

# COMBATING GENDER BASED CYBERVIOLENCE

## INTERVIEW WITH DEQA YASIN

# About us



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The Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (CSPPS) is a global network of civil society organizations supporting peacebuilding efforts in fragile & conflict-affected settings. It is composed of civil society actors, practitioners, experts, and academics from the Global South and the Global North who work together on advancing Sustainable Development Goal 16+, conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and state-building in fragile and conflict-affected settings. Since 2011, CSPPS has acted as a central platform where civil society ideas are generated, where progress is discussed regarding peacebuilding and statebuilding goals, where consensus is sought on the course of action to be taken with respect to the International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding.

# Foreword

In a digital age where cyberspace plays a pivotal role in our lives, the story of Ms. Deqa Yasin, the former Somali Minister for Women and Human Rights, serves as a stark reminder of the profound impact of online violence. Her journey began in 2020 after she endured a relentless barrage of insults and death threats from a segment of Somali citizens, especially men. And what was her crime? Championing the Sexual Offenses Bill (SOB), a tailor-made legislative initiative aimed at addressing sexual and gender-based violence in Somalia.

Online abuse has been steadily on the rise with increased social media use and disproportionately targets women's rights advocates and female politicians. Deqa Yasin's poignant account, shared in an earlier blog post, underscores the critical importance of acknowledging and taking action against the gravity of online violence. It is an unfortunate reality that women are often discouraged from pursuing political roles within society partly due to such reasons. But by bravely sharing her painful journey, Deqa Yasin not only empowers women, especially those aspiring to leadership positions, to speak out and shatter the silence and also withstand potential backlash against women's rights. Deqa asserts that "Freedom of speech comes with limitations and responsibilities," as she recounts her decision to seek justice for the cyberspace attacks against a Somali diaspora residing in the Netherlands.



November 14, 2023 - Final Court Decision at The Appeal Court in The Netherlands.

# Background



October 31, 2023 - at The Appeal Court

In November 2022, Deqa presented her case for justice against a Somali Dutch citizen who perpetrated cyberviolence against her at the Palace of Justice in The Hague, where the court found the perpetrator guilty. A year later, Deqa appeared for a second time to the court as the perpetrator sought to contest the prior ruling and therefore had requested an appeal against the verdict of the case. Despite the perpetrator's efforts to prolong the process, the court upheld its original judgment, ruling in favor of Deqa Yasin. This judicial outcome not only underscores the courts' acknowledgment of the paramountcy of online spaces but also reaffirms their firm commitment to impartial adjudication, demonstrating that online and offline violence and hate speech are non-permissible and preparators should and must be held accountable for their actions, irrespective for where they live.

I had the privilege of attending the proceedings of Deqa Yasin's court case in The Hague, and this fueled my desire to conduct this interview with her to understand the gravity of the issues presented. The purpose of this interview is to shed light on Deqa Yasin's experiences, and lessons learned during her tedious journey in seeking justice and confronting the abuser. I wanted to know what insights she has gained, including the role that civil society as she envisions towards addressing gender-based cyber violence. This conversation marks the first step toward a greater understanding of this extremely important issue.

# What prompted you to proceed to the court case, or what triggered this initiative?

Allow me to provide some context to this situation. It all began in 2017, as the Minister responsible for developing various pieces of legislation aimed at safeguarding the rights of children, women, and vulnerable groups. One of the pieces of legislation included the Sexual Offences Bill (SOB), which had faced major opposition since 2013, despite significant efforts by previous ministers. However, during my term, I persisted in advancing the bill. After navigating through all the required procedural checks and balances, I ensured that the bill successfully passed all the legislative processes, including the Executive branch. However, when it reached the Federal Parliament of Somalia, it faced an unprecedented obstacle.

A highly irregular unparliamentary procedure was used against the SOB. Unlike other bills, it became the first known draft law ever to be returned to the Cabinet by a Speaker without even being tabled for a first reading because it was argued that the bill was contrary to Islamic principles. In 2020, matters took a troubling turn when opposition to the bill escalated into a targeted personal assault against me, orchestrated by factions within the government, legislative body, and external entities. This was a meticulously choreographed manoeuvre aimed at besmirching my reputation and stature, not just within Somalia but also on the international stage.

At some point, I wondered why legislation aimed at protecting and empowering women consistently faced such strong opposition. Nonetheless, I found myself at the receiving end of a deliberate and highly personal onslaught, including severe abuse through social media. Given my lifelong commitment to fighting against injustice, I was not going to allow this to happen to me as I watched silently.

**The road to seeking justice was difficult, but my unwavering commitment to pursue justice was resolute.** When I made the decision to go to court, I was aware that the path ahead would be daunting, but I intended to send a clear message, particularly to those in the diaspora, that such behaviour was entirely unacceptable. In this way, this battle extended beyond my personal pursuit to one that represented countless girls and women facing similar challenges but often lacked the resources and resilience to fight back and end up suffering in silence. It took a painstaking two years before I received any response and an additional year after the appeal. Nevertheless, my commitment to pursuing justice remained steadfast, as I understood that the only effective avenue to resolve this issue was through the judicial system. For me, it was a matter of principle, and this ultimately brought me to a courtroom within the halls of justice in the Netherlands.

## How was your experience when you arrived in The Hague? Did you feel supported?

Yes indeed, there was some solidarity. The wholehearted support I received from my family and friends was unequivocal, but if I could change something, it would be to see a stronger and more well-coordinated network of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) from both the Global South and the North in amplifying such experiences. Unfortunately, many Somali CSOs were relatively weak, though with a few notable exceptions. It's essential for CSOs from both the North and the South to establish connections, work together and amplify their voices, because their support is absolutely beneficial for women enduring similar ordeals in seeking justice and holding international wrongdoers accountable.

## Have you witnessed any changes/developments in Somalia concerning women rights issues after the court case?

Based on my observations on social media, it's evident that many individuals have begun to recognize the significance of dealing with these issues. Many are now aware of and acknowledge the prevalence of gender-based cyber violence, and the precedent-setting court case, which has transformed the conversation and discourse on the issue. And this shift is empowering women to break the silence take action. Prior to this, it was often described as "a problem with no name,"<sup>[1]</sup> but now it's encouraging to see that people are addressing the issue head-on. Although it took a lengthy and challenging two-year process to bring this matter to court, this change occurred as a result of this case, and I am genuinely delighted to witness its impact.

[1] This notion was first presented by Betty Friedan, writer and activist in the book *The Feminine Mystique*, first published in 1963.



# What advice would you give to other women and young girls?

First and foremost, we must name cyber-based violence for what it truly is – gender-based cyber violence. Naming it accurately helps to acknowledge the seriousness and impact of such actions and can lead to more effective strategies for prevention and intervention. Secondly, I cannot overemphasize the critical role a well-organized network of civil society organizations plays in amplifying and supporting these efforts. Increasing awareness is a crucial resource that should be easily accessible, particularly for girls who have been victimized. They need to be aware that there is a social support network available to them, ready to offer assistance even when they may feel lacking in personal strength and support. These supportive mechanisms must be in place and readily available.

It is evident, particularly on social media, that victims often tolerate or overlook abuse, but we must summon the courage to confront the issue without fear or favor. In my experience, I witnessed many who remained on the sidelines silent, fearful, or apathetic although several young individuals took a stand. With the increasing prevalence of online abuse, we all must recognize the gravity of the problem and take action against the abusers, especially women and young girls. Strength, solidarity, bravery, and determination are essential components in the battle against cyber violence.

Unfortunately, without being addressed in an organized and coordinated manner, these attacks not only reduce the representation of women in public life, but also deeply affect the unity within the women's movement and the outlook for activism. Through their actions, some men target to isolate and undermine women, making them doubt their capabilities and worth, and it is within this context that dialogue and reflection among women in politics must commence. We need to plan and prepare for what lies ahead.

In conclusion, I would reiterate the importance of accurately identifying the issue and finding the courage to speak up and stand up for oneself.



November 10, 2022 - at The District Court

# What were your main takeaways - lessons learned from your experience?

After sharing my story across my social media platforms, I encountered a variety of reactions. Some doubted the authenticity of my experience, but I saw no need to justify myself to them. It was my truth, my narrative.

Nevertheless, the outcome of my case stands as a testament to the triumph of justice through my unwavering perseverance against a flawed system. As an advocate for human rights, it was imperative for me to uphold my principles and defend my own rights when they were infringed upon. I'm proud that I confronted the challenges head-on and fought for my own justice. This victory not only vindicates my own quest for justice but also signifies progress in safeguarding the rights of women and girls, whom the system was designed to protect. This success is a tribute to their cause as well.

Transnational crimes must be held to account regardless of the perpetrator's location, and this case demonstrated that accountability is achievable where the rule of law is upheld. Therefore, those in the diaspora should use their social media platforms positively instead of perpetuating harmful stereotypes, spreading misinformation, issuing threats, or fuelling division. Those who engage in negative behavior must understand that there are consequences, and they will be held responsible for their actions.

Furthermore, this case highlighted that accountability is attainable in Somalia when the rule of law is respected. Even those whom I couldn't directly hold accountable were subject to scrutiny.

Ultimately, we must move beyond simply acknowledging the existence of online gender-based violence against women and recognize it as a global threat to both women and democracy. Indeed, now is the time to speak up and ensure our voices are heard.



# What different strategies and measures can we as a society take?

Bullies exhibit consistent behaviour. In the realm of social media, many hide behind anonymity, making it difficult to discern their true identities. Thus, the initial step should be to recognize instances of bullying and then seek support and solidarity within a well-organized network of CSOs with shared values. It's imperative to acknowledge that maintaining the status quo is no longer an option.

Regrettably, I currently do not see meaningful discussions taking place in Somalia regarding gender issues. The genuine problems women face are not receiving the attention they truly deserve. Most, if not all bills that address women's issues encounter obstacles and any minister attempting to advance such bills becomes a sure target for attack. It's crucial to engage in critical self-reflection and develop a plan that is grounded in the realities on the ground, rather than being tied solely to development projects set out in federal and state blueprints. These discussions need to transcend the local level and be elevated to a global platform to ensure that issues affecting women worldwide are adequately addressed.

Parliament must also reflect on how women's rights are addressed, but because women are significantly underrepresented, they are rendered increasingly invisible in discussions and positions dominated by men. This is a legitimate concern that must be addressed genuinely; there remains a considerable risk for women.

The world is evolving, and I am committed to continuing to raise awareness regarding cases such as this. Change may take time, but I will persist in efforts to influence these discussions to the best of my ability, by utilizing my voice and collaborating with like-minded individuals to amplify this critical issue.

# Conclusion

This compelling narrative of Ms. Deqa Yasin, former Somali Minister for Women and Human Rights, sheds light on the distressing realities of gender-based cyber violence. In the spirit of solidarity, awareness, and advocacy, our hope is that this conversation opens a doorway to greater understanding and collaboration in the ongoing battle against online violence, paving the way for a more inclusive and equitable digital world for all.



November 10, 2022 - with family, friends and supporters at The District Court

# About CSPPS



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CSPPS is a global network of civil society organizations supporting peacebuilding efforts in fragile & conflict-affected settings. It coordinates and supports civil society participation in the International dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (IDPS) and related policy processes.

Cordaid, as part of its commitment to address fragility, hosts the Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding. The Secretariat is managed and coordinated by our senior manager Peter van Sluijs.

Please find hereunder relevant contact information for the Secretariat.

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to Deqa Yasin for allowing me the opportunity to conduct this interview and for generously sharing her journey with me. Her insightful contributions and knowledge have been instrumental in shaping the content and direction of this publication. Furthermore, her dedication to advocating for women's empowerment and combating cyber violence is both inspiring and commendable.

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