

PERSPECTIVES

Empowering vulnerable Somali Girls and Women - a narrative on the role of education for health and development

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ABSTRACT

Promoting the education of girls and young women is a powerful strategy for empowering them in societies influenced by traditional patriarchal cultural norms. Hawa Aden Mohamed, a Somali educator, has been urging action on women's rights for over twenty years. Following years of exile during civil unrest, she returned to her homeland in 1999 and established the Galkayo Education Centre for Peace and Development. It is a non-government organisation committed to strengthening the capacity of girls and women to advocate for fundamental human rights such as gender equality in education and health, and protection from abusive practices such as female genital mutilation.

Within this narrative, the voices of Mama Hawa, current and former students and their mothers, school officials and local government representatives connect to tell the compelling story of this inspirational Somali-based Centre.

This may serve as a catalyst for nurturing girls' education and create an enabling environment for pivotal engagement in Somalia's national development and the pursuit of human rights. Somali leaders at all tiers of governance, civil society organisations, educational institutions, the private sector, the wider communities, and international partners are urged to work to make gender equality and the empowerment of girls and women through education, a central theme for achieving all the Sustainable Development Goals.

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Background

Education is a human right which gives people opportunities to enjoy a healthy lifestyle and positively contribute to society. Investing in equitable and quality education may reverse extreme poverty and contribute to reaching the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The absence of educational opportunities entrenches poverty across generations [1]. Globally 258 million children and adolescents are not enrolled in schools due to factors deriving from poverty and hardship [2].

When reinforced by traditional gender norms favouring boys, girls are disproportionately impeded in their educational and health-related development. Global and national issues

such as the COVID-19 pandemic, HIV, climate change and civil conflicts, all contribute to a widening of social and gender inequalities and inequities [3].

Poverty is a key underlying factor which disproportionately disadvantages the health and social development of girls and women. In Somalia, gender inequality is one of the highest in the world resulting in limited opportunities for girls and women to engage in accessing education, health care, and the labour market. In 2012 the United Nations Development Program ranked Somalia as the fourth highest globally in terms of gender inequality based on a global index which encompasses reproductive health, empowerment

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and the labour market. Somalia was given a score of 0.78 out of a possible one. In Somalia girls and women have restricted access to educational opportunities compared with boys and men and on children's rights Somalia is placed at the lowest rank out of 178 countries [4].

In Somalia, many societal and religious norms impede the realization of fundamental human rights, particularly for girls and women. Gender inequality is rooted in socio-cultural and religious attitudes, beliefs and practices which have permeated institutional settings. High rates of maternal and neonatal mortality rates are indicative of government neglect; investment in the health sector in Somalia is just 1.3 percent of total government spending. Maternal and newborn fatalities arise as a consequence of the prevalent high-risk practice of female genital mutilation (FGM). Rape and other forms of gender-based violence (GBV) have long-term detrimental impacts on the lives of girls and women [5].

Just as health is an investment in peace and development, education is a gateway to the labour market, gender equality and more broadly, equity and human rights. The education of girls and young women is a key strategy for empowering them to take their rightful positions in society. This principle was the inspiration for Hawa Aden Mohamed, popularly known at home as Mama Hawa, a Somali educator and champion of women's rights. After several years in exile during civil unrest, Mama Hawa returned to her country in 1999. She then established the Galkayo Education Centre for Peace and Development to care for and empower vulnerable girls and women. Mama Hawa's commitment was staunch and unrelenting in the face of harsh critics from various parts of Somali society, both civil and religious.

The GECPD was established as a central point for mobilizing local and global resources in providing girls with basic education and women with practical literacy skills. Somali women endured extreme hardship before, during, and after the civil war. Limited resources have impacted on employment opportunities for all, but women have borne a disproportionately high burden of disadvantage that impacts across their life course.

In line with Somali tradition, girls are expected to be married off to other families, implying that their presence in the family is not expected to be long-term. Many parents view girls and young women as resources to be 'used' to benefit the household financially. Girls who enter young marriages are overworked with domestic duties and other jobs, some of which can place them in danger.

Women are also severely under-represented in political, economic, and decision-making processes, and they have been passive recipients of their social situation. They face greater challenges in fighting against gender discrimination, fostering individual growth, and obtaining information necessary for their own and their children's wellbeing. Primary school enrolment is persistently low, averaging 33 percent nationally, with rural, nomad and

female participation being the lowest [6].

The GECPD is located in the northern part of Galkayo city in the Mudug region which is administered by the state of Puntland. Galkayo city is the second-largest city in Puntland. The southern part of Galkayo city is administered by the neighbouring state of Galmudug. Galkayo city functions as the commercial hub and has recently experienced significant economic growth.

GECPD's Governance Structure includes a 6-member Board of Director who are responsible for policy related matters of the organization. The Board meets twice a year. The second tier is the management team comprising the Executive Director, Program Coordinator and Finance & Admin Officer who are responsible for the day to day running of the organization affairs. The organization currently has 54 employees.



Figure 1. Entrance to the main centre of GECPD

Aims

The vision for GECPD (www.gecpsomalia.org) is a society where girls and women are safe, respected, and can peacefully participate in all decisions affecting their lives, families, and communities. The GECPD mission is to work for a just, violence-free society where girls, adolescents and women exercise their entitlement to basic human rights, such as education, health, and livelihood opportunities. This has served as a background against which we have set the following aims of this paper:

- To describe the activities of GECPD in relation to:
 - safeguarding children from violence, abuse, neglect, and defending their rights to security, education, health, and well-being, and
 - providing humanitarian assistance for victims of sexual and domestic violence as well as to

conflict, drought and famine-stricken communities.

- To provide some examples of how GECPD has empowered girls and women by encouraging them to participate in local and national-level decision-making and to highlight how this is realized through the provision of safe spaces and platforms for dialogues on peace and reconciliation.
- To explore GECPD programs aimed at developing the employability of women and adolescent girls through education and skills-based training to build capacity for empowerment - physically, emotionally, politically, and socially.
- To identify the strengths and challenges encountered in establishing and developing the GECPD.

Data collection

This report narrates a twenty-five-year journey, partly guided by a video interview held with Mama Hawa in 2019. We have used the video to illustrate the founder's initial thoughts while being in the diaspora, what she faced when getting started, her view on the role of education, central to GECPD's vision, and finally her belief in change which ultimately is a driving force behind the Centre. Since the video is more than 30 minutes long we cut it into clips to fill this quadruple purpose.

Primary information was also collected through interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) held with key informants from various backgrounds. Four FGDs were conducted, two with mothers (five members in each) and two with the girls (one group of three girls and the other with ten girls). Three single interviews with males were also conducted, one with the mayor, one with the school headmaster and one with a father. All the FGDs were recorded and later transcribed into English. All the FGDs were performed by the principal investigator (MA). A former student collected the interviewees, set the meeting time, and made the initial introduction of the participants to the principal investigator.

The discussions covered a range of opinions and perspectives. The interviews provided deeper insights into how girls and women are treated in their local context. Secondary information was assembled to give this story a contextual background.

The GECPD Board and Management granted us permission to use photos of GECPD Buildings, program activities and program beneficiaries interviewed for the purposes of this article. Individual consent was also granted from participants appearing on photos and quoted in the article. We have written consent from the GECPD Board and Management to use additional interviews appearing on GECPD's website.

Key Findings

Establishing the GECPD

When asked in the video interview why she returned to her country, Mama Hawa's response reveals a compassion for her people. She explains how it was untenable for her to continue enjoying a modern western life in Canada while knowing that Somali women and children needed support. In the [interview](#) Mama Hawa also shares her feelings when confronting the issue of FGM. This was a pivotal turning point which prompted her resignation from well-paid employment in Canada and the decision to return to Somalia.



"I wanted to go home – I was not homesick – I just wanted to go home."

Figure 2. Hawa Aden Mohammed, Founder of GECPD (Image published with the permission of Mama Hawa and the GECPD Board)

In the initial set-up phase priorities were given to internally displaced persons (IDPs). Mama Hawa [continues](#) to express this forcefully in the interview.

"They came in thousands from the south, there was cultural clash, hunger...nowhere to go... they were out... especially the girls, they were bringing the water, they carried firewood...then the rapes...do not see, not hear... what happened last night, don't ask me."

She explains that GECPD is...

"...not only a place to stay, not only a shelter ... but also literacy programs are integrated."

After the civil conflict eased, families, displaced as a result of the city's thirty-year civil strife, relocated to a cluster of communities that emerged around Galkayo. Even though Galkayo's 'relative stability' attracted civilians, sexual violence remains common in many communities where IDPs congregate. Girls journey into secluded areas in search of firewood and the militia

Table 1. Facilities in Galkayo city emerging from 1999 and onwards supported by Oxfam Novib, Diakonia, Norwegian Peoples Aid (NPA), Spazio Solidale, Marie Saibene, American Refugee Council (ARC).

<p>Halabookhad Community Centre Established between 2010 and 2011 to provide the IDP community in Halabookhad settlement a place where they could meet and discuss issues of concern to them and offer non-formal education to women and girls.</p>	<p>Minority Education Centre Established from 2002 to 2003 to cater for the education of minority and IDP women and children in and around Buulo Baaley. The centre has 3 classrooms, 1 office room, 1 dining hall, 1 kitchen and 4 toilets.</p>	<p>Youth Peace and Sports Resource Centre Established in 2010 to provide youth a place to meet, participate in peace building and engage in sports and other tent areas as strategy towards mitigating the risk factors that could make them resort to social debauchery and other criminal activities. The centre has a library/ICT center, a social hall with 300 seating capacity, basketball court, football pitch with 800-seater grand sand, canteen, and kitchen.</p>
<p>Vocational Training Centre Established between 2009 and 2010 with support of the community to provide skills training to vulnerable boys. The center has two workshops, carpentry and metalwork, and an exhibition shed.</p>	<p>Main Centre Established 1999 to serve as hub for GECPD as an organization. Comprises of 7 classrooms, a tailoring skills training room equipped with sewing machines, 11 office rooms, 2 storerooms, a conference hall, a residential unit and 6 shop outlets for income generation to support GECPD programs.</p>	<p>Halabookhad Women Market Constructed in 2010 to provide the enterprising IDP women in settlement a place where they could operate business and earn a livelihood and the residents a place where they could do their shopping given the long distance of the settlement from the main town and market which made the shopping an expensive undertaking for the IDPs.</p>
<p>Tailoring and Garment Making Centre Established in 2007 to provide tailoring skills training to IDP women and girls. The workshop has a tailoring hall, 2 storerooms and an office room.</p>		

presence of demobilized militia is confronting. They also face danger in remote IDP settlements situated outside populated towns such as Galkayo. Mama Hawa wants to ensure that these vulnerable women and girls receive the assistance they deserve:

“I want to provide these girls and women with a comfortable, safe shelter to stay, and then later by providing food, clothes, tailoring and computer skills. Most important, basic literacy for these girls was a stepping stone into integrating health and preventing female genital mutilation and gender-based violence through a response plan.”

Initially, GECPD had limited funding and resources were actively sought from local partners, communities, and civil society organizations. Education programs need longterm and sustained funding to be able to be impactful. Lack of funding has sometimes led to temporary closure or disruptions of the programs. Moreover, GECPD has had a challenge in retaining qualified and experienced teachers who will quite often leave for greener pastures causing gaps in teaching. In addition, the teacher/student ratio of 1:40, although not worse than the national average, is too wide. The funders role was mainly providing resources to establish and run the programs. This, of course, includes regular monitoring of the execution of the program, sometimes involving government representatives. During the establishment, GECPD worked closely with community women support groups.

GECPD is registered and recognized as an education facility by the Puntland Ministry of Education. GECPD programs are also recognized by the Puntland Ministry of Labour and the course content and certification is endorsed by the ministry. Government assistance included provision of land on which the initial centre was constructed; providing political good will and moral encouragement at a time when some conservative forces were against the programs run by the centre. Thus, vocational training courses were recognized through endorsement of their certification and promotion of linkages with other multi-lateral partners such as UNICEF and UNESCO. The government also granted GECPD tax exemption status which enabled it to receive some in-kind assistance from its supporters abroad, hence boosting its resource mobilization efforts to run the program.

Many at-risk Somali girls and women in the area and beyond have adopted GECPD as a ‘second home’. With the support of the community (both local and diaspora) and various donors, GECPD has built 12 education centres/schools that provide ongoing support for the provision of formal and non-formal education and skills training for women and girls, as well as vulnerable boys. All the current facilities are well furnished and equipped. Previously, classes were held in rented rooms and outdoors.

Tables 1 and 2 show the different facilities that have been built alongside and outside GECPD since its establishment in 1999.

Table 2. Facilities emerging outside Galkayo supported by UNHCR, Spazio Solidale, Marie Saibene, Islamic Relief, Holy Trinity Wimbledon.

<p>Harfo Boys Peace School Constructed in 2009 to offer formal primary education to young boys in the area who had resorted to mischievous activities for lack of education opportunities. The school comprises of 4 classrooms, an office room and dining hall. The school is now also utilized in the morning to offer secondary education to girls.</p>	<p>Bursallah Woman Centre Constructed 2008 and 2009 to provide non-formal education to returnee and poor pastoral rural women and girls in the area. The centre consists of 3 rooms, 1 office and 4 toilets. GECPD has also been providing adult literacy programs in rented rooms to poor rural women in Jariban and Balibusle.</p>	<p>Harfo Girls Hostel Established between 2004 and 2007 to provide accommodation to vulnerable internally displaced, orphaned, and poor pastoral nomadic girls enrolled in the education and skills training programs at the Harfo Girls and Women Centre. Also, a safe haven for girl survivors of violence. The hostel consists of 8 dormitories with a capacity to accommodate 160 girls.</p>
<p>Harfo Girls Centre Established from 2003 to 2007 to provide education to returnee, orphaned and poor pastoral girls in the area.</p>	<p>Ba’adweyn Women Centre Established between 2004 and 2005 to provide non-formal second chance, adult literacy education and tailoring skills training to returnee, poor pastoral rural women, and girls in the area. The centre comprises 4 classrooms and 1 office room.</p>	

Programs and capacity building

In a third clip from the video interview Mama Hawa shares her views on and rationale behind the Centre's investment in education programs:

“Without education you are not what you are supposed to be – independent, thoughtful... you have so many problems, health problems, the FGM problem, the belittled woman, beating wives, rape – gender equality and empowerment is nothing without education... education is the key for human beings, it develops you personally, emotionally, economically, and it empowers you. Without education you can't do much.”

GECPD provides four sets of educational and vocational programs. Table 3 shows the number of participants that have been involved in different programs since 2000. There were 1,096 girls, vulnerable boys and women enrolled under various basic education and skills training programs offered by GECPD in the school year August 2022/May 2023. There have been 58,453 participants attending the various GECPD programs across its centres since 2000. From 2006, 574 girls and 209 boys have completed eight years of learning culminating in a final official examination prepared and awarded by the Puntland State government of Somalia.

Formal primary education is offered to girls and vulnerable boys, aged eight to fifteen years, who come from orphaned, poor, internally displaced and minority families. In the scholastic year 2022/2023, 814 (505 girls and 309 boys) were enrolled under the program which covers a ten-year course with two years of pre-primary and eight years of primary education.

Non-formal education and adult literacy programs are offered to older girls and women aged above 16 years

who missed an earlier educational opportunity, either due to poverty, displacement resulting from incessant armed conflicts and droughts or the traditional segregation of girls in education. Issues pertinent to women's rights are integrated into the main curriculum. In the scholastic year 2022/2023, a total of 126 girls who missed an earlier educational opportunity were enrolled under the Second Chance Education Program. This is an 18-month intensive course aimed at building the capacity of these girls and enabling them to integrate into the formal education program to continue their studies. The zero involvement as of 2019 was initially due to scarce resources but subsequently covid-19 hindered the intense participation required. Fifty-six women without any literacy skills were enrolled under the Adult Literacy Program, an 18-month course aimed at equipping them with functional literacy and numeracy skills. Many of these women are involved in small businesses. The skills and knowledge gained through the Program allows them to develop their entrepreneurial capabilities.

Vocational training mainly targets vulnerable girls and boys aged 17 to 34 years without any known employable skills. The intention is to help them earn a decent living. The main skills offered include tailoring and garment making, henna and hair dressing for women and girls, carpentry, metal fabrication and electrical installation, mainly for boys. In the scholastic year 2022/2023, another 100 young women were enrolled under the Skills Training Program where they are equipped with employable skills in garment making, and in henna and hair dressing.

Mudug region, where GECPD is based, falls within the regions with relatively better education facilities. Yet, not many schools were open when GECPD was established in

Table 3. Number of participants by program over the period 2000-2023

Period	Primary Education	Second-Chance	Adult Literacy	Vocational skills	Total
2000-01	279	644	4 080	72	5 075
2001-02	725	428	2 200	72	3 425
2002-03	277	1 080	3 500	65	4 922
2003-04	414	722	1 200	60	2 396
2004-05	527	677	1 239	60	2 503
2005-06	664	856	863	102	2 485
2006-07	773	929	1 066	99	2 867
2007-08	895	545	1 086	170	2 696
2008-09	893	1 837	667	296	3 693
2009-10	1 234	1 616	432	210	3 492
2010-11	1 015	1 550	0	250	2 815
2011-12	805	1 500	100	150	2 555
2012-13	537	1 550	50	140	2 277
2013-14	536	1 600	0	130	2 266
2014-15	644	0	0	100	744
2015-16	735	200	400	200	1 535
2016-17	727	150	450	250	1 577
2017-18	949	300	700	200	2 149
2018-19	1 149	280	720	272	2 421
2019-20	1 033	0	845	0	1 878
2020-21	895	0	870	125	1 890
2021-22	783	0	768	145	1 696
2022-23	814	126	56	100	1 096
Total	17 303	16 590	21 292	3 268	58 453

1999 and those that were open gave preference to boys. Literacy levels amongst women and girls were very low. Moreover, Somalia is a culturally conservative patriarchal society and parents were not comfortable with the idea of mixed gender schools. At its advent, GECPD was the only place offering programs that specifically targeted girls and women. Yet today people are slowly and gradually appreciating the value of girls' education and more mixed-gender schools are opening. However, affordability remains a big challenge for many parents.

GECPD is involved in *awareness creation and policy advocacy* on women rights issues such as FGM and GBV, Gender, Human and Women Rights, HIV/AIDS, Community Health, Peace and Reconciliation, Democracy and Environmental Education. Since 2007 GECPD has been offering psycho-social, medical and legal support to women and child survivors of violations and those at risk. This includes:

- safe haven for female survivors of violations and girls at risk;
- child friendly spaces for neglected and abandoned children in IDP settlements and the broader community (since 2011);
- constructive engagement of vulnerable youth through sports, life skills development and employable skills training (since 2010);
- safe and alternative livelihoods for women and girls at risk of GBV (since 2008) and
- menstrual hygiene/dignity kits for women and girls of reproductive age (mainly IDPs).

The Self Reliance and Sustainable Livelihoods Program for vulnerable women and girls has mainly benefited IDP women heads of households. Through this initiative GECPD has:

- constructed the Halabookhad Women's Market where 62 IDP female heads of households have been helped to start small business enterprises.
- established the Galkayo Tailoring School where women and girls are trained and engaged in producing locally made menstrual hygiene kits;
- conducted business management and entrepreneurial skills training program that has benefitted over 1,200 displaced persons in the last 5 years who through advocacy have received business start-up grants of between US\$ 500 and US\$ 1000. A majority of the beneficiaries have been women facing livelihood related protection risks.

Humanitarian interventions began in 2006 They target IDPs in settlements in and around Galkayo. Through these activities, GECPD has been involved in the distribution of non-food relief supplies to over 20,000 newly arrived, evicted and fire affected displaced families in Galkayo over the past ten years.

Promoting girls education in a state of displacement, widespread poverty and overwhelming needs remained a big challenge to GECPD. The demand for the girls' labour

at home to help meet family needs was an impediment to them accessing education. To mitigate the opportunity cost of girls attending education to family survival, GECPD in 2008 and 2013 rolled out an ambitious food for training program, whereby families would be provided monthly food rations in exchange of allowing their women and girls attend education and vocational training programs provided by GECPD. Over 6,800 internally displaced, poor and famine affected families in Galkayo, Harfo, Ba'adwey, Bursallah and Galdogob benefitted from the program acquiring basic literacy, numeracy and employable skills.

GECPD founders recognized the important role the youth could play in driving the social change that could help fast track eradication of negative social norms that impede empowerment of women and girls. This includes the acknowledgement that the youth themselves were a neglected lot in key decision making processes and community development in general. GECPD continues to nurture young talents to take over the running of the Centre. Thus, seven former beneficiaries of the program have returned and absorbed in various capacities including working as teachers. It is expected that they will develop the capacity over time to take over from the older generation. Upon completion of the formal primary education, some of GECPD graduates have received support or secured scholarships to pursue secondary and tertiary education in other existing schools and institutions of higher learning. Currently, GECPD is supporting some 25 of the beneficiaries from Halabookhad IDP school to pursue secondary education. It is hoped upon completion they will be the seed that will help with the continuity of the program within that community.

A Youth Development Program was hence initiated through the Galkayo Youth Resource Centre for Peace. This facility provides young people with a safe place where they can meet and organize themselves to engage in promoting peace, sharing ideas and experiences, proposing their own solutions, learning to assert themselves in articulating issues of concern, and transferring important lessons to their peers and the community at large, while engaging in sports and the arts. Facilities at the Centre include a resource library, an auditorium, gender friendly sports facilities, a dormitory and a social recreation arena.

The Galkayo Youth Resource Centre has been a centre for peace building not only for youth but for the entire Mudug society and Somalia. Programs include:

- engaging with the IDP, refugee and host community youth aged 12 to 24 years in various sports disciplines including local and inter-regional tournaments;
- training youth on issues of peace, GBV/FGM, Environmental Conservation, democracy, and civic education;
- life skills development and mentorship programs for youth;
- promoting and organizing community dialogues

on peace and peaceful co-existence;

- engaging youth in performing arts such as drama, poetry and other folk media and
- organizing book fairs themed on peace and women empowerment

The voices

Zamzam Abshir Samriye ...



"The boys in my secondary school class would warn us to stop talking since we were so sure of ourselves and eager to participate in class discussions."

Figure 3. Zamzam Abshir Samriye (Image from GECPD's website published with her permission)

... was one of the initial enrollees in the GECPD education programs in the early 2000's. Young as she was, she presented herself to the centre for enrolment after learning that the school was open to girls and was free of charge. Her mother demanded a commitment from her daughter that she would continue to do her household duties in exchange for letting her attend the school. Her ambition was to become a strong woman who would stand up for the rights of other women and girls. In 2007, Zamzam finished her elementary education at GECPD along with 46 other girls and then transferred to a mixed secondary school.

"At first, my mother was dubious because she questioned why the school would be free and heard rumours that the founders intended to instill 'Western culture' in the girls. I recall enrolling in 2002 and hearing others make fun of us on the way to and from school for going to the 'foreign school' that would 'spoil us', but I persisted in going."

Zamzam is now a member of one of the locally evolving political associations and one of the six women who were chosen in March 2019 to seat on the 31-member Council of Galkayo town. She hopes to become Galkayo's first female mayor and then a cabinet minister. She objects

to the ancillary roles assigned to women and says:

"Most often, if you are identified as a female minister, you will be appointed to the ministry of women and gender affairs. That is not what I am anticipating. I want a meaningful ministry where I can demonstrate my abilities, like finance or education..I find it amazing that some of my family who opposed my attending school now take pride in my accomplishments and value my opinions. I appreciate GECPD and all its past contributors for assisting me in achieving this respectable rank. The true power is in the pen, without a doubt."

Zamzam is greatly appreciative of how GECPD, with the help of donors like Oxfam Novib, Diakonia, and others, altered her life and brought her one step closer to achieving her goals.

The deputy mayor ...

...representing the local government, saw GECPD as an important integral part of the city - a small light shining in their community. He saw GECPD as being instrumental in increasing the confidence and outlook for the girls and said that what was unusual was seeing girls' taking microphones speaking out about their concerns in the city. He also noted that some of the girls were employed to help handle crimes, rapes, drought, and related issues. The local government made GECPD exempt from paying taxes and donated land for the initial physical facilities.

The headteacher ...

...of the largest public secondary school in the region of Mudug, Omar Samatar Secondary School, highlighted the main barriers and what could be done to overcome the challenges girls face, especially their lack of representation in the job market and in politics. For example, if rape occurs in this community, it is difficult to find a woman lawyer to represent them.

The lack of mothers' education is problematic for their daughters. There are many examples in which girls are assigned heavy kitchen work/household chores that disrupt their ability to finish assignments, prepare for exams, and attend school regularly and on time. The headteacher highlighted the value of collaboration between schools and the Centre. Due to the GECPD not having a secondary education programs, public schools fill this crucial gap.

While the school draws on the important fundamental principles that the girls learnt from the Centre, such as empowerment, it expands upon this knowledge, and ensures that it is shared by all segments of society once the girls graduate from secondary school.

Girls from GECPD helped other girls find a way to address empowerment since they tended to be confident and open to sharing what they learned from the Centre with other students. This was achieved through public presentations in classes, school activities, and projects.

A father...

...who had brought five of his daughters to the GECPD said that changing men's attitudes towards women and

girls has been a long journey. But he noted that it was worth it. His five daughters had received a high-quality education and are fully prepared mentally to face the challenges of life. He strongly supported the education of girls. He has tried to educate the men in popular social gathering places like cafés and places of worship about girls' empowerment. He became a role model for other fathers who became more inclined to bring their daughters to the Centre.



“Boys are treated differently to girls; they are not expected to carry a lot of responsibility like us in this society specially in school age times. The girls are expected to be students and a mother at the same time.”

Figure 4. Focus group session with former students (Image published with the permission of all participants)

Former students of the Centre ...

...raised issues related to gender discrimination. They stated difference in treatment at family and community level favouring boys. They acknowledged the many responsibilities such as housework and caring for the younger siblings being placed on girls' shoulders.

There have been several joint activities and interactions between older women and mothers of former students from both the Galmudug and Puntland states. They include meetings and discussions about peace keeping and development. It was not previously common for young girls to get involved in such meetings in Somalia.

Participants say that they do not appreciate the societal structure and norms in which they live. For example, one participant highlighted that when girls fall victims of rape and domestic abuses, clan leaders from both parties (i.e. families of the victim and perpetrator) exchange money based on the degree of harm, but as they see it. This occurs without any consultation of care to the feelings of the victim. Victims of rape are unjustly often treated by close relatives who accept money from the offender's family and force the victims to keep silent. More often they never receive a share of the compensation despite being victims of the harm.

Participants recognised the important impact of GECPD on their lives as women. They acknowledged how illiterate they were before and explained how the Centre had changed their lives by making them aware of their rights. This has made them hopeful for their future.

The girls also noted that their mothers chose not to subject their younger siblings to the circumcision of girls after contact with the Centre. Likewise, participants discussed FGM/cutting, associated with immediate and longterm health complications, and a socio-cultural practice unworthy for the new generation of educated women. In addition, they highlighted the scarce but highly needed mental health services in Somalia.



“There is no justice, the boy that raped the girl is released after his family pay money and the girl is left in traumatized condition. Her life is not important, what matters is the reputation and statue of the family in the community. There is a lot of covering up that occurs.”

Figure 5. Interview with mothers of current students. (Image published with the permission of all participants)

Mothers of former and current students of GECPD Centre ...

... explained the bleak outlook with the city's lack of opportunity for their girls and how the GECPD intervention has helped improve this. They talked about the lack of jobs for women with children many of whom have absentee fathers. These situations brought on extreme financial hardship. With reduced funding, GECPD has been forced to impose a fee subsidy for learners in its schools to help meet the cost of running its programs. But even though the subsidy is far too low compared to market rates, some mothers struggle to pay these relatively small fees for their girls' education posing a challenge to the continuity of GECPD's programs and a threat to girls access to education.



“The girls in here need counseling, girls deal with traumatic memories associated with the procedure. ... there is no place for us to go to... people say she is mad person, no medication and prevention are available in the community.”

Figure 6. Interview with mothers of former students. (Image published with the permission of all participants)

“When mothers visit the Health Centre, after we are treated, we worry about hospital fees as we can’t afford it and we can’t leave the health Centre. So, the health worker calls GECPD and talks about our situation and GECPD gives the Health Centre the remaining amount to free us from the medical Centre, we are grateful to GECPD.”

Despite the major efforts to stop FGM practices in Somalia, this remains a deeply rooted harmful cultural practice with long-term health risks.



Figure 7. Community mobilization against female genital mutilation (Image from GECPD’s website published with the permission of the Board).

In one participant’s words...

“Even though today educated mothers tend to not do FGM, some are still doing it and find it hard to let go of old things they knew from their past lives’ experiences. it’s slowly changing, but the FGM practice is still widespread across this community.”

Hawa’s voice towards the end of the video articulates her strong belief in [change](#). She proudly states that many of the girls have been lifted “from the floor” and risen up to become professionals.

The way forward

GECPD aspires for a violence-free society where girls, women, and young people exercise their civil rights for education, health, and improved livelihoods. Gender equality and equity will facilitate sustainable and transformational improvements in Somalia’s economic and social development [4,7]. The GECPD empowers women and adolescent girls to participate in decision-making processes at all levels by fostering peace and reconciliation dialogues among Galkayo communities and beyond.

The strongest educational barriers for girls are socio-cultural. When boys and girls meet in traditional Quran learning places (madrassas) boys and girls are segregated, while the teachers sit in the middle to impart teaching. Similarly, the strong culture of preparing and training girls for early marriage and enhancing their domestic household skills for reproductive, maternal, childcare, and family management skills, makes school enrolment for girls more difficult particularly in poverty stricken rural areas.

Investing in girls’ education is transformative. Educated girls are more likely to earn higher incomes and participate in decision making on the issues that affect their lives and those of their families and communities [7,8]. To scale up the initiative, the government must strive for universal primary education and gender mainstreaming through the meaningful participation of women in national development [6,10,11].

The GECPD role includes focused interventions to create a supportive environment where they can seek help against GBV [5,7], with psychosocial counselling and peer support. The centre stands for the total abandonment of FGM, yet candid discussions are encouraged to better understand the hazards of the practice [11]. The centre has supported many IDPs and survivors of FGM and GBV through medical, legal, psycho-social and livelihood support. Those at-risk can access a safe haven at Harfo Girls Hostel. Over 453 survivors of FGM and GBV (predominantly women) have been supported by GECPD since 2007.

At least 98% of Somali girls between 9-15 years’ age have undergone FGM/cutting [11,12]. In addition to pain and distress, FGM leads to longterm complications during childbirth. FGM also leads to school absenteeism, poor educational performance and possible drop-out. The most severe form of FGM, infibulation, is practiced in 80% of the cases [12]. Despite years of intense awareness creation and advocacy, meaningful behavioural change has yet to occur. However, one of the positive outcomes of this gradual change is that cases of FGM are now regarded as GBV and reported to GECPD. To mobilize a greater solidarity for girls’ education and gender equity rights, local, district, regional and inter-state partnerships need to be established with links to the Global Partnerships for Education, and the Universal Girls’ Education Accelerator.

We need to move forward strategically through the establishment of civil society organizations (CSOs) and involving them in all local community development processes, especially in the social sectors. In Somalia, these interventions are still underrated but are most essential for the envisioned Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) development pathways.

As the CSOs are closely embedded within the grassroots communities, they can promote self-help potentials, especially in all aspects of poverty reduction and gender mainstreaming. Their knowledge of the local context enables them to generate valid evidence and carry out advocacy, social mobilization, and consensus building on supporting universal primary and secondary education that is compulsory and free of charge. Supported by stakeholders, the CSOs can bring about a whole-of-society approach to strengthen primary education, health and well-being, while emphasizing government coordination and trust building among these diverse actors. However, the diverse stakeholders also need to document and report their actions, as a measure of accountability to secure the trust of the engaged CSOs who are assisting the most vulnerable segments of society

and protecting girls and women against GBV.

The Somali diaspora/refugees are estimated at 1.8 million spread in Europe, USA and Canada, the Middle East and Yemen, and across East and South Africa. The diaspora relate to their families at home with compassion since decades, annually remitting nearly US\$ 2 billion, of which the overwhelming proportion goes towards their families' living expenses, school fees, health expenses, and other emerging needs to enhance resilience in conflict situations, droughts and other calamities.

The diaspora organize fundraising opportunities for community development interventions such as building girls' schools, orphanages that support vulnerable children, and health facilities for women and children. Diaspora communities also support the placement of female community health workers for rural-based health services offering them education and employment opportunities while they perform essential health services to marginalized communities. The diaspora have also organized BCC focused on young girls, to eliminate practices like FGM/C and early marriages.

Humanitarian disasters' mitigation is another area where diaspora communities call for collective response across their hosting countries and regions. Moreover, a tangible number of the diaspora have returned to Somalia and are actively participating in community development by offering expertise to government institutions, universities and in nonprofit income generating ventures while improving the performance of targeted interventions.

Several social challenges confront women pushing them into the spiral of poverty and ill health, such as single mothers without any social or financial protection, who have had to assume responsibility for their children's survival and development. Thus women 'entrepreneurs' have emerged as the independent voice providing supportive counselling to other women and protect their human rights.

A major gender-based positive transformation is reflected in the Provisional National Constitution that promises women's participation in all elected and appointed positions across the three pillars of government, while enshrining the principal of equality before the law and upholding the right to political participation by all. The Family Law Act in 1975 assured women equal rights and made discrimination against women illegal [13]. This Act guarantees women's rights in marriage, divorce, and inheritance. However, civil status issues are most often resolved in traditional settings outside the purview of Family Law Courts.

To promote gender equality and equity, Somalia's public sector institutions should formally pursue cultural changes attained through leadership, education, media advocacy and law that can work together to bring about a behaviour change [9]. The equitable financial allocations for education, reproductive health, safe water, sanitation and transport, will improve the population's quality of life, bridge the gender gap and have a beneficial impact on maternal, newborn and child survival. These outcomes

will increase girls' school enrolments, improve their decision-making skills, and lessen the prevalence of child marriages and early pregnancies.

The profound developmental experience of the GECPD compels us to rally Somali leaders at all level, CSOs, academicians, private sector, communities and international partners to make gender mainstreaming a central theme towards achieving all the SDGs.

Author contributions

The study was conceived by SW, KB and BL. Interviews were conducted by MA supported by JA. MA provided a first draft supported by JA, FM and SW. SW, KB and BL further developed the draft and the final version was worked out by SW. All authors read and approved the final version.

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Paper Context

This report narrates a twenty-five-year journey of a Somali-based Centre established to create an enabling educational environment for vulnerable girls and women. We suggest that the Centre may serve as a catalyst for nurturing girls' education and for pivotal engagement in Somalia's national development and the pursuit of human rights.

Summary in Somali

CINWAAN

Siinta Gabdhaha iyo Haweenka Soomaaliyeed Fursad Labaad- Sheekadii Xarunta Waxbarashada Gaalkacyo ee Nabadda iyo Horumarinta

SOOKOOBID

Tani waa sheekadii xarunta waxbarashada Gaalkacyo ee nabadda iyo horumarinta iyo asaaseheedii Marwo Xaawo Aadan Maxamed. Kor u qaadida waxbarashada gabdhaha iyo haweenka da'da yar waa istaraatiijiyad awood leh oo iyaga lagu xoojiyo bulshooyinka ay saameeyeen caadooyin-dhaqameedyadii awoowayaashood. Xaawo Aadan Maxamed, oo ah aqoonyahan Soomaaliyeed, ayaa muddo labatan sano ka badan ku talineysay in wax laga qabto xuquuqda haweenka. Sannado ay qurbajoog ahayd muddadii rabshadaha sokeeye kaddib waxay ku soo laabatay dalkeeda 1999, waxayna asaastay Xarunta Waxbarashada ee Nabadda iyo Horumarinta Gaalkacyo (GECPD), oo ah hay'ad aan dowli-ahayn, ay ka go'an tahay iney xoojiso awoodda hablaha iyo haweenka si ay ugu doodaan xuquuqaha aasaasiga ah ee aadanaha sida u-sinnaanta jinsiga xuquuqaha waxbarashada iyo caafimaadka, iyo ka ilaalinta falalka xadgudubka ah sida gudniinka fircooniga ah. Sheekadan dhexdeeda, codadka Maama Xaawo, ardaydii hadda iyo kuwii hore iyo hooyooyinkood, madaxda dugsiga iyo wakiillada dawladda hoose waxay wada garteen inay tebiyaan sheekada soo jiidashada iyo dhiirigelinta leh ee Xarunta ka hawlgasha Soomaaliya. Tani waxay u adeegi kartaa inay noqoto mid horseed u ah kobcinta waxbarashada gabdhaha iyo abuurista jawi suurtagelinaya ka-qaybgalka muhiimka ah ee horumarinta qaranka Soomaaliya iyo raadinta xuquuqda aadanaha. Dhammaan hogaamiyeyaasha Soomaaliyeed heerarkooda kala duwan ee dowladnimada, ururada bulshada rayidka ah, xarumaha waxbarashada, ganacsiga gaarka loo leeyahay, bulsho weynta, iyo saaxiibada caalamiga ah ayaa loogu baaqay in ay ka shaqeeyaan sidii loo heli lahaa sinnaanta jinsiga iyo awoodsiinta gabdhaha iyo haweenka iyada oo loo marayo waxbarashada, taas oo ah mawduuc udub-dhexaad u ah gaarista dhammaan Yoolalka Horumarinta Waara.

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