

BRIEFING | NOVEMBER 2023

Addressing gender-based violence against women activists in Somalia: Violence Observatory Systems

Women activists, peacebuilders and journalists in Somalia are leading efforts to improve gender equality, human rights and peacebuilding. Their work, which often challenges harmful gender and traditional norms, makes them susceptible to violence. Existing support and protection mechanisms against gender-based violence (GBV) are limited in Somalia, so the continued support of these women is crucial in progressing gender equality and peacebuilding.

Saferworld and partners the Somalia Women's Study Centre (SWSC) and the Somali Women's Development Centre (SWDC) are supporting women activists in the country through the 'Making space for peacebuilding in Somalia' project, which focuses on South West and Jubaland States, as well as Mogadishu. This project has established six Violence Observatory Systems (VOS), which provide real-time data on GBV against women activists and journalists. The VOS have helped to inform more effective responses to GBV and have given women activists tools to advocate for change. Through targeted awareness campaigns, women activists have educated communities on the root causes of GBV, promoted behavioural change and enhanced law enforcement responses to GBV. These efforts have culminated in high-level advocacy on policy reforms, such as changes to the penal code and promoting the passing of the 2018 Sexual Offences Bill – paving the way for a safer environment for women working in peacebuilding and journalism.

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Complementing the VOS is a targeted micro-grant initiative implemented by Saferworld, SWSC and SWDC, which is helping women journalists and women activists to visually document their experiences, creating a strong evidence base of the risks they encounter. This initiative has bolstered women activists' advocacy efforts, leading to collaboration with key government institutions to promote the safety of women activists and journalists and to foster a gender-inclusive understanding of violence.

We conducted comprehensive interviews with women activists, journalists and peacebuilders, analysed data from the VOS, and drew on insights from our wider programme to provide an overview of our work and its impact. This briefing also presents recommendations for how government, civil society and international donors can practically support the safety and rights of women in Somalia. This includes strengthening legal frameworks to safeguard women's rights, training law enforcement officials, establishing support services for GBV survivors, and continuing to support impactful projects like the VOS and micro-grants.

Violence against women activists in Somalia

Women activists, journalists and peacebuilders in Somalia face high levels of insecurity. They are targeted due to their work on issues that are considered 'controversial' such as gender equality, human rights and peacebuilding, as well as their disruption of traditional gender norms by working outside the home. They encounter significant challenges, including violence perpetuated by intimate partners and by the authorities such as the police, as well as public backlash in the form of online hate. They often experience ostracism from family members, clan elders and the broader community. Activists may be arrested and detained by authorities if they are perceived as a threat to the government or if their activism is considered illegal. These challenges are aggravated by inadequate legal protections.

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A women's rights activist from Kismayo

Data from the VOS highlights trends of GBV against women activists, journalists and peacebuilders. From September 2022 to June 2023, 233 GBV cases were documented, with physical assault (16.74 per cent) and rape (13.73 per cent) most commonly reported. Psychological abuse, denial of resources, online harassment and social media attacks were also prevalent. A security risk analysis conducted by Saferworld in December 2022 corroborated the findings from the VOS. As part of this analysis, interviews with local NGOs revealed instances of traditional elders interfering with justice pursuits for rape victims, disruption of campaigns to end female genital mutilation, and threats from al-Shabaab and clan militias.

The risks posed by al-Shabaab worsen the situation for women activists. A women's rights activist from an organisation in Kismayo emphasised these challenges, stating, “As women activists, we witness first-hand the devastating impact of increased fighting with al-Shabaab. This relentless violence against our communities only exacerbates the suffering experienced by women...we also confront the terrorist threat of al-Shabaab, who not only threaten our lives but extort money from us when we travel through their controlled areas.” Women activists confront the threat of al-Shabaab through community engagement, education and awareness raising of the risks of radicalisation, and by collaborating with local authorities to enhance security and reduce the group's influence.

Organisations like SWDC and SWSC are working to mitigate these challenges. Halima Mohamed, a project coordinator at SWDC, stressed the need to address the source of the violence: “We must address the root causes of violence against women in Somalia, including the patriarchal norms and structures that perpetuate discrimination and inequality. Without gender equality and women's empowerment, sustainable peace and development will remain elusive.”

Recent government advances – such as the launch of a National Action Plan for women, peace and security in 2022, and the Ministry of Women and Human Rights Development playing a more active role in combating GBV – mark progress in government policy. These advances signify an opportune moment for international donors to boost their support for women activists and journalists in Somalia, and for women activists to leverage existing policy frameworks to demand stronger protections and the inclusion of women in peacebuilding and decision-making.

Violence Observatory Systems: A comprehensive tool for action

The VOS are a powerful and transformative tool for the protection of women activists, journalists and peacebuilders in Somalia. These systems – established through our ‘Making space for peacebuilding in Somalia’ project in Mogadishu, Jubaland State (Kismayo) and South West State (Baidoa and Wajid) – provide a systematic process for monitoring and managing data on violence against women. With the assistance of 300 trained Somali women volunteers, incidences of violence against women activists are tracked and analysed. Survivors self-report GBV incidents via a hotline, or by reporting incidents in-person to women-led organisations that handle GBV cases (these organisations then refer the survivors' cases to the VOS). This information is logged into the VOS, which is administered through the data analysis tool Kobo. Survivors inform the VOS volunteers about the nature of the violence, perpetrator identities, and the survivor's response to the

violence they experienced. The VOS use a live system that is updated continually as new cases are reported. To ensure survivors' privacy, details are kept anonymous and identifiers are replaced by codes.

The goal of the VOS is to strengthen responses to violence and enhance the safety of women activists and journalists. The VOS data provides women activists with evidence to advocate for change, helping to build credibility and foster effective collaboration with policymakers, the police and legislators at the Federal and State level.

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Halima Mohamed, a project coordinator at SWDC

Insights from the VOS data

We examined a snapshot of VOS data over ten months from September 2022 to June 2023. In this period, 233 cases of GBV were reported, painting a stark picture of the threats faced by women activists and journalists. The locations of these incidents were distributed among Kismayo (96 cases, 41 per cent), Baidoa (66 cases, 28 per cent), Mogadishu (61 cases, 26 per cent) and Wajid (10 cases, 4 per cent).

The data revealed that most survivors (75.97 per cent) were aged between 18 and 35, and men perpetrators¹ were responsible for 93.56 per cent of reported incidents. The most common locations for violence were the survivors' own homes (37.34 per cent) and their places of work (14.16 per cent). Physical assault (16.74 per cent) and rape (13.73 per cent) were the most commonly reported types of violence, followed by psychological and emotional abuse (14.59 per cent). Denial of resources, such as access to basic needs like food, water and shelter (10.3 per cent), and online sexual harassment (6.87 per cent) were also significant concerns for women. The majority of survivors who reported to the VOS (87.55 per cent) had not been referred to safe spaces, indicating support gaps, while access to justice remained challenging – with 54.74 per cent of survivors choosing not to pursue legal action.²

The data offers important insights into the nature of violence against women activists and journalists. Women who participate in public life or who hold leadership roles defy societal and traditional gender norms, which can trigger a backlash that manifests as intimate partner violence. The data shows that GBV is used as a tool to maintain norms and reassert men's power, and that women's homes are places where violence often escalates and where women are unsafe.

The reporting habits of women and their pursuit of legal action varied across the regions, suggesting a complex interplay of factors such as regional gender norms, trust in justice and security institutions, and availability of safe spaces for

reporting. The role of traditional elders and clan leaders in the resolution of cases outside formal justice channels further complicates the situation for some survivors seeking justice.

Impact of the VOS

Despite the deeply embedded societal barriers in Somalia, the VOS project has provided vital support to women activists and journalists. VOS volunteers are trained to not just collect data but also to guide survivors to appropriate referral services. To increase awareness of the VOS and of referral services, awareness sessions were carried out within communities and the hotline numbers of both the VOS and women's organisations were shared widely.

The VOS project has enhanced the resources available to women activists, allowing them to approach GBV issues with greater confidence. Batulo Sheikh Ahmed Gabale, Head of the National Somali Women Association, noted the transformative effect in Baidoa: “Before the implementation of the VOS, most women organisations lacked the skills to effectively collect GBV data. However, after receiving technical training provided by the project...this has been a game-changer for us.”

Increased access to services for survivors of GBV is a notable impact of the VOS. Our analysis found that 80 per cent of women activists were able to access GBV support services through the VOS – a substantial improvement from previous support availability: according to our baseline assessment,³ only 27.5 per cent of women activists surveyed were able to access GBV services.

¹ Though the term ‘male perpetrators’ may sound more grammatically correct than ‘men perpetrators’, at Saferworld we always use woman and man instead of female and male. As an organisation championing the rights of different genders and identities, we recognise that biological sex does not equal gender and we want to use language that reflects this.

² In Kismayo (the combined districts of Farjano, Calanley and Shaqaalaha), the majority of survivors were aged between 18 and 35 (72.92 per cent), with men perpetrators responsible for the majority of reported incidents (93.75 per cent). The most common locations for violence were streets/roads (23.61 per cent) and women's places of work (20.83 per cent). Psychological/emotional violence (27.03 per cent) and rape (15.63 per cent) were the most commonly reported types of violence. In terms of referral to safe spaces, a significant proportion of survivors (70.59 per cent) were not referred to any. Additionally, 22.91 per cent of survivors in Kismayo chose not to pursue legal action.

For Baidoa, 78.79 per cent of survivors were aged between 18 and 35. The types of threats reported were: physical assault (34.85 per cent), online sexual harassment related to media work (16.67 per cent), personal attacks on social media (10.61 per cent), threats of rape (6.06 per cent) and domestic violence (3.03 per cent). The locations of incidents were as follows: survivors' homes (51.52 per cent), places of work (9.38 per cent), schools (9.38 per cent), and camps for internally displaced people (9.38 per cent). As in Kismayo, men perpetrators accounted for 95.08 per cent of reported incidents. The majority of survivors (80.30 per cent) in Baidoa also chose not to pursue legal action, and 98.33 per cent were not referred to safe spaces.

In Mogadishu, a similar age distribution was observed, with 77.05 per cent of survivors aged between 18 and 35. Men perpetrators were responsible for 98.36 per cent of incidents. Survivors' homes (54.10 per cent) and places of work (15.70 per cent) were the primary locations of violence. The most commonly reported threats were denial of resources (22.95 per cent) and rape (22.95 per cent). As in the other locations, a significant number of survivors (65.57 per cent) in Mogadishu were not referred to safe spaces, and 8.20 per cent chose not to pursue legal action.

³ The baseline assessment, conducted from 1 January–28 February 2023, aimed to identify the key challenges and barriers encountered by women journalists, women activists from marginalised groups, and selected local women's organisations and networks in South West, Jubaland and Mogadishu. For the baseline assessment, we conducted three focus group discussions with a total of 45 participants.

VOS volunteers can either refer survivors to services directly provided by SWSC and SWDC, or to external agencies such as medical services or the police. SWSC in Jubaland offers psychosocial support services and legal aid, and SWDC in Mogadishu and South West offers psychosocial support and legal aid as well as a safe house for survivors needing protection. Awareness raising around services has also had a positive impact for women survivors beyond the activist target group, as Fatima, an activist from Baidoa, reflected: “Before the project, accessing GBV services and protection mechanisms was a challenge for me due to limited awareness and resources in our community. However, with strengthened referral pathways...I was able to refer a fellow community member to the appropriate support services.”

Another significant impact of the VOS project has been its influence on the security and justice sectors in Somalia. The VOS not only provide a robust documentation and evidence system for violence against women, but the project has also fostered a more coordinated approach by women’s rights organisations to GBV issues. This collaboration has been particularly evident in Jubaland, where women activists involved in the project came together and successfully advocated for the establishment of a gender office within Jubaland’s Ministry of Justice. This office now provides essential support and access to justice for survivors of GBV.

Saadia, a Kismayo activist, emphasised the role of persistent advocacy in these achievements: “We urged the Ministry of Interior to prioritise gender balance and ensure women’s meaningful representation within the District Council Formation. The Minister of Interior promised to secure a ten per cent [representation] for women in the District Council Formation.”

The VOS

The VOS offer not only an effective data collection system but also a tool for empowering women, challenging power imbalances and holding institutions accountable, through:

- **Documentation and evidence:** The VOS provide a comprehensive system for documenting cases of GBV, providing valuable data for women-led organisations, women journalists and activists.
- **Increased visibility:** Often, women’s rights groups face accusations of exaggerating GBV experiences. The extensive data from the VOS, recorded in real time, shows the widespread nature of GBV.
- **Enhanced prevention and response:** The VOS allow civil society organisations (CSOs) and authorities to identify trends and patterns in violence, informing reactive and proactive responses and informing early warning systems and prevention strategies.
- **Evidence-based advocacy and improved policy development:** Reliable data enables effective engagement with policymakers, police and legislators, informing policies that address the root causes of violence against women.

Shukria Dini, Director of SWSC, attested to the project’s impact on the Ministry of Women and Human Rights Development in Jubaland. She said, “Our persistent advocacy led to increased commitment and action from the Ministry, resulting in improved projects and initiatives to combat sexual and gender-based violence, protect survivors and ensure justice.”

By focusing on capacity development for women’s rights organisations in data management and enhancing access to justice, the VOS have changed the landscape of GBV response in the Jubaland, South West and South Central regions of Somalia. With more survivors referred to legal assistance services and a decrease in reliance on traditional justice systems, women’s rights organisations in Baidoa and Mogadishu are now playing a crucial role in advocating for women’s rights and providing support to survivors.

Micro-grants

The second component of our ‘Making space for peacebuilding in Somalia’ project centres on providing micro-grants – a tailored response to the needs of women activists, journalists and peacebuilders that was determined via an intensive security risk assessment. The micro-grants, unlike traditional funding mechanisms, offer flexibility, enabling individuals and organisations to address the unique challenges they face.

Security risk assessment

The security risk assessment, conducted alongside the VOS data collection, gathered crucial data from local organisations, women’s groups and individual activists. It identified common security threats that women activists and journalists frequently encounter, including GBV, terrorist threats, harassment at checkpoints, and backlash from traditional leaders.

In response, we developed ‘Gender-responsive security guidelines’,⁴ which address concerns raised in the assessment. The guidelines are a practical tool offering advice and training for women activists, peacebuilders and journalists in Mogadishu, Kismayo and Baidoa.

Micro-grant activities

A total of 50 small grants were provided to women journalists. These grants support them in documenting their experiences, including discrimination and digital bullying on social media. Six micro-grants were also allocated to women’s organisations and to communication and advocacy campaigns led by women journalists that focus on violence against women activists and their involvement in peacebuilding and political life. We provided another six small grants to national women’s media forums, including journalists from South West and Jubaland, to conduct campaigns against political violence targeting women in Somalia. Twenty leaders of local women’s organisations and media networks also received small grants to participate in national-level advocacy opportunities.

⁴ The guidelines offer practical advice to the groups highlighted here, and provide them with appropriate and effective mechanisms to respond to the complex and evolving security threats and risks in Somalia.



A journalist participating in a media training session with the Jubaland Women Journalists Organisation
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Micro-grant activities

The micro-grants project has enabled women activists and journalists to conduct a range of activities, including:

- **Data collection:** Women journalists used the micro-grants to capture photo stories and videos depicting the security challenges they face. This material shed light on how women journalists work in dangerous locations without adequate security measures, highlighting the risks of attacks, physical assaults and sexual harassment.
- **Documentation:** Through writing initiatives, women journalists documented their experiences of cyberbullying and online abuse. They also developed advocacy messages that raise awareness of the safety and security challenges they face, calling for action and protective measures.
- **Advocacy:** Women journalists in both South West and Jubaland States used the micro-grants to advocate for strategies that amplify their voices and to influence policymakers. For example, they actively engaged in advocating for the implementation of laws safeguarding women's rights, such as the Sexual Offences Bill.
- **Policy engagement:** Micro-grants supported activities that offered opportunities for women activists to engage with representatives from various ministries, to lobby for policies that support the work of women journalists.
- **Solidarity/support mechanisms:** Women journalists established support groups, providing a platform for sharing challenges and experiences of trauma. These support mechanisms foster solidarity and mutual learning among women journalists, helping them to address the specific challenges they face and to work together to improve their safety and well-being.

Impact of the micro-grants

The micro-grant project has had a profound impact on women journalists and activists in Somalia, providing a platform for increased visibility and awareness of the issues they face. Zahra, a journalist from Kismayo, explained: "Sharing my story through photography has been an empowering journey. Our visual documentation has ignited crucial dialogues, garnered support, and led to concrete measures such as increased community solidarity and improved response mechanisms. By sharing visual evidence with the local police, they were compelled to take the matter seriously, providing enhanced security measures and increasing their overall support."

The Wawo Women Group, a recipient of a micro-grant, played a pivotal role in advocating for a women's quota in national election law. The group mobilised resources, organised events and engaged with policymakers. In recognition of these efforts, the Ministry of Women and Human Rights Development is actively working towards the realisation of the women's quota. This exemplifies the transformative power of targeted support and locally led initiatives. The group's tireless advocacy has set the stage for concrete policy changes that will enhance women's political representation.

“Our persistent advocacy led to increased commitment and action from the Ministry, resulting in improved projects and initiatives to combat sexual and gender-based violence, protect survivors and ensure justice.”

Shukria Dini, Director of SWSC



Abshiro prepares to record a segment of video in the JLTV studios in Jubaland.

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Case study: Maryan and Abshiro

Journalists Maryan Jamac Dhonbe and Abshiro Abdirashid Husein [used micro-grants to address challenges faced by women journalists](#) in Jubaland. Maryan aimed to challenge stereotypes and raise awareness of women's rights by creating spaces for women to openly share personal experiences and discuss challenges. Maryan explained that: "The micro-grant allowed us to conduct training sessions and workshops where women could express their experiences and challenges without fear." Abshiro organised storytelling workshops and interviews to advocate for a safer environment for women in journalism. She said: "Our stories created a platform for dialogue and challenged societal norms."

Financial support allowed Maryan and Abshiro to acquire necessary equipment and resources – such as high-quality cameras and audio equipment – to amplify the women's voices. They used social media platforms and collaborated with local organisations to expand their reach. Their stories received positive reactions, and the coverage compelled local authorities to act. The police gender desk in Jubaland established a dedicated hotline and reporting channels for women journalists to report threats, harassment or violence. Abshiro helped to establish these better response mechanisms, which have made women journalists feel safer when covering risky events, thanks to quicker responses and investigations into reported cases.

By addressing security concerns and documenting experiences, Maryan, Abshiro and their colleagues have paved the way for improved safety measures and heightened awareness of protecting women in journalism. They now plan to collaborate with more organisations and create more platforms for sharing stories.

“The micro-grant allowed us to conduct training sessions and workshops where women could express their experiences and challenges without fear.”



A graphic we created for the online publication of Maryan and Abshiro's case study "Journalism as evidence? How micro-grants are improving women's safety in Somalia" © Saferworld

Recommendations

The VOS data and findings from our broader programme point to the importance of a holistic approach to supporting the safety and rights of women activists, journalists and peacebuilders. This approach should include increased funding, strengthened legal frameworks, support for women's advocacy efforts, and effective collaboration between the Somali government, civil society and international donors.

Government of Somalia

- **Strengthen legal frameworks:** The government should prioritise the development and enforcement of laws that safeguard women's rights and effectively combat GBV. This includes reviewing and updating the penal code and implementing the Sexual Offences Bill, as well as ensuring their proper implementation to hold perpetrators accountable.
- **Training for law enforcement officials:** Provide comprehensive training programmes for law enforcement officials on handling GBV cases, emphasising survivor-centred approaches. Sensitivity training should be included to ensure survivors are treated with empathy and dignity.
- **Women's leadership:** Increase the representation of women in leadership positions at all levels of government to promote gender equality, inclusive decision-making, and policy formulation that addresses the needs and rights of women. Work to fulfil – at a minimum – the women's quota of 30 per cent representation in parliament and all levels of government.
- **Comprehensive support services:** Establish and strengthen support services for survivors of GBV, including accessible and survivor-centred counselling, medical care, legal aid and safe shelter facilities. These services should be adequately funded and readily available in both urban and rural areas.
- **Judicial processes:** Ensure that perpetrators of sexual violence are subject to statutory court rulings, and limit the interventions and interference of customary courts in cases of GBV. Strengthening judicial processes will contribute to a fair and effective justice system that upholds women's rights.

Civil society

- **Advocate for policy reforms:** CSOs should engage in advocacy efforts to hold the government accountable for combating sexual violence through policy reforms. This includes advocating for gender mainstreaming, affirmative action measures, and the ratification and implementation of regional and international instruments such as the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (the Maputo Protocol), and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women.
- **Sexual Offences Bill and updates to the penal code:** Advocate for the signing and effective implementation of the 2018 Sexual Offences Bill and updates to the penal code to address gaps in the legal framework and provide stronger protection against sexual violence. Collaboration between CSOs and government bodies is crucial in advancing this legislative process.
- **Support for women journalists:** CSOs should collaborate with media associations to increase protection and create a safe work environment for women journalists. This includes providing training on safety protocols, digital security, and support mechanisms in case of threats or harassment.

International donors

- **Strengthen partnerships:** As mentioned earlier, recent government advances – such as the launch of a Somali National Action Plan for women, peace and security – present an opportune moment for international donors to boost their support for women activists and journalists in Somalia. Fostering collaborative partnerships between international donors, local organisations and government entities can help maximise the impact of interventions addressing violence against women activists and journalists. This includes supporting capacity-strengthening efforts, knowledge sharing, and joint advocacy campaigns to address root causes and promote sustainable change.
- **Sustain funding:** Continue providing financial support to women activists and journalists through sustained funding for crucial projects, such as the VOS and micro-grants. This funding will ensure that initiatives that shed light on violence against women activists and journalists continue, and will support advocacy efforts led by women's groups.

About Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent, not-for-profit international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives in countries and territories across Africa, Asia and the Middle East. We work in solidarity with people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. Our priority is people – we believe in a world where everyone can lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from fear and insecurity.

Cover photo: A graphic representing the work of the Violence Observatory System in Somalia

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