

# *Burcad badeed - The Implications of Piracy for Somali Women*

*By Shukria Dini\**

## *Introduction*

Through the ongoing piracy off the coast of Somalia, Somali pirates continue to forcefully hold crews and their ships. They seajack the crew, using them and the goods they are transporting as hostages and demand ransoms to the tune of millions of dollars from the ship owners. This is the only part of the story that the world hears through the mainstream media. I am not an apologist for the pirates and personally condemn all kinds of piracy. However, I would assert that the mainstream media coverage on the piracy problem fails to capture the root causes and the gendered outcomes of piracy.

The purpose of this short piece is to explore the root causes of piracy and its specific effects on Somali women. To grasp the particular effects of piracy on Somali women, I argue it is important to discuss the causes of what we call ‘Somali piracy’ and to provide a gender analysis of the issue.

Somalia is located in the Horn of Africa and is endowed with a long coastline along the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea. The disintegration of Somalia’s state in the early 1990s clearly ushered in new challenges for the citizens of Somalia while producing new threats, such as the exploitation of foreign fishing fleets along its unguarded coast line that endangered the livelihoods of local fishermen. The collapsed state in Somalia resulted in the disintegration of all institutions, including the country’s national navy. For the last two decades, without a functioning navy to protect its coastline, Somalia has been forced to stand by as the waters off its coast became the site of a free-for-all as foreign fishing fleets from Europe, Asia and the Middle East engaged in the illegal exploitation of its marine resources. Some local actors, including warlords, have benefited from the absence of the state, making huge profits by providing “permission to fish” to external actors and fishing companies from various countries. The question to consider here is the extent to which political disintegration has affected Somalia’s marine resources, the livelihood of local fishermen, and the overall well-being of Somali women.

## *Understanding the Causes of Somali Piracy*

Foreign fishing vessels have been illegally exploiting Somalia’s marine resources since the 1990s when the Somali state collapsed. Somalia's unprotected coastline has attracted high-tech, modern foreign fishing fleets that exploit marine resources belonging to this war-ravaged nation and its people. This “invasion” has brought into close contact the not-so-modern subsistence local fishermen and the high-tech fishing vessels of industrialized countries. High-tech fishermen harvest far more fish than their technologically challenged Somali counterparts. This, as expected, has led to high tensions between these groups over the dwindling marine resources. The foreign fishing vessels are taking advantage of the political insecurity and the absence of a state navy in Somalia.

The situation was drawn to my attention between 2005 and 2006 when I was conducting research in Puntland, Somalia, a region that continues to be affected by piracy. Whilst there, I had the opportunity to speak to women activists who were leaders of non-governmental organizations that were doing work in the Tsunami-hit

areas including Bander Beyla town. Women and men residing in those coastal communities shared with me their experiences with foreign fishing fleets. They informed me of the humiliating intimidation inflicted by foreign fishing fleets on their own coastal waters. One local fisherman explained that their fishing nets were deliberately destroyed. Their boats were forced to capsize as they could not withstand the speeding power of these large fleets that came to illegally fish in their country's waters. They also talked about how they were water-hosed by foreign fishermen whenever they went out to fish in their own country's territory.

Foreign fishing vessels were described as hostile entities that use intimidation against the local fishermen. They described the effects of the "invasion" of foreign fishing fleets to their safety, ability to fish and earn a livelihood. They asserted that they had nowhere to turn to seek help from the foreign harassment and intimidation. They felt that there was a need to stop foreign fishing vessels from coming to Somalia's waters because their basic livelihood is threatened by larger fishing fleets. Thus, retaliation against the illegal fishing activities of the foreign fishing vessels was considered as not only appropriate action but also the only means available to these local fishermen to protect their livelihoods and the marine resources belonging to Somalia and its people.

I would add that the political circumstances in war-torn Somalia enabled these local fishermen to use armed violence and to attack foreign ships that entered Somalia's waters. That is how piracy was born along the Somali coastline in this modern era. It emerged as a result of state collapse, the illegal presence of foreign fishing fleets, as well as the ways in which some local individuals have taken advantage of the political situation in Somalia to appoint themselves the authority to license foreign fishing companies to fish in Somalia. Though at first aiming their violent attacks at vessels suspected of carrying illegal fishing crews, their reach eventually expanded to include not only fishing vessels but also commercial liners transporting trade goods and humanitarian aid.

Piracy off the coast of Somalia is a dangerous crime and has multiple effects on various people inside and outside of Somalia. The criminal and illegal activity threatens many lives including the lives of the pirates themselves and those of the foreign crews. It also threatens the lives of innocent Somali civilians including women residing in piracy zones of Somalia. It affects the free flow of goods that are for various markets and humanitarian goods intended to be given to the displaced population in the Horn of Africa region. If piracy in Somalia persists, it will likely perpetuate the on-going violence as warring groups find ways to tap into pirated money to purchase arms. This will enhance clan warfare ideology if it has not already done so.

The following sections will examine the particular ways in which piracy impacts on women and girls in Somalia and the need to consider gender when searching for durable solutions to this particular problem.

### *Piracy and Gender: What is the Connection?*

In what ways are Somali women affected by the ever-growing piracy as well as the resources generated from such illegal activities? How does piracy affect Somali women's livelihoods, socio-economic status and their overall security? Piracy off the coast of Somalia and the resources generated from such activity is not only a gender issue but also produces gendered outcomes for women and girls. Imagine you are a wife whose husband is a fisherman in a small coastal town in war-torn Somalia. Due

to the above-described situation, your husband and his fellow fishermen find it difficult to fish, as the marine resources are taken by these external entities. This directly affects you as woman, a mother and a member of that particular fishing community because the little income and food generated from fishing supports the basic food basket of your family and other families.

Then, these fishermen, including your husband, take up arms and try to scare off the foreign fishing boats. As a woman, this can affect you, particularly, if your husband loses his life in the ordeal. You will be left with the responsibility to care for your children without the support of your husband. If your husband survives the piracy, he may become part of a scheme where ships carrying out goods are hijacked and ransom are demanded in which millions of dollars are paid to the pirates. This ransom is divided among the pirates including your husband. The money could provide needed resources for your family, but on the other hand, it may adversely affect your relationship with your husband. You may not see a penny of this money. He may spend the money on himself including using it to chew *qat* (*Catha edulis*). The World Health Organization classifies *qat* as a drug of abuse that can produce mild to moderate psychological dependence.

More likely, he will take another young wife and this may affect you and your children as resources are diverted to his new family. If you express your misgivings about him taking another wife, you will be likely divorced and abandoned by your husband. Piracy is a crime committed by men and these men are members of specific families and communities. It is through their memberships and linkages with individuals including their wives, children, parents, siblings, relatives and community members that their actions and the outcomes of their actions affect their families including women and children.

Women in Somalia are directly and indirectly affected by piracy especially when their male family members are the ones who are doing the piracy off the coast of Somalia. They are affected when these pirates perish in the sea and whenever they are captured by foreign navies and brought to justice outside of Somalia.<sup>1</sup> Piracy affects the emotional and mental well-being of those who have close relationships with the actual pirates whether they are husbands, sons or fathers. Moreover, piracy can disrupt international trade and may impact the delivery of humanitarian aid to the Horn of Africa. This has direct and indirect dramatic effects on the well-being of Somali refugees and internally displaced women and their families who not only constitute the majority of this displaced population but also those who heavily depend upon humanitarian aid for their basic survival.

The absence of a gender analysis of piracy in Somalia has inevitably led to the formulation of gender-blind and non-gender inclusive solutions to combat this phenomenon. All of the anti-piracy strategies so far established exclude Somali women from playing a relevant role within the affected communities; both local and international actors involved in resolving piracy in Somalia have overlooked Somali women's potential contribution in dissuading their male relatives from piracy activities. Analyses of the effects of Somali piracy have focused more on its disruption and its criminality on global goods and international ships and less on the effects on the Somali people who are victims of piracy not only in terms of livelihood, through the loss of traditional fishing activities, but also in terms of social relations, gender relations in particular.

---

<sup>1</sup> "Somali Piracy Suspect Pleads Guilty in N.Y." *Associated Press*.  
<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2010/05/18/national/main6496451.shtml>

First, piracy and its specific gendered ramifications are ignored and second, both the proposed military force solution and the ransom payment strategies used by companies have failed to address the root causes of piracy in Somalia. These strategies also perpetuate the socio-economic situations for Somali women whose rights and dignity are violated by the pirates whose crimes are rewarded with large sums of hard currency. This money, rather than alleviating the burdens of Somali women and girls, creates problems, thwarting their attempts to persist in a hostile and insecure country.

Thus, I also argue that the past as well as current international discussions on piracy have overlooked its effects on Somali women living in the affected areas. Additionally some of these discussions have not been inclusive and have been held outside Somalia, and have led to the formulation of resolutions intended to respond to the piracy problem in the region. The use of force by the international navy vessels was authorized to fight piracy off the coast of Somalia.

In this brief paper, I examine and highlight some of the specific ways in which piracy off the coast of Somalia affect Somali women. I argue that piracy is a criminal activity which is detrimental to Somali women's well-being and it is of paramount importance to provide a gender analysis. This will enable us to understand and grasp the gendered ramifications of piracy and also place gender at the centre of all the proposed efforts intended to solve piracy.

### *Piracy and Marriage*

Somalia continues to be a country plagued by extreme poverty, unemployment, gender inequality, protracted statelessness and violence. The protracted statelessness and militarized violence continue to destroy economic and social security for all Somalis, but are even more detrimental to women and girls who have no social or economic “cushions” to fall on for support. Many Somali parents face extreme difficulty in providing for their young and adult children and particularly protecting girls in such impoverished and hostile environment. Thus, young women and girls lack access to education, employment, and state protection. Because of this they remain vulnerable, poor and are susceptible to exploitation and gender-based violence. Poor parents have no resources to educate their girls and the ever-growing violence forces them to “marry off” their young daughters. Whenever the security deteriorates, unmarried women and young girls are more likely to be targeted sexually by warring groups. Early marriage in war-torn Somalia serves two purposes: first, it is used as a tool to lessen the socio-economic hardships of poor families by giving away the daughter for marriage. Marriage is believed by many poor parents to provide some kind of relief from their responsibilities towards their daughters. Secondly, it is believed that it may provide some protection to the married women from war-instigated gender-based violence. The conservative Somali society sees marriage as the right way to protect the honor of the bride’s family, her clan through the groom’s family and his extended clan.

A question that needs to be asked is: To what extent does piracy perpetuate early marriages for girls in Somalia? In an impoverished environment, where meeting basic needs remain a hurdle, the fact that young men who became pirates end up having a significant amount of hard currency changes the social structure. Piracy proceeds not only to change the power relations in a given society but also alter gender relations. For example, young impoverished Somali women can easily be lured into becoming chattel or wives of the pirates because they are enticed by their ill-

gotten wealth. With their large riches, pirates have the ability to marry more than one wife. The desire to marry affluent pirates is on the rise among young poor women. They leave their homes and regions and go to the areas where pirates have their bases of operation, hoping that they will find a pirate husband. Finding one with money is like striking gold in the impoverished Somali environment. Marrying a pirate may be seen as an opportunity for the girls and their families to gain some economic security.

With their money, pirate men possess the upper hand over poor families and their daughters and may approach such poor families to ask for the hands of young women for marriage. These impoverished and illiterate young women are not in a position to resist the pirates and their money. Parents, particularly fathers, may approach pirates and offer their daughters as wives. What these parents don't know is that money generated from piracy is a temporary phenomenon and life with a pirate spouse will not lead to a blissful marriage and safety for their daughters. In an environment where poverty and unemployment are rampant, young men who are not involved in piracy who want to marry are typically unable to financially provide for their families. Thus, marriage for poor couples in such an environment becomes difficult and stressful. Due to the factors described above, I argue that piracy and pirates perpetuate exploitation against vulnerable women and girls.

### *Piracy and Sexual-Exploitation*

The absence of state, rule of law, abject poverty, lawlessness and violence in Somalia are some of the factors that have led to the growth of piracy off the coast of Somalia. As pirates secure millions of dollars ransom per ship hijacked, the money is brought into an impoverished town or village. This increases the sexual exploitation of women and young girls residing in the pirate controlled areas in Somalia. Young men who gained enormous money, arms and power through piracy are also able to purchase anything that is available in the local market including female flesh. While the connection between piracy in Somalia and sexual exploitation is under-researched, it is safe to say that in an environment where large amounts of cash generated by piracy are brought in a small coastal town or village, it creates conditions where those with the money – in this case the pirates – can use their money to sexually exploit impoverished women and girls who have no other means to survive in a poverty-stricken environment.

Asha Gelle, Minister of Women and Family Affairs of Puntland, highlighted in a speech she gave in Minneapolis (Oct. 2009) how pirates with their money request young women of a certain age, height, and weight from various places to spend some 'quality' time with them for short period of time. This is of course unheard of, especially in a conservative and Muslim country such as Somalia. But piracy and pirates' money have changed everything, introducing new lifestyles that allow pirates to sexually exploit young women, taking advantage of a desperate need of a little cash.

The availability of large amounts of hard currency in the hands of pirate men who have never owned any money in their lives puts them in a position where they can do anything with anyone. Pirated money provides them enormous power to exploit vulnerable women and girls. Such exploitation strips women and these young girls from dignity and they are humiliated as these pirates take advantage of them sexually. I argue that in country such as Somalia where there is a scarcity of resources, the presence of pirates and their hard currencies fosters an environment where women who continue to struggle for meager basic needs may be forced to sell

their bodies in order to feed their families. Pirates with their resources create conditions that breed female prostitution even in a conservative society such as Somalia. Poor women and young girls with no other economic opportunities available travel distances to find some 'employment' but end up being lured into prostitution, and some of these women become susceptible to sexual exploitation. It has been noted that many Somali women including the young ones are flocking to the areas where pirates are based hoping they that either find jobs such as a cook, cleaner in restaurants and mini-hotels or eventually marry a pirate. Once they are sexually exploited, their society treats them harshly and they may not find support and protection. They will be marked forever and will be blamed for what happened to them.

### *Piracy and Insecurity*

The proceeds of piracy have an impact upon the physical and economic security of war-affected people of Somalia, perpetuating the prolonged militarized violence in that country. For instance, the ransoms collected from hijacking foreign vessels off Somalia's coast not only serve as gasoline that adds more fuel to the violence but also brings drastic change in the social structure – leading to the emergence of a new social class in an impoverished town or village. In other words, the money gained from hijacking foreign ships, crews and goods enables the pirates to emerge as a powerful group loaded with large foreign denomination currency. This money enables them to purchase more arms to protect their crime and bases where hijacked ships are kept, sustaining their criminal activities. This adds to the tension among warring groups but also creates new tension and insecurity in a given community where the pirates are present with their money and arms. In addition, some pirates with money and arms may support warring groups in their community and thus may lead to more violence, killings and displacement – upsetting existing the existing balance of power and creating new inter-clan conflict. It is worth noting that pirates hail from various clans and each clan may appeal to their pirate clan men to support their clan warfare and its clan ideology. In other ways, pirates with large resources can perpetuate the security situation in a given environment affecting both the security of ordinary people including women.

Pirates can alter the social order existing in a particularly town and village. Piracy and the pirated money enable pirates to exert their power over everyone in their community. Money is power and those with lots of money can receive the attention and service of others. Their presence combined with their resources and arms in a particular geographic location can either disturb or perpetuate security and insecurity.

Women, who have become the breadwinners of their families (due to the civil war, inter-clan violence and other crime that resulted in a high male death rate) and who are working outside of their homes are directly affected when tensions rise among warring groups, including pirates,. They become restricted from going to the market to earn an income for their families. The presence and circulation of pirate money can facilitate the inflow of arms by pirates, and this can perpetuate the on-going militarized violence in Somalia, which is detrimental to the security of ordinary people including women and girls who are coping with scarcity and insecurity.

Discussions with women activists highlighted that the presence of pirates and their newfound wealth increases the price of goods and services. This is an area that needs further research. However, it can be anticipated that when the prices of basic

goods go up, women who are the main breadwinners for their families are affected and find it difficult to afford purchasing basic food staples for their families. Thus, pirates and their money affect the economic security of poor women who struggling to meet the basic needs for their families.

### *Conclusions*

Piracy in Somalia is a product of both internal and external factors, and a problem in which both issues must be tackled simultaneously. Both local and international media must provide balanced reporting when covering this issue. Particular attention needs to be given to the impact of the illegal fishing activities carried out by foreign vessels and its ramifications on the livelihoods of fishing communities in Somalia.

Any attempts at finding anti-piracy solutions and strategies must be inclusive of local or internal input. Somalis, including women, who have shouldered the brunt of piracy, are hardly at the table when top-down anti-piracy solutions are developed outside of Somalia. *Such anti-piracy strategies must also protect Somalia's marine resources from foreign exploitation.* In doing so, this will help ensure that Somalis living inside and outside of the country have faith in those solutions and strategies to fight off piracy inside and off the coast of Somalia. Regaining the trust of Somalis is paramount to defeating piracy. Somalis also need to be included as partners in the fight against piracy and not treated solely as criminals. Such an approach will change the hearts and minds of some Somalis who are sympathetic to pirates and may bring a change of opinions. For example, an inclusive solution may change the view held by a few Somalis that “they [local fishermen] have the right to defend their livelihoods but also Somalia's marine resources from external forces”<sup>2</sup> and once their trust is secured the above-mentioned view may be replaced with “piracy is an illegal action and both Somalis and the rest of the world have that moral obligation to combat it”.<sup>3</sup> It is also the responsibility of all Somalis to denounce piracy and begin to acknowledge that Somali pirates are not heroes but thieves who—if not stopped—can adversely affect the socio-economic and geo-political situation of war-torn Somalia. Somalis, whether living inside or outside Somalia, also need to recognize that piracy and pirates are a threat to the well-being and security of Somali women. At the present time, Somali piracy is not just a “robbery reaction” against foreign fishing exploiting Somalia's marine resources by local fishermen. It is more than that: non-fishermen are also involved and if it is not addressed it can become more dangerous than it is presently.

The support of the international community in addressing this problem remains vital and necessary. The international community can play an important role in ending piracy in and outside of Somalia by monitoring Somalia's coastline to ensure that no illegal fishing occurs and no hazardous waste is dumped in Somalia's water. At the same time, it can formulate resolutions and policies that can make the illegal fishing and waste-dumping in war-torn Somalia a crime. Such initiatives will reverse the belief held by a majority of Somalis that the international community not only remains apathetic to the theft of Somalia's marine resources by foreign fishing vessels and that it is not willing to stop the plunder. It is imperative that the international community fully understands how the exploitation and theft committed by foreign fishing vessels affects the already fragile livelihoods of people affected by prolonged statelessness. The violence and deprivation the Somali people suffer from

---

<sup>2</sup> Discussion with some members of the Somali diaspora in Toronto in August 2009.

<sup>3</sup> An interview with an activist in Nairobi, Kenya in December 2009.

needs to be recognized. Fishermen and their communities affected by piracy need to be given support that may bolster their livelihoods and dissuade them from joining the piracy “business.”

Piracy in Somalia is very much connected to Somalia’s political instability. I argue that piracy can be eradicated in and off the coast of Somalia provided that Somalia’s statelessness and protracted militarized violence are solved. As long as Somalia remains politically insecure and with a weak transitional government, and its people, particularly the young, remain unemployed, piracy will be a fact of life. If the situation in war-torn Somalia remains unchanged, many unemployed young men will find that piracy as a lucrative business where they will be able to “make a quick bucks” by hijacking foreign ships. State-building, reviving state institutions—including Somalia’s navy—and rebuilding the livelihoods of the war-affected population are paramount to overcoming piracy in the region and to the country’s overall recovery.

This article has analyzed the gendered implications of piracy. Due to their social positions, Somali women are socially and economically affected by piracy; it affects their physical security and bodily integrity as they become more susceptible to sexual exploitation by the pirates. There is a need to recognize that any solutions proposed to address piracy in Somalia need to be gender-inclusive and sensitive. It is essential to provide Somali women the space to share their own input when formulating solutions. Such a space may enable Somali women to share their own experiences on how they are impacted by pirates and piracy and come up their own appropriate solutions in ameliorating those impacts and most of all finding durable solutions to piracy and political insecurity. Local civil society can also play an important role in protecting young women from migrating to zones where pirates live and can provide alternative income-generating activities, though local organizations are facing resource shortages and may not be able to make the needed immediate interventions. These same organizations can also help unemployed young men who may be recruited to participate in piracy by providing them with alternative (and less dangerous) livelihoods.

In sum, piracy off coast of Somalia can be defeated through the adoption of comprehensive efforts and these efforts need to be taken collectively by local and international actors. Such actions must also provide all the actors (victims and perpetrators) the kind of support and opportunities that decrease their vulnerabilities to piracy.

I strongly believe that if support and opportunities are created in Somalia, young men, whether they are angry fishermen affected by foreign fishing fleets, or just recruited into criminal activity, will find the engagement of piracy as unattractive, unnecessary, and dangerous. Piracy overall is a risky business and young men in Somalia who have been living a life filled with insecurity have nothing to lose and are driven by the urge to survive in a harsh environment. Similarly, young Somali women also bear the brunt of the prolonged statelessness and militarized violence, and if they are not provided protection and opportunities, they will be persuaded to aspire to marrying a pirate, or taking a path that will likely lead to their sexual exploitation.

---

*\*Shukria Dini, a feminist and a researcher on gender issues in war-torn Somalia, holds a PhD. in Women’s Studies. Her doctoral dissertation examined Somali women’s activism and their involvement in the NGO sector in Puntland and Somaliland.*