

Title of Project: Advancing Women's Rights and Access to Justice

Country: Somalia

Sponsoring College: Future Generations Graduate School

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The project aimed to provide human rights training focusing on women's rights for ten communities across Puntland, and also to introduce to them to the legal rights services that Puntland Women Lawyers Association (PUWLA) provides to women in the region. In addition, the project was designed to initiate dialogue about human rights to create awareness about the importance of preserving human rights in order to achieve peace.

My project was to be implemented in collaboration with Puntland Women Lawyers Association (PUWLA) and I had prepared a detailed travel plan with my team from PUWLA to travel to ten villages in Puntland to take routes that efficiently cover the 10 communities in 10 days. Most of the planning went according to schedule but there was a difficult challenge we faced during the initiation stage, for instance, we learnt that the vehicles renting companies were asking for much higher prices than what the budget allowed. I had negotiated with few companies but they were reluctant to lower their price. Finally, we overcome this challenge by deciding to target individually owned vehicles and this worked for us. I was able to negotiate with two freelance vehicle owners to lower their price to a reasonable price that was acceptable for our project budget. Soon we were on the road and as we went from one community to another, we were overwhelmed by the warm welcome we received from the communities although we were often reminded that we were all female team but we assured communities that our gender is just a fact not an issue.

Following our initial plan, we wanted to select 25 literate women in each community but this proved to be challenges because the literacy rate in some of these communities was very low because we did not have enough participants to go ahead with the workshop. Due to this, we had to be flexible with our selection criteria and also update our training techniques to be understood by both literate and illiterate alike. In the first community, the selected participants were 25 women, but after returning from the first community, I sat together with my team to evaluate and reflect on what went well and what didn't. We realized that focusing only on women would not allow us to open dialogue among the entire community to talk about social issues, women shared their experiences and issues with the group but we soon realized this experience sharing lacked an important aspect which is cross gender and cross age information and knowledge sharing. We decided to include men also to share their experiences and also to hear the responses of women to foster a healthy dialogue about issues such as domestic violence, gender discrimination and etc.

We reached out to the village leader of the second community we planned to visit and informed the leader we needed to include both genders of different age groups to have diverse and inclusive dialogue. In the subsequent communities, we continued with our inclusive selection process in our workshops however we intentionally selected ore women to outnumber men in the sessions so as to avoid male domination of discussions which is what often happens in our male dominated society.

Once we included both genders and divided into small diverse groups, it was evident our dialogue sessions were more informative and fruitful. However, taking this step was not short of challenges because the dialogue was occasionally getting heated, and at this point our biggest fear was to unintentionally create tensions between men and women in the community. To avoid the dialogue from being escalated into a conflict, I had sat with my facilitators before and after each session to remind them to be neutral and avoid taking sides in the discussions. There are few times we have seen the participants aligning with their gender but the project team was quick to intentionally break the cycle by individualizing the experiences and giving examples of situations to narrow the focus and zoom in to the person who might have caused harm to make their gender irrelevant and avoid gender blaming.

Overall, there was learning across genders and age groups, as the older generations' shares with us their experiences, and the youth expressed opinions and experiences to the older generation and this was received in the spirit of dialogue. At the end of the training, 300 participants benefited from our training consisting of 167 women and 133 men.

It was interesting to see the community continuing the dialogue amongst themselves even during breaks the conversation was still ongoing. After each workshop, we had a number of participants coming to us to commend us on our techniques and requesting more projects like this. I learnt the importance of dialogue through this project, and the effect it can have on communities to achieve peace. The participation of men and women in the community both old and young in discussions of social issues was refreshing.

To me, peace means respecting and protecting human rights where all members of the community are exercising and enjoying their full rights. A Peaceful community is one that treats women, men, boys, and girls as valuable members, where girls go to school alongside boys, where women get employed alongside men, where the different tribes, clans or ethnicities can participate in politics and leadership without discrimination. For me, achieving a long-lasting peace means the presence of equal opportunities to education, to employment, to health, to economic freedom, and to political participation to all members of the community.

My project will contribute to peace in Puntland by raising awareness about human rights focusing on marginalized and vulnerable members of the community such as women. The communities who benefited from this project now enjoy using dialogue as a tool to discuss social issues and there is an increased awareness and understanding of gender discrimination in general. Although some of the communities we visited were considered rural communities as they did not have schools but I was very pleased to learn that some of the participants who had access to schools decisively changed their behavior about girls' education and sent their daughters to go to school instead of just doing domestic chores. That was very interesting outcome of this project, although we discussed gender roles but we focused on domestic violence and issues that disturb peace. According to the community members, their decision was based on seeing educated females who were leading and implementing a project successfully so this inspired them to give their daughters a chance. Our team was truly humbled and inspired by this revelation. Moreover, my ultimate expectation is through this project we contribute to reduction in domestic violence against women as the community employs dialogue to resolve conflict rather than violence. Additionally, PUWLA extending their legal rights services to the communities to report their cases to the justice system in case there are violations of rights.

I had genuine interactions with community members as we discussed issues, shared our experiences with peace and violence, and our thoughts about gender discrimination as it relates to human rights violations. It was a valuable experience to listen to mothers, fathers, and children sit together and talk to one another openly to discuss community issues.

This project taught me the dire need of our communities for dialogue to communicate and have open discussion of social issues that cause human rights violation and disturbance of peace but there is also the need for services that provide counselling to victims of domestic violence and emotional abuse to help them overcome emotional trauma.

