

Empowerment of women | Mediation | Negative coping strategies

Self-protection outside community protection structures

📍 Somalia/Somaliland

Identifying and supporting self-protection mechanisms in Somalia/Somaliland

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Community-based protection (CBP) empowers women and men in communities to obtain their rights safely and with dignity. Using CBP, crisis-affected communities and the humanitarian actors that assist them can identify a community's most serious protection risks, explore their causes and effects, and jointly decide how to prevent and respond to them. It achieves better protection impact and improves the lives of people we work with.

However, it is crucial to acknowledge that many protection problems pre-date humanitarian emergencies, and may be exacerbated by them. In the face of them, local communities may have self-protection mechanisms, which could either be positive or negative. It is therefore important to examine the role of communities critically, recognizing that they are sources of support and assistance, but potentially also of threat and harm.

During CBP work, we have learned that women sleep in groups at night, specifically when the men from their families are away. Women feel unsafe sleeping alone due to their open huts, which have neither doors nor lighting. In some locations, especially in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, there may also be no lights in the street or near latrines. Women and girls travel in groups when fetching firewood and water, an activity that exposes them to greater protection threats such as killing, rape, sexual harassment and assault. Women and girls only go out in the early morning, while others still sleep, to avoid being seen, or before dark, when it is deemed safer. As there is acute shortage of latrines open defecation is a common practice.¹

Oxfam's CBP work has encouraged positive protection mechanisms, such as traveling in groups. Based on identified protection issues, we formulate messages with community protection volunteers (CPVs) that promote community-based solutions to specific risks. CPVs carry out awareness-raising sessions in the community using the modalities preferred by each community. For example, one of the issues identified was that women were not included in communities' traditional decision-making bodies. This led to a neglect of protection issues affecting women and girls in particular. As a response, women's forums and CPVs carried out awareness-raising sessions about the importance of women's participation in decision making.

On the other hand, there are also harmful self-protection mechanisms that local communities adopt. For example, men and boys are armed and always ready to attack people they see as a threat – usually people from other opposing clans. In these situations, we have observed that gender-based violence increases.

¹ According to Protection analysis conducted with women and young girls in IDP camps, 2019.

During protection capacity-building training sessions with authorities and community committees, such issues are considered, and alternative self-protection mechanisms are discussed. For instance, peaceful conflict resolution mechanisms have been discussed as an alternative to retaliation in response to clan violence. The trainees are also familiarized on risk analysis to be better able to identify, understand the consequences of, and address negative coping mechanisms.