knew that I didn’t have the same interests as a faction leader because I am a woman. I was not supporting any one of them.”

After she accepted the leaders’ nomination, Zahra set rules and boundaries that the participants had to follow to ensure all voices were heard and that everyone at the table was treated fairly and equally. “I saw that this would be a big responsibility and there would be obstacles and difficulties. I had taken courses on mediation processes, and they really benefited me in this situation.” Her procedural guidelines included allotting the same amount of time to each person who wanted to speak, listening to each participant, and prohibiting all violence in word or deed; the overarching rule was respect for each person.

At one point, there were two men from the same clan but different factions who were part of the committee. “One of them was very powerful. When one came in the room, the other one stood up and left.” Zahra called for a break in the proceedings and went to talk to the man who left. “I went to him and said, ‘Look, you come from the same people. Why are we here? For consideration, for peace, for Somalia. Maybe tomorrow you can accept each other and collaborate.’” The man returned the next day.

You Have to Look for Hope

As the peace process and the reconciliation conference continues with international mediation, the reality on the ground in Somalia is still bleak and the prospects for true peace tenuous as the violence continues unabated. Her safety is often compromised. “I want to take care of myself. But it won’t stop me from what I am doing.”

But Zahra continues her work with FERO and advocating for women’s active involvement in the peace process. Despite her and other women’s contributions to the Arta and Eldoret conferences, women’s representation in any new Somali government will be limited. As of 2003, women held only twelve percent of the positions in parliament, under half of what they had demanded. “We wanted more than twenty-five percent women’s participation in the parliament, in the cabinet, and in regional and local government positions. We are still struggling for more.” Zahra takes a historical perspective in relation to this marginalization: “Women assisted financially and sacrificed for their country” during the fight for independence from colonial rule, but were left out of decisions about how to build the country once it was free. “They cooked the food and never ate.” Likewise now, “After the food is cooked, we are left out.”

Despite this, Zahra respects and seeks out the people who are not “looking for their own interests. It’s difficult in this situation to find compromise, forgiveness, and peace.” Relying on her religious faith, her husband and three children, her extended family, and the women of FERO, Zahra has hope while Somalia struggles toward recovery. “You have to look for hope. Hope makes you energized.”

Bibliography

Affi, Ladan. “A Role Model for Somali Women.” In *Pour une culture de la paix en Somalie: actes du second congrès international des études somaliennes*. Eds. Mohamed Mohamed-Abdi and Patrice Bernard. Paris: La Direction, 1997.

Report of Committee Six on Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation. Eldoret-Nairobi, Kenya: Somali National Reconciliation Conference, Phase Two, March 2003.