



## Building Safe Communities Through Story-Sharing

*Emma Dorothy Reinhardt*

### *Abstract*

This paper introduces readers to community transformation strategies used by the women peace-leaders in Wajir, Kenya to reduce violence in their district and introduce effective systems of collaborative, sustainable peace. In order to do so, the author invites readers into a global web of women's testimonials collected by a U.S.-based organization called HERvoices. Woven together, Wajir's successful means of conflict management and the use of HERvoices' testimonies to foster cross-cultural understanding propose the use of story-sharing to build safer local communities and a safer global community.

### *Author Profile*

**Emma Reinhardt**, founding director of HERvoices, is an organizational manager and social entrepreneur who specializes in conflict resolution, community-building and the empowerment and inclusion of underrepresented communities into mainstream forums. The mission of HERvoices is to build a safer global community by strengthening cross-cultural openness and understanding through story-sharing presentations that profile women and girls. Emma has a Bachelor's degree from Wesleyan University, CT, and a Master's degree from the University of Ulster, N. Ireland.

## Peacebuilding in Wajir, Kenya

I was first in Wajir, Kenya in 1999 when I was twenty-two years old and conducting research for my Master's thesis. I had learned that a group of Muslim women indigenous to the area had emerged as the leaders of a successful, nonviolent movement and I wanted to learn from them. Three family clans – the Ajuran, Degodia and Ogaden, all of whom are Somali Muslims living within Kenya's bounds just over Somalia's border – had been fighting over sparse natural resources, discrepancies between traditional and colonial law and disputed land boundaries in Wajir district for decades. However, when the fighting reached the town of Wajir and began effecting the women and children directly, the women launched a proactive, nonviolent response. I was most interested in how the women could be effective leaders during conflict times since they were excluded from mainstream politics and decision-making processes during stable times; and what forms of nonviolence actually worked to abate the conflict and create stability in the area. <sup>1</sup>

During my ten weeks there in 1999, I conducted fifty interviews of women and men involved with and impacted by the conflict and nonviolent resolution process. I lived with a family and was hosted by the peace group in Wajir. My research culminated in a summary of the nonviolent means of resolution that were utilized successfully and an assessment of what the global community could learn from the accomplishments in Wajir.

I returned to Wajir in early 2008 with one other researcher and now under the umbrella of HERvoices, a U.S.-based organization whose multimedia presentations bring narratives of women and girls to diverse audiences so to build cross-cultural openness, understanding and a global exchange of ideas and perspectives. During our one-week visit this time, we conducted forty interviews of women and girls involved in the peace work and impacted by it. Our goal was to be able to introduce Wajir's work to others from the platform of HERvoices to both share the effective, nonviolent practices with others around the world, and to bring into the global conversation voices rarely heard publicly: the candid, ordinary and extraordinary voices of Muslim Somali women using nonviolence successfully.

When I first learned of Wajir and the peace work conducted there, I learned about Dekha Ibrahim Abdi. In 1999, it was to Dekha I wrote my letter asking if I could visit Wajir and learn from her and the others. When I arrived in Nairobi

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<sup>1</sup> Though there is not yet one complete report on the conflict and peacebuilding practices in Wajir, extensive information is available. The author recommends beginning with: CDA's "Reflecting on the Peace Practice Project," written by Janice Jenner and Dekha Ibrahim Abdi, October 2000.

and was waiting at the regional airport at dawn to find a flight to Wajir, it was Dekha who met me and welcomed me to a land that then felt so frighteningly far away from anything I knew.

I met Dekha at sunrise that August of 1999, and she impressed me immediately in the same way a sunrise does: she is a phenomenal woman who exudes universal qualities of immense, unwavering warmth, generosity and trustworthiness. In communities around the world, she, her work and the Wajir community's work has become a cited case of the success of nonviolence over violence. And yet, in the quiet of the HERvoices interview during my return visit to Kenya in 2008, as the sun was setting in her home, the story that best anchored her in her renowned work was this one about her father:

*There is a memory that comes to my mind as I talk about this -- it's my dad, may God rest his soul. It's me walking with him from our home to downtown Wajir, and he will stop to greet, and he will stop to greet and talk, and stop to greet and talk. So he will not really walk straight. And as a young person, maybe eleven, I wanted the task done. The task was the walking. You have to walk from A to B. And he was like, "No. You'll still reach B, but as you move from A, take your time, greet the neighbors, ask how they are." And I used to say, "That's a waste of time. The sun is hot, let's just get on already." And he said, "My daughter, one day, one time, you will understand what I am doing. For now, just ask the question."*

*So I learned his openness. He could see I didn't understand, but at the same time, he didn't shut me down, he just allowed me to be. ...And he died in 1982. And in 1997, I was walking from my office to the post office: I left the office at three o'clock and I reached the post office at five o'clock and it got closed on my face. And I was like, "Oh my God, that's a fifteen minute walk. You took two hours!" What was I doing? Exactly like my dad did: Stop, greet, stop, greet, but unconsciously. It hit me that I couldn't post the letters. So I couldn't do the task. But I had fantastic relationships of greeting people and asking them how they were. And I was like, "That's it. Dad, thank you very much." Now I know, it's about relationships, it's about caring about people. And sometimes it's not about getting your task done.*

I had already known Dekha for years at the time of this interview, and had studied the Wajir conflict and resolution processes extensively by then, but still, I had imagined the interview would again allow a newcomer to the topic to learn the explicit details of the structures and mechanisms now known as the Wajir peace process. But in the telling of her story that she had told over and over, I heard in Dekha the foundation for her work: relationships. Somehow it was the telling and re-telling that provided space for Dekha to find a new reference and meaning to her powerful work. "I've never reflected on these things like this," she concluded.

### **Peacebuilding through Relationships**

*"Politics ... is about relationships among significant clusters of citizens to solve public problems in a cumulative, multilevel, and open-ended process of continuous interaction over time ..."*

(Saunders, Harold, "Politics is about Relationship," Palgrave Macmillan, NY 2005, p. 47)

With the fifty interviews from 1999 incorporated into my thinking and philosophy, alongside the forty more from 2008, and then the hundreds of others now from other communities I have had the honor to work with and interview in affiliation with HERvoices, I can conclude so simply and in agreement with Dekha: building safe communities, peacebuilding, is about building relationships. While Dekha and her father walked from their home to their town's center, and twenty years later, while Dekha walked from her office to the post office, the adult in each story (Dekha's father in the first, and then Dekha on her own in the second) was able to appreciate that the importance of each journey was not the explicit result of the journey - the arrival at the destination and the completion of the named task - but rather the process of making connections and forming relationships along the way, of building community based on continuous, open, interpersonal interactions.

It seems simple enough for each of us to borrow from Dekha's story and resolve to pause more during the day to establish a human connection to the people we pass. Christine Tibor, a HERvoices' interviewee living across the world from Dekha, giving her HERvoices interview from her school office where she runs an English-as-a-second-language program for adults in Framingham, Massachusetts in the U.S. made a similar conclusion:

*The best way to solve issues is to connect to people one-on-one. I don't think you need to do anything more than talk to people. But*

*I think the number one way to do it is when you talk to the fellow pumping your gas, or you take a risk and go into a new bakery, or you see someone on the street who needs your help that you say good morning. And you talk to them -- whether or not they can answer you in perfect English doesn't really make a heck of a lot of difference ... You just start to see people as more similar than dissimilar when you talk to them, and then a lot of those challenges disappear. And if the challenges are there and in reality, the only way to address them is to talk to people anyway.*

Locally, and in stable, peaceful communities, we can imagine the possibility of taking the time to build relationships with our neighbors and we can imagine the richness and closeness that could come from that. Knowing the story of Wajir district, which was once strangled by daily ethnic violence, I can even begin to understand how Dekha and her team led their community to stability: one, then ten, then ten-thousand people living in Wajir began to take on this philosophy of metaphorically and literally 'stopping and greeting' each other and prioritizing relationships over tasks.

With Dekha's story in mind, and through this new lens of peacebuilding-through-relationships, I can revisit and re-understand all of the Wajir interviews I have from both my 1999 and 2008 visits, alongside my summary and analyses of all of the strategies of nonviolence that were utilized successfully in that community: The Wajir Peace Group's Rapid Response Team relied on urgency, its commitment to building Collective Peace relied on inclusiveness, and its pre-emptive Peace Festivals were dependent on optimism. These three pillars to Wajir's Peace - urgency, inclusiveness and optimism - can be reanalyzed and further strengthened when seen as adhering to this simple strategy of peacebuilding-through-relationships.

### **Building Relationships through Story-Sharing**

HERvoices relies on this same strategy. However, as an organization, we are challenged by the reality that in so many communities, the social divides - or geographical distances - are too great to hope that members of one community will be able to either comfortably and/or safely take on the commitment of 'stopping and greeting' those of another community with whom they do not usually interact. Even within communities where violence is not a threat per se, like in a classroom in a safe town, it is likely that a well-meaning, relatively judgment-free student will not feel s/he has 'permission' - the social excuse - to begin 'stopping and greeting' a student with whom s/he has not previously felt a natural connection. Simultaneously, an open-minded, well-intentioned adult living in the U.S., for example, will likely not have access to 'stopping and

greeting' another adult living in Iraq, to continue this example. In the former classroom scenario, a small social divide may continue to exacerbate notions of difference and distrust between the two students; and in the latter scenario with the adults, that lack of access to or real knowledge of each other can in fact result in dehumanizing ideas and resulting actions that have a truly grave impact within the global community.

Following the philosophy of both Dekha and Christine, HERvoices provides a platform for 'stopping and greeting' across social and geographical divides, enabling peacebuilding-through-relationships to occur through the exchange of narratives: At each HERvoices presentation venue, women in the audience step in as the live readers of the profiled women's testimonies, alongside an audio-visual slide-show - so that students in New York City, for example, take on the voices of and feel connected to women in Wajir, Kenya; and women in Wajir, Kenya take on the voices of and feel connected to women in Sindh, Pakistan, etc. "You got to feel for these women and know them, like you had met them," wrote Zach, age 13, one of HERvoices' now 10,000 audience participants. "The stories introduce you to the real people that statistics can't, and inspire empathy," wrote Maggie, another audience participant, age 28. Participants are in consensus: Hearing the candid testimonies of others, in their peers' voices, gives them permission to share their own stories and ask others about their lives; the HERvoices testimonies expand the parameters of the participants' conversations.

Founded in 2004, HERvoices' mission is to build a safer global community by strengthening cross-cultural openness and understanding through these presentations and adjoining workshops. It tours its programs to co-ed audiences of all ages, while allowing each presentation to be comprised entirely of female voices.

### **Wajir's Process: Urgency, Inclusiveness, Optimism**

We are all capable of 'stopping and greeting,' of building relationships and in fact, of peacebuilding. It is exciting to learn how accessible peacebuilding can be and how we each can and do participate in it in different ways. Three paramount nonviolent techniques used in Wajir were centered around urgency, inclusiveness and optimism, respectively. A brief summary of each, paralleled by excerpts from HERvoices interviews that emphasize the same philosophy, embed Wajir's work in a wider web of women's stories, while inviting the wider web of women's stories into an arena of explicit peacebuilding.

In the throes of deadly clashes between three Somali clans in the middle of the expansive red desert of northeast Kenya, a group of women said, "No." "No" to



the fighting, “No” to the deaths of their husbands and children, and “No” to the disrupted trading at the marketplace. They responded with urgency, inclusiveness and optimism.

Nuria Abdullahi, one of the leaders of the peace movement and also my host during my 1999 visit, generously summarized the previous two decades of peace work during her 2008 HERvoices interview:

*The Wajir Peace and Development Committee started as a community-felt need. After the 1991-92 ethnic clashes in Wajir, we felt that the government forces were really using excessive force towards the civilians and it was like, “Violence could not solve violence,” so we decided as a community, the youth and the women came together to intervene.*

*And after a long process started by three women, we were able to contain the situation and came up with a Rapid Response Team and made the Wajir Peace and Development Committee which was a coalition of Government officers, civil society organizations, elders, women, youth, religious leaders, the business community, Parliamentarians, local leaders, local counselors ... Because we believe peace is a collective responsibility. Everybody was taking conflict and everyone learned ways to respond and support the community process.*

*We decided to look at structures to build and maintain the sustainability of the peace process. The first structure we looked at for sustaining the peace process was building district, locational and sub-locational peace committees, which are replicas of the district level structures involving all of the community members, the religious leaders, the education sector, including developing peace education in schools as a means of adopting a culture of peace ... All facets of the community within that locality should be part of the process because peace is a collective responsibility.*

Nuria and the others also proactively and optimistically organized Peace Festivals during this time of violent conflict, to celebrate the Peace to come, to enable the community to taste its anticipated sweetness as an incentive. At the Festivals, the Peace Group honored traditional clansmen who were spearheading the fighting -- they would publicly honor them as Peace Leaders. The result? They would “hike up their bootstraps and start acting like Peace Leaders,” they explained. The group introduced Peace education into all sectors of the community. They were inclusive in their work so within a few years, every sector

of the community had taken part in the Peace work to the point that everyone seemed to “own” the Peace. The Peace group helped others lead, and through means reliant on urgency, inclusiveness and optimism, the Peace became sustainable.

### **Peacebuilding with Urgency**

As Nuria discussed above, in the early 1990s, women from the three clans combined resources and joined together to form a cross-community Rapid Response Team that responded instantly to all incidents of violence perpetrated by one clan against another. Working as one unit, the Team would arrive at the injured family’s home and address the family’s losses and basic needs, face-to-face. The Team would then arrange for that family to receive any provisions they required like soap or food, especially if the injured person or persons were the main providers for the family. The Team would also begin negotiations between the injured family and the perpetrators in order to dissuade the victims from retaliating. Sometimes an exchange of cows, for example, would be arranged by the Team. Thus, the ongoing cycle of violence was slowed as retaliatory violence was greatly reduced.

Paramount to this part of the process was the immediacy, the deliberate and fast, urgent act. “The important thing to do -- whichever group was hit, get there fast, before they hit back!” explained Amran Abdikadir, an interviewee in Wajir during my 1999 thesis research. There was one moment, one point of decision in each of these scenarios when it was necessary to jump in order to effectively change what would otherwise be the inevitable direction of the path of violence or stability in Wajir.

People talk about these turning points, these pivotal moments in their lives in very different contexts throughout HERvoices interviews. While the contexts and locales are substantively different between Wajir and Pakistan, and the U.S., and the many other places HERvoices works, it is clear that this certain spirit of urgency and these necessitated and timely acts underscore many of HERvoices’ interviewees’ stories, and lives in fact. One after another, the women with whom we work speak of these pivotal moments, propelled by their own ability to respond rapidly and urgently to their given situation in order to restore a peace and/or find a sustainable and sound solution in their own lives: Rhonda faces an overwhelming sense of directionless and depression after being released from jail and she finds herself turning inward and to God in order to make a dramatic change in her life in the middle of one cold winter night in Framingham, Massachusetts; fifty years earlier in the same town, Roberta Walcott confronts the



town after it bans her son, an African American high school student, from riding the school bus; as a mother of three in Sindh, Pakistan, Mahanta makes the first decision about her own life when she realizes it is being threatened by her husband – she takes her children and flees the country; and “K,” a South Asian woman seeking work abroad and finding herself enslaved instead survives one situation after another because of her ability to act with urgency, and literally jump:

*One day, he put his gun on my forehead and said if I gave him trouble, he was going to shoot me. He lay down to take a nap. I saw the door open, and I ran. After half-hour, I got to the main street. I found a truck taxi. I was sitting in the front seat and the man put his hand on my thigh. I opened the door fast and jumped out. I found another taxi, a young boy - sent by a god - was so nice. He saw I was crying and I asked him to please take me to my country's Embassy.*

In one moment of mentally reviewing the hundreds of HERvoices interviews in my head and in our files, I can see one woman, then another, then another jumping from her situation in order to save herself, her family or her community. Through these stories, these women are connected to each other, and those who have the opportunity to hear the testimonies are connected to the women who are otherwise very far away from them.

In Wajir, acting with urgency changed the direction of the conflict and eventually enabled the Peace to take hold, thus nurturing the process of peacebuilding. In the context of the HERvoices interviews, interviewees often define themselves in the segments of their own stories in which they were effective in *responding rapidly* to their own difficult situation in order to change their life-path's direction. The urgency of their actions shifted each woman's relationship to herself and the path she was on; and by sharing her story with others through HERvoices, the peacebuilding is reinforced through the story-sharing as it is empowering for the interviewee, and informative - and even inspiring - for the listener.

### **Peacebuilding Through Inclusiveness**

Wajir's cross-community team of women leaders was inclusive and quickly expanded to involve men and children to the point that everyone truly felt an ownership of and responsibility to the Peace to come and the peacebuilding systems in place. Wajir calls its peace “collective:” involving everyone in every sector of the community - from government to education - so that even those

least likely to contribute positively felt empowered, vital and effective and thus heartily joined the movement.

We each have easiest access to those we are close to - our children, parents, husbands, other women in our community or congregation, etc. - and throughout the HERvoices interviews, it seems that universally, we all actively make space for and encourage the participation of those within our reach: Born in Italy and now living in the U.S., Marisa D'Eramo talks to her husband about women's rights in the context of her three daughters; Kanwal Memon runs human rights awareness workshops for other women living near her in Sindh, Pakistan; and the older Mamas in Wajir describe their technique in involving their husbands in the peace process. Mama Fatuma Mire explains:

*One of our first tasks as the Wajir Women For Peace was going to the villages looking for the guns to have turned in. We visited at the homes, tried to talk to the mothers. The first woman we met said, "That man is here with me, and he has refused to return the gun." Our advice to her: "When your man comes at night, don't give him a space to sleep, don't agree to sleep with him. If the man comes to you three times and you refuse to welcome him three times, he will not ask a fourth time, he will turn in his gun." The woman did that and the man came to her the fourth time. He had handed over his gun to the government, and the government gave him a job in exchange. We advised the others to take an example of that.*

Who can we each reach most effectively and how we can best involve them in constructive community participation? How can we begin to expand our reach, and encourage others to do the same?

### **Peacebuilding with Optimism**

The peacemakers and leaders in Wajir - during both my 1999 and 2008 visits - spoke about their Peace Festivals with pride and pragmatism, and also a little humor. By celebrating that which they wished for - Peace - and by honoring positive behavior of the clan leaders needed by the community in order for its stability to increase and be sustainable, the peacemakers of Wajir led their community with optimism. We often hear references to the 'power of suggestion' in our ordinary lives - the Peace Festivals and Peace awards to the violent leaders were successful in just that way. "We were changing their psychology," one leader explained.

Other women around the world are leading their communities in similar ways, by suggesting publicly the positive possibilities that may not seem immediately accessible to those around them. Dalia Abrego, for example, born in El Salvador and now a middle school teacher in the U.S. explains how she introduces the concept of college to her teenage students:

*I started realizing, I went to college, I was motivated, but in my home we really never talked about, "You're going to go to college." And so I thought, "Well, we are going to talk about it, it is going to be a part of their lives." When I talk to them, I say, "Well when you go to college, or when you become this..." My hope is that it will become a part of them.*

Similarly, many women interviewed by HERvoices who have survived horrific periods of time talk about the dreams that kept them alive and inspired them to want to live, even during their various forms of detention. Dreams too, like Peace Festivals and the 'power of suggestion,' remind us of what can come, enable us to viscerally imagine the safety, sweetness and richness that could be ahead, and encourage us to pursue forward despite the difficulties of our current situations.

### **Finding the Story to Peacebuild Across Divides**

Towards the end of her interview, Dekha told me a story about a difficult situation she found herself in at the airport in Tel Aviv, in Israel. She acted with urgency, inclusiveness and optimism as she privately navigated herself through:

*There are many challenges and there are those many moments that seem to sort of fight against you. And when those moments come, I go back to my spiritual base: I reflect, I meditate, I pray, I read the Koran. It gives me clarity of thought. ... Like there was a time, I was at the airport in Tel Aviv and this young girl, a security agent, she asked me a really horrible question and I could not even see the security part of the question. And I would have lost my cool, I would have lost my everything. And I just stopped. And I asked her ... "What's your name? ... How are you?" ... Just making that human connection. And then she told me her name and what it meant, something to do with dew in Hebrew. And then I said, "That's it -- I am harvesting that dew. It's really challenging to be in this airport ... It's really challenging to harvest dew ... It's really challenging to be asked all of these questions, to be looked at suspiciously, and it's like harvesting dew." I made that human connection and I went poetical. And*

*that helped me really calm down. So I wasn't seeing her as a security agent ... I was just seeing she could be my daughter, she is just doing her job.*

Dekha found in herself a reliable resource – her spirituality, her poetry – so that she could quickly shift her mental posture, and act constructively and with urgency in the difficult situation. She then reached out to the security agent, including her in the situation fully, and humanizing her. And then Dekha optimistically thought beyond the obvious limitations of the situation and concluded that the other woman could be her daughter, was just doing her job, and that the more beneficial response on Dekha's part was to accept her as familiar, even as family.

By prioritizing the relationship between herself and the young woman at the airport, by 'stopping and greeting' and exchanging a story, Dekha was able to dissolve some of the barriers between them. Dekha's actions enabled the two women to find a point of common, human connection, once again shifting a path away from conflict and towards building a safe community.

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