

**For Somali Women, Pain of Being a Spoil of War**  
**By Jeffrey Gettleman**  
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MOGADISHU, Somalia — The girl's voice dropped to a hush as she remembered the bright, sunny afternoon when she stepped out of her hut and saw her best friend buried in the sand, up to her neck.

Her friend had made the mistake of refusing to marry a Shabab commander. Now she was about to get her head bashed in, rock by rock.

"You're next," the Shabab warned the girl, a frail 17-year-old who was living with her brother in a squalid refugee camp.

Several months later, the men came back. Five militants burst into her hut, pinned her down and gang-raped her, she said. They claimed to be on a jihad, or holy war, and any resistance was considered a crime against Islam, punishable by death.

"I've had some very bad dreams about these men," she said, having recently escaped the area they control. "I don't know what religion they are."

Somalia has been steadily worn down by decades of conflict and chaos, its cities in ruins and its people starving. Just this year, tens of thousands have died from famine, with countless others cut down in relentless combat. Now Somalis face yet another widespread terror: an alarming increase in rapes and sexual abuse of women and girls.

The Shabab militant group, which presents itself as a morally righteous rebel force and the defender of pure Islam, is seizing women and girls as spoils of war, gang-raping and abusing them as part of its reign of terror in southern Somalia, according to victims, aid workers and United Nations officials. Short of cash and losing ground, the militants are also forcing families to hand over girls for arranged marriages that often last no more than a few weeks and are essentially sexual slavery, a cheap way to bolster their ranks' flagging morale.

But it is not just the Shabab. In the past few months, aid workers and victims say, there has been a free-for-all of armed men preying upon women and girls displaced by Somalia's famine, who often trek hundreds of miles searching for food and end up in crowded, lawless refugee camps where Islamist militants, rogue militiamen and even government soldiers rape, rob and kill with impunity.

With the famine putting hundreds of thousands of women on the move — severing them from their traditional protection mechanism, the clan — aid workers say more Somali women are being raped right now than at any time in recent memory. In some areas, they say, women are being used as chits at roadblocks, surrendered to the gunmen staffing the barrier in the road so that a group of desperate refugees can pass.

"The situation is intensifying," said Radhika Coomaraswamy, the United Nations' special representative for children and armed conflict. All the recent flight has created a surge in opportunistic rapes, she said, and "for the Shabab, forced marriage is another aspect they are using to control the population."

In the past two months, from Mogadishu alone, the United Nations says it has received more than 2,500 reports of gender-based violence, an unusually large number here. But because Somalia is a no-go zone for most operations, United Nations officials say they are unable to confirm the reports, leaving the work to fledgling Somali aid organizations under constant threat.

Somalia is a deeply traditional place, where 98 percent of girls are subject to genital cutting, according to United Nations figures. Most girls are illiterate and relegated to their homes. When they venture out, it is usually to work, trudging through the rubble-strewn alleyways wrapped head to toe in thick black cloth, often lugging something on their back, the equatorial sun burning down on them.

The famine and mass displacement, which began over the summer, have made women and girls more vulnerable. Many Somali communities have been disbanded, and with armed groups forcing men and boys into their militias, it is often single women, with children in tow, who set off on the dangerous odyssey to refugee camps.

At the same time, aid workers and United Nations officials say the Shabab, who are fighting Somalia's transitional government and imposing a harsh version of Islam in the areas they control, can no longer pay their several thousand fighters the way they used to. Much as they seize crops and livestock, giving their militants what they call "temporary wives" is how the Shabab keep many young men fighting for them.

But these are hardly marriages, said Sheik Mohamed Farah Ali, a former Shabab commander who defected to the government army.

"There's no cleric, no ceremony, nothing," he said, adding that Shabab fighters had even paired up with thin little girls as young as 12, who are left torn and incontinent afterward. If a girl refuses, he said, "she's killed by stones or bullets."

One young woman just delivered a baby, half Somali, half Arab. She said she was selected by a Somali Shabab fighter she knew, brought to a house full of guns and handed off to a portly Arab commander, one of the many foreigners fighting for the Shabab.

"He did whatever he wanted with me," she said. "Night and day."

She said she escaped when he was sleeping.

The Elman Peace and Human Rights Center is one of the few Somali organizations helping rape victims, run by Fartuun Adan, a tall, outspoken woman whose husband, Elman, was gunned down by warlords years ago. Ms. Adan says that since the famine began, she has met hundreds of women who have been raped and hundreds more who have escaped forced marriages.

"You have no idea how difficult it is for them to come forward," she said. "There's no justice here, no protection. People say, 'You're junk' if you've been raped."

Often, the women are left wounded or pregnant, forced to seek help. Ms. Adan wants to expand her medical services and counseling for rape victims and possibly open a safe house, but it is hard to do on a budget of \$5,000 a month, provided by a small aid organization called Sister Somalia. Ms. Adan wept on a recent day as she listened to the 17-year-old girl recount the story of seeing her friend stoned to death and then being gang-raped herself.

"These girls ask me, 'How am I going to get married, what's going to be my future, what's going to happen to me?'" she said. "We can't answer that."

Some of the women in Ms. Adan's office seem to have come from another time. They have made it here, with help from Elman's network, from the deepest recesses of rural Somalia, where women are still treated like chattel.

One 18-year-old who asked to go by Ms. Nur, her common last name, was married off at 10. She was a nomad and says that to this day she has never used a phone or seen a television.

She spoke of being raped by two Shabab fighters at a displaced-persons camp in October. She said the men did not bother saying much when they entered her hut. They just pointed their guns at her chest and uttered two words: stay silent.

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