

The story of a Somali refugee woman in Ethiopia: how I became a peer counsellor

Ibado Mahamoud Hilole

Ibado Mahamoud Hilole, a Somali woman, fled to Ethiopia after her son was killed in Mogadishu in 2010. Since then, she has lived in a refugee camp situated on the border where Somalia, Kenya and Ethiopia meet. In this personal reflection, she describes how her life has been affected by the violence in her country, how she survived periods of despair, and yet was able to find the courage to become a peer counsellor for other refugees. After training, she is now able to provide a listening ear, as well as giving practical support and advice.

Keywords: Ethiopia, peer counselling, refugee, Somalia

Introduction

My name is Ibado. I am a Somali woman, 44 years old. I come from Mogadishu. That is where I was born and where my parents were born. It is a long story how I became refugee in this camp, so far from Mogadishu. Since the fall of President Siad Barre, when I was a young girl, my country has been in turmoil. It still makes me sad when I talk about it. So many people have died. My father was killed in the war. Three of my brothers were also killed.

In the beginning, I was able to live reasonably well in Mogadishu. I married my first husband with whom I had a son, Mohammed. My first husband divorced me after a while and went with another woman. Then I married my second husband, and with him I had another child. However, misfortune befell us and my second husband died. According to our custom, his younger brother married me so I was not left alone.

I had four more children with him. My life was not good, but also not bad. Because I had been to school, I could read and write and I was able to make a living selling vegetables in the market.

Why I fled my country

It all changed in one day. Five years ago my son Mohammed, my first born, went out and never returned. He was killed when he was only 19 years old. I still feel deep sadness when I think of him. . .

After Mohammed's death, my husband decided it was too dangerous for us to stay in Mogadishu. My husband left first, telling me to stay behind with the children. When he arrived in Ethiopia, I received a message that I could also come. I took two of my children and left on a truck that was loaded with goods. It was a horrible and dangerous journey with check posts of armed groups everywhere who stopped cars and wanted goods or money. When I arrived in Ethiopia, I was brought to the Melkadida camp. It is not so far from the border with Somalia. At that time this was a new camp and I was among the first arrivals. Very soon after my arrival, I went back because I wanted to bring my other children here. I travelled once again to Mogadishu and returned with my other kids. Then we were all safe.

Life as a refugee

But life was not easy here. Yes, we were given shelter and we were given food. Above all, we could live in peace. Yet, I did not know many people. I am from the Hawyia clan,

like my husband, and in this camp there are not many people from my clan. But you meet people at weddings and funerals, and so I began to know some of the other women. We started to visit each other. I also tried to keep good relations with my neighbours. That is not always easy in a camp. Some people create problems, for example, if children fight with each other the parent of one of them may come to beat the other child and then there is trouble among households. I always tried to be wise and not to enter into conflicts, as a housewife with the care of young children, I had enough to do.

How I became a peer counsellor

One day a friend of mine came and told me that Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS)¹ needed volunteers. She told me they offered training for three months, without pay. I was interested, because I thought this could be an opportunity for me to learn new things that I could use in life and later to provide an income. The training was very interesting and I learned a lot, for example, how to talk with people who are sad. How to listen to their stories and to help them find solutions to their problems. I learned how listening can be healing, but it is not always easy. Not at all. Sometimes, when people tell me stories of their loss, it can make me sad because I remember the people I have lost. This is how life is: God gives us life and God takes it away.

What I have experienced is that it really helps if you listen carefully and let the person feel that you are there with him or her. It is also very important that the person feels safe with you and that you do not tell their secrets to others. People tell me many things, but I will always keep it confidential. Every man or woman has his or her story and I try to accept everyone how they are: man or woman, old or young, no matter what clan or religion.

My work

For the past three years I have worked as a peer counsellor. I have three to four clients

each month. Also, twice a week peer counsellors meet in the community centre, where we discuss our clients with the social worker, learn from each other and report on our work. Regularly, we also discuss our work with psychologists specialised in the field of listening and counselling. We also do awareness raising activities within the community.

However, my work as a peer counsellor is not full time. I have my children to care for and, of course, I must cook and do the laundry, and I have a small shop, but, being a peer counsellor makes me feel proud. I also earn a bit of extra money for my family. I get 800 birr (around 30 Euros) each month. I use the money to buy things for my little shop that I can then sell in the camp. Also, if I see people in need, I sometimes share it with them, how could I let someone suffer and close my eyes?

I remember a man who lived with his deaf wife, they did not have children. The wife fell sick and the man became demoralised. I met them by accident, when I was walking to another client. I saw this man talking to himself and I greeted him, but he did not hear me. So I wondered what was going on here? I came back to visit him. Then he let me into his hut and told me that he had a big problem because his wife was sick and he did not know what to do. He could not sleep anymore, had lost all hope, did not take good care of himself. So I started visiting him and the wife. I fetched water and made a bath for the wife. She was very sick, so I went with her to the health centre, and with medicine her health improved slowly. I kept visiting them twice a week and helped them put their life back in order again. Once, I was looking for firewood and the man became more active. I encouraged him and slowly he regained his strength. I also talked with the neighbours and people in the community and convinced them to visit the couple from time to time. Slowly, the life of the couple returned to normal.

So, some of the things I do to help people are very practical. But I think that listening and talking, as a one human being with another human being makes the biggest difference. In some people, the pain and the sadness is so deep that they cannot carry it by themselves. I remember a man who had lost his wife and his children. They were all killed in Somalia. When he heard that news he was so sad that he could not stop crying. He fell on the ground in despair. So I brought him water and tried to calm him down and listened to his sad story. I saw him several times a week, and as I listened to him, he slowly regained some courage. He has never forgotten me. Whenever I meet him he greets me warmly and reminds me that I was there for him to help him when he was overwhelmed by grief. It makes me

proud and happy that I could be there for him.

My hope for the future

Mogadishu may be a bit safer these days, but I do not trust the situation there and therefore, do not want to go back. I am afraid that something may happen to one of my other children. Of course, I also do not want to stay here forever and live on the food that the UN gives me. My hope is that one day the UNHCR will help me to go to Europe or Australia. I want my children to have a good future.

¹ Jesuit Refugee Service is an international NGO which serves, accompanies and advocates on behalf of refugees and other forcibly displaced persons.

The story behind this personal reflection

The story of Ibado Mahamoud Hilole was told to Peter Ventevogel on the afternoon of 10 October, 2015 in the Melkadida refugee camp in Ethiopia. The conversation took place with the assistance of Salatha Ali Gaide, a young Somali–Kenyan woman, who studies social work in Kenya and works as an interpreter and social worker for the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) in Melkadida. Written drafts of this text have been shared with Ibado, who reviewed them carefully, with Salatha acting as her translator. She approved this text and recognises it as her story. Additionally, she has chosen to publish this personal reflection under her real name, and not a pseudonym.

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