The Problem of Gender Bias in Conflict Management

The community approach to disarmament has been one of the country’s most successful exercises of this kind. As a field monitor and a member of the Women Peace Forum, I have participated in it and can report that several women are on record having returned these guns after they were handed over by their sons or husbands. We are happy Kenya’s CEWE-RU has documented this and we have our own documentation that we can share with others.

We engaged the police commander in charge of the disarmament process in Isiolo in eastern Kenya. We went to the camp and told him, “We know the exercise is generating some friction, including the human rights abuses that often accompany it, so how do you intend to carry it out, and what is your response to our suggestions?”

He replied, “Do you think it’s really possible to have any female police officers on board?”

ABDIA MAHAMOUD
(Interview)

Abdia Mahamoud served as CEWARN’s Field Monitor for Isiolo, Kenya. She is currently the Executive Director of Isiolo Peace Link. She is a recipient of the 2012 Head of State Commendation (HSC) from former president of Kenya H.E. Mwai Kibaki for her contribution in peace building across Kenya.
We said, “why not?”

Women police officers were identified and we also suggested that community elders accompany the police to the houses because there have been incidents of rape and looting in the past. The commander proved to be very cooperative. He agreed with our proposal. We went to every village and identified appropriate elders. He also gave us his phone number in case we needed to report if an officer was engaged in any other activities other than disarmament.

Because our people know each other, they also know who deals in arms and who are the brokers. So it was prudent to bring some of them on board. When we did this, the informants identified some local Somali and their Turkana and Borana counterparts who were known to trade in arms. We put the mechanisms in place and when the disarmament exercise began, everything ran smoothly because people owned the process. I have pictures of the weapons that were returned that time, including one of a woman returning arms and receiving the certificates from the District Commissioner. There were more than thirty weapons that were returned and tested, because there is always the claim that during disarmament people return obsolete arms. The late Prof. George Saitoti, then Minister for Internal Security, presided over the handover ceremony in the company of the elders.

We are happy the CEWERU continued to support the group after the disarmament exercise. Unfortunately, to be more effective the Isiolo exercise needed to be carried out in Meru, Samburu, Marsabit, and other contiguous districts. Disarmament needs to be uniform to systematically eradicate the problem of small arms in the country. As it stands, the communities in Isiolo returned their firearms but they became vulnerable because the other communities did not return theirs. At the moment if you talk about disarmament in Isiolo, you will meet resistance because the other communities are not disarmed. A hard-earned peace can be shattered by a single gun.

What is the attitude of local people towards the different forms of illicit activity including the problem of human trafficking?

Interdicting human trafficking is the government’s responsibility. How do these people pass so many barriers only to be caught in Nairobi? Although people talk of nyumba kumi (ten-house security cells) this kind of community monitoring is not something our people are ready to embrace. The people feel it’s something being imposed on them. In my view, it’s bound to fail because it requires dialogue to implement—it is a concept that is not understood well by the community. I think community policing could have worked better because it’s a matter of the equipping the
community with a policy they can work with. But those propagating the nyumba kumi initiative also feel community policing has its challenges, like when people form vigilante groups.

Why has the security situation in Isiolo deteriorated?

Before, people were fighting with spears. But with the proliferation of small arms the whole situation changed. It is now a major cause of the rampant insecurity in Isiolo. The flow of information is another factor. The conflict early warning system needs to be more inclusive, with systematic reporting and everybody in the mechanism making use of information. Any one should be able to report when they witness people gather in suspicious manner or young people being armed. What are the channels for sharing this information? And how can rearming groups be dismantled before they proceed with their plan? We need greater focus on information networks. This would help us tap into information flows and share the details before an incident happens.

The other variable here is that local politics has changed for the worse. The scramble for leadership and power among the different communities residing in Isiolo has disrupted the peace. Previously, the Turkana in Isiolo could not imagine getting into leadership positions because many people believed that they were ‘outsiders’ and could not represent the area. The issue of land is a major trigger of conflict in Isiolo. Within Isiolo itself, people are speculating that the government will compensate them over the LAPSET (an infrastructure project designed to link the Kenyan port of Lamu with South Sudan and Ethiopia) and some of those positioning themselves to receive the compensation are displacing others.

The structure of peace building still excludes women from the process. There is still the attitude that a woman is a lesser person and not worthy of engaging in the peace process. The Modogashe Peace Declaration of 2001 was designed to accommodate the Samburu, the Somali, and even the Meru. I participated during one of the reviews and witnessed how the whole gender based violence issue was not mentioned anywhere. It was absent from the declaration while all the other issues were highlighted. But we insisted that a clause be included and I became a signatory to it.

What led to the Modogashe Peace Declaration?

The first peace meeting in 1998 addressed the conflict in the local conflict triangle including Meru. Despite the heightened tensions among communities, people felt that Kenya’s Constitution did not address the issues driving the conflicts. They did not have any control mechanisms to fall back on when-
ever violence broke out. Provision of security was invested in the state with no role for local participation.

The Modogashe process started with the elders from North Eastern Province coming together. The CEWERU facilitated the first joint meeting in 2001. The people who came together discussed conflict management options but also differed on some issues. If a man is killed the compensation is 100 animals but for a woman it’s 50, and this raised human rights issues. So here we are with Islamic principles that say 100 and 50. The Samburu, in contrast, said when a man dies in conflict there should be no pay. Another round of talks was attended by human rights activists who said a soul is a soul, whether a man or a woman. These are the kind of differences we encountered.

Last August, a Somali was killed in Isiolo and his livestock stolen. The Turkana and Somali elders came together and decided to refer to the declaration and see what to do as far it was concerned. They found that if a man was killed, a hundred camels or cows were to be paid. The Turkana felt this was too much, and they asked for a middle ground by suggesting the hundred livestock include donkeys. The debate went on and on. In the last review meeting in Garissa, the Muslims from the North said they should proceed according to their own customs, so that if one party is Muslim let them handle it within their own tradition. This is what’s now playing out in Isiolo among the different communities. It was a mutual agreement.

There were also differences on how to deal with cases of stolen livestock. The initiative was spearheaded by the CEWERU in conjunction with the government. It has brought an element of sanity to pastoral conflicts. There is another agreement in Marsabit called the Maikona Declaration that addresses specific issues on the border between Kenya and Ethiopia. My role in these fora is to speak on behalf of women. I see myself in a leadership position in the county whenever there is a need for dialogue or negotiation. We give talks in schools as well as to parents when there is need to promote tolerance in schools or to address youth radicalisation.

I was in Kigali recently. We went to present our case studies and to explain what we do in schools when such problems arise. I talked about the contribution of women leadership in bringing peace to schools and mediating interreligious conflicts. What we do in Isiolo is what Muslims call dawa, a form of context-specific peace preaching that fosters interreligious tolerance among our communities.
Would you say that CEWARN’s work in Isiolo is having an impact?

I have seen things move beyond pastoralist conflict to include issues like religious and urban conflicts and the issue of small arms. We also address the new frictions that come with devolution and issues of gender based violence. The mechanism is broadening its focus to include a number of things including the financing of conflict.

One weakness is that peace workers require more training in gender based violence, governance issues, and methods for controlling small arms. These are things that should be looked at by the CEWARN family to ensure that the monitors are familiar with the specifics of these particular areas. In respect to the problem of visibility, while some people may simply see me as Abdia, others do not associate with me because I’m a woman. So we are trying to move forward to ensure greater visibility for women at the county and local levels.

What is CEWARN’s role on the ground?

The first mandate is to relay information related to impending conflicts through our alerts—conflict prevention in short. In my collaboration with counterparts in Samburu, we have managed to use information that we shared with local authorities in order to help de-escalate some conflicts. One example is an incident in 2010 when the CEWARN monitor in Samburu relayed information about a raid to the CEWARN monitor in Isiolo. I relayed the same message to the local authorities. They went to the location and determined that some of the warriors were planning a raid; disengagement proceeded after two of the raiders were killed. There was another incident in 2011 where a local elder on the district peace committee relayed information about a group of young armed men gathering near a mountain called Lowangisu.

The police used a helicopter to patrol the area and prevent an attack. We also organised a temporary response centre during the last elections. Because of the experiences I’ve gained over the years from CEWARN, our CEWERU sent me to Sierra Leone to monitor elections there. We replicated some of the activities we used in Isiolo. We called every stakeholder into a tent together with the police, the District Administration, humanitarian organisations and other stakeholders. We formed a small reporting and response centre. The District Peace Committee was feeding the centre with information that was going to all the polling stations. Whenever there was conflict in any area the centre would get information and people concerned like the police would go to maintain peace. The initiative worked, and I was proud to be associated with it.
In addition to the standard monitoring and reporting for CEWARN I also track the state’s efforts to control firearms. We are looking at it from different perspectives and we, in civil society, are planning to digitise their register in tandem with periodic inspections of the weapons. Some former police reservists originally possessed a gun for years pass it on to the sons before they die, who then pass it on to their sons. So we are now dealing with the weapons by ensuring when a reservist dies, the guns are returned to the government.

How many field monitors are active in Isiolo?

I’m currently the only one. I think this limits our effectiveness. The area is vast. I am in charge of two sub-counties, and another is left out at this time. Employing more monitors so someone is in charge of Garbatula would enhance coordination in Isiolo, which could serve as a model for other counties due to its diverse mix of ethnicities and faiths. We also need satellite phones for reporting from remote locations. It also helps when the field monitors from the IGAD countries get to meet. Gatherings like the meeting held in Nakuru last year are productive and allow us to share our experiences, which is why they should be convened on a periodic basis.

Do you ever feel intimidated or pressured because of the nature of your work, like when people are obstructing the disarmament program?

There are problems when people question the capability of a woman to bring peace. Apart from that I haven’t faced other major obstacles in the course of my work. There are problems highlighted by other monitors of maintaining credibility when there is no response to an alert, or in the case of recommendations that are not acted upon.

At times, it is difficult to work through the CEWERU, the CEWARN secretariat and the National Research Institute. It is the duty of the field monitor to cultivate relations with the local network and authorities and to maintain good rapport, but sometimes it is hard to follow up and act on the alerts due to the gaps in transmission. The fact that community-based monitors are part of the mechanism makes a big difference despite such problems. The CEWERU has otherwise been very supportive, and I am proud to report that I received a Presidential Commendation, the Amani Award, in recognition of our work.