

Care and Politics in Action: The Humanitarian Relief by Somali Businesswomen in Zambia to Puntland

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Abstract

This paper examines the humanitarian engagement of Somali diaspora businesswomen in Zambia and it interacts with political and commercial interests. Focusing on a network of businesswomen in Lusaka and their chairwoman, Guddomiso Shamsu Sheikh Ali, we investigate the gendered mobilisation, delivery, and communication of emergency relief in response to the 2020 Qardho flash floods in Puntland, Somalia. The ethnographic case study employs qualitative research methodologies, including in-depth life history interviews and observations. It draws on the analytical couplet of modes of being and belonging in transnational social fields, as well as feminist care ethics, to better understand Somali-Zambian businesswomen's humanitarian involvement, arguing that it constitutes care and politics in action. We challenge neat distinctions between “pure” humanitarian care to distant strangers and “partisan” care to loved ones, highlighting how diaspora humanitarianism may be linked with transnational businesses and political interests.

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Keywords

Puntland Somalia, Diaspora, feminist care ethics, humanitarianism, leadership, transnationalism, women

Introduction

On 27 April 2020, the district of Qardho, located in the Karkaar region of Puntland, Somalia, was struck by sudden and intense flooding caused by heavy rainfall. This calamity had devastating consequences, including destroying households and causing power disruptions. The flooding affected approximately 250,000 inhabitants and vital infrastructure within Qardho town. Lives were tragically lost as homes were swept away, shops and vehicles overturned, power lines toppled, and businesses left in devastation. Individuals were forced to flee their homes, and a crucial bridge that connected Qardho to neighboring towns collapsed under the force of the floodwaters. As a result, many people were displaced and the economy in Qardho was severely disrupted, leaving the town desperate for help.

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown worsened the situation both in terms of recovery and distribution of emergency assistance. In response, the President of Puntland established a disaster committee to oversee the distribution of aid. A bank account was created to channel funds for the Qardho flood disaster. The hashtag #PrayForQardho was set up by youth in Somalia to create awareness and lobby for support for the community. The Somali Federal Government made financial and technical contributions. While local and international aid organisations also responded to the crisis, the involvement of the Somali diaspora, particularly women, was notable, with Somali businesswomen in Zambia playing a prominent role.

Zambia harbors a large Somali diaspora community, which can be dated back to the early 1960s, when the first Somali truck drivers migrated to Zambia in search for work and business opportunities (cf. Bakewell and Binaisa, 2016). Owing to their values, resilience, and industrial nature, the late President Kaunda welcomed close to 70 Somali drivers, who were some of the earliest migrants, to assist with the infrastructural development in the country (Chikeu, 2023; Musonda, 2014). A small group of women came as spouses or with male relatives from Somalia, but the initial migration was dominated by men. The civil war and conflicts in Somalia in the 1990s resulted in more Somalis arriving in Zambia, including many women. Today, most Somali migrants in Zambia hail from Puntland. This region is plagued by challenges stemming from political instability, conflict, and economic hardships. It also faces recurrent environmental and man-made disasters, such as droughts, floods, and explosions.

While literature on African diaspora groups living on the continent and their contributions to humanitarianism remains scarce (cf. Bakewell, 2008) studies on Somalis in African urban contexts have started to emerge. These studies focus on Nairobi (Abdi, 2007; Carrier and Scharrer, 2019; Ripero-Muñiz 2023), Johannesburg (Abdi, 2015; Jinnah 2010; Ripero-Muñiz, 2023; Sadouni, 2019), and Cairo (Al-Sharmani, 2010).

Collectively, these studies show that transnational ties – such as remittances, kinship obligations, and connections to religious authorities – reinforce a collective sense of belonging inside the country of settlement as well as to the wider diaspora and Somalia. Such layered identifications connect Somali diaspora groups to both homeland obligations and host-country opportunities, enabling them to mobilise resources and maintain cultural norms (Carrier and Scharrer, 2019; Ripero-Muñiz, 2023). Religious spaces, particularly mosques, serve as hubs for spiritual life, social support, and community organisation (Sadouni, 2019).

Gender plays a central role in these dynamics. Somali women are key actors in sustaining transnational family networks and often bear the responsibility of maintaining social ties and facilitating remittances (Al-Sharmani, 2010). Similarly, women strategically engage with norms of piety and respectability to claim social legitimacy and assert agency in caregiving, entrepreneurial activity, and religious participation (Ripero-Muñiz, 2023). Such practices are, thus, pertinent to how diasporic identities are continuously negotiated through everyday practices across multiple scales.

Furthermore, studies show that contributions to development and humanitarian relief in Somalia are widespread. They are based on transnational ties with areas of origin and diasporic networks across continents. While not a new phenomenon, it has scaled up and become more visible in recent years. Occasionally, these networks have been faster at responding to emergencies than international organisations. Technologies, especially telecommunication and social media, facilitate and accelerate communication and connectivity among these networks (Horst et al., 2016; Kleist et al., 2025; Majid and Abdirahman, 2017; Musa, 2023; Oliff, 2018).

As we show in this paper, Somali women in Zambia also take part in the mobilisation and delivery of assistance to crisis relief in Puntland. This poses a multitude of difficulties, due to the volatile context, including logistical challenges, security considerations, and regulatory obstacles that frequently hinder the prompt distribution of assistance. In addition, conventional gender norms and power dynamics can restrict women's involvement in leadership positions within humanitarian endeavors. While it is well known that Somali diaspora women play crucial roles in maintaining transnational ties, as shown above, only little is known about the specific ways women mobilise, organise, and contribute to disaster relief (but see UNHCR, 2019). As a result, we have an inadequate understanding of the humanitarian activities and motivations, senses of belonging, and connections to their home country amongst Somali women in Africa in general, and Somali women in Zambia in particular.

To address this gap in the literature, our article investigates the humanitarian engagement by Somali businesswomen in Zambia – led by chairwoman Guddomiso Shamsu Sheikh Ali – in response to the 2020 Qardho flash floods in Puntland. We ask how the women mobilised and delivered emergency relief and to what degree this engagement reflected and was entangled with their business activities and political interests. Derived from the Somali verb *guddoomi* which means “to chair” or “to lead,” the titles *Guddomiso* (feminine) or *Guddomiye* (masculine) refer to the chairperson of an association or network who holds the position of power, oversees managing meetings,

makes decisions, and acts as the group's representative in various contexts. As Mrs. Shamso Sheikh Ali is widely known as Guddomiso amongst Somalis in Zambia, we refer to her as such in this paper.

Based on ethnographic fieldwork in Lusaka, Zambia, the paper is informed by theories on transnational social fields (Levitt and Schiller, 2004) and feminist care ethics (Ho et al., 2015) to analyze the organisation of businesswomen and their mobilisation and delivery of humanitarian relief support to Puntland. This focus will illuminate the broader roles of Somali diaspora women in humanitarian initiatives, as well as the transnational ties and networks that underpin their efforts – particularly in contexts where conventional aid organisations are inadequate or inaccessible.

In the following sections we present the methodological framework, followed by the history and context of the Somali community in Zambia, their transnational connections to Puntland and introduce Guddomiso and the Somali businesswomen's network. We then present a case study of their response to the 2020 Qardho flash floods before the discussion and conclusion.

Methodological Framework

We adopt a transnational perspective to explore connections between Zambia and Somalia through women's humanitarian initiatives. This highlights how migrants and diaspora groups maintain multiple, overlapping identities and ties – be they social, economic, familial, and religious. Rather than assimilating or upholding a single traditional culture, these identities link them to both their ancestral places of origin and settlement countries (Levitt and Schiller, 2004). Inspired by Bourdieu, Levitt and Schiller refer to such constellations of practices as transnational social fields, defined as:

a set of multiple interlocking networks of social relationships through which ideas, practices, and resources are unequally exchanged, organized, and transformed [...] National social fields are those that stay within national boundaries while transnational social fields connect actors through direct and indirect relations across borders (2004: 1009).

The authors also propose a distinction between ways of being and belonging. This analytical couplet encompasses migrants' activities and identity creation, with the former defined as "actual social relations and practices that individuals engage in rather than to the identities associated with their actions" (ibid., 1010). Conversely, modes of belonging are "practices that signal or enact an identity which demonstrates a conscious connection to a particular group" (ibid., 1010). In other words, migrants' connections – ways of being – may or may not be coupled with identification. Likewise, there may be ways of belonging that are decoupled from actual connections to the group or political cause that migrants identify with, just as there may of course be convergence between ways of being and belonging. The point is not to conflate these dimensions from the outset or presume that they reflect each other. Distinguishing between them help us analyze Guddomiso and the Somali businesswomen's involvement in humanitarian relief in Puntland and their

broadier transnational engagement, in particular how certain kinds of practices and motivations may underpin one another.

We find further inspiration in studies of care in diaspora engagement. On the one hand, care as social reproduction within migrant families and communities, expressed through affect, communication and remittances and/or other emotional and socio-economic exchanges (e.g., Al-Sharmani, 2010; Cole and Groes, 2016; Lindley, 2010). Inspired by Levitt and Schiller, we could formulate this as care manifested in ways of being. On the other hand, care as belonging in the relationship between diaspora and homeland where ways of belonging may play a bigger role, potentially going beyond interaction and connections with family and community. Yet, as pointed out by Ho et al. in their work on feminist care ethics in diaspora-homeland relationships, such care may also be “built on social relations of reciprocity, trust and mutuality” (2015: 207). Together these perspectives draw attention to how – and if – care is expressed in humanitarian engagement and explore how emergency relief and care practices may be part of ways of being and belonging. Here we can look for whether they reflect and are circumscribed by already existing connections or go beyond them (cf. Musa, 2023) and/or if they (also) are coupled with and signal identity affiliation or political cause.

This study uses a case study approach to provide a detailed and contextualised analysis of how Somali businesswomen in Zambia mobilised and engaged in humanitarian delivery in response to the 2020 Qardho flash floods tragedy (Lund, 2014). Based on ethnographic fieldwork by the first author, we reconstruct the businesswomen’s emergency responses, with attention to the temporal and spatial dimensions as well, as we present the overall history of Somalis in Zambia. Interviews and observations with the businesswomen in Zambia took place over a period of four months, during March to May 2021 and again in April 2023.¹ Initial interactions with Guddomiso commenced in April 2021, laying the foundation for a sequence of progressive and comprehensive life history interviews with emphasis on her motives, practices, and influence in the field of humanitarian relief. This is supplemented with 34 in-depth life history interviews with other Somali businesswomen. Participant observations and seven focus group discussions, of which four were with the businesswomen, were also conducted. Furthermore, eight interviews were conducted with relevant individuals and organisations, such as the Somali civil society in Zambia, the Somali embassy, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) office, the University of Zambia, Makeni Islamic Center, and the Muslim Community in Zambia. All interviews took place in Somali, with quotes translated into English for this article.

In addition to interviews, observations and interactions with people on the ground were recorded in field notes and a daily journal, specifically documenting the businesswomen’s meetings, leadership dynamics, and cultural traditions. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they were aware of the purpose and scope of the study. With the exception of Guddomiso and Sheikh Halimo, who gave consent to being mentioned by name, all interviewees have been anonymised to protect their privacy. The same goes for the moniker of the businesswomen’s network, Idil.

Somali Women in Zambia and the Businesswomen's Network

Somalis in Zambia form part of a transnational social field where care and connectivity are continuously expressed through everyday life practices, extensive communication with and financial support to kin in Puntland and elsewhere. As the Somali saying goes, “Tol waa tolane” – family is everything. The importance of transnational modes of being, linking Somali-Zambian businesswomen to Puntland and the wider diaspora reflects the traditional reliance on robust social networks, kinship and family responsibilities amongst Somalis (cf. Horst, 2002). Ways of belonging are manifest as well, such as an ongoing maintenance and performance of “Somaliness” in the Zambian context (cf. Bakewell and Binaisa, 2016). This is expressed via clothing, expression of religion, and use of language taking on new significance (cf. Hopkins and Greenwood, 2013), as illuminated in the interview quotes below.

Shukri who arrived in Zambia in the 1990s, and the owner of a popular Somali clothing and artefact shop in Lusaka's Chaisa township, remarked, “back home, I never had to think about my Somali identity, but here, it's something I have to constantly be conscious of to maintain and practice” (Interview 1, 2023). Zainab, a 45-year-old restaurant owner who has been living in Lusaka since she was 19-years-old, also spoke about the significance of maintaining Somali cultural practices in her daily life: “We still follow our traditions very closely. My children use Somali language at home, and we take Somali food, and any celebration is handled in the same manner as we would have done in Puntland” (Interview 2, 2023). Additionally, Fatuma, the owner of a butchery network, emphasised the importance of networks: “We are always in touch with our family and friends in Puntland. If someone needs help, whether it's financial or other support, we come together as a community to provide it” (Interview 3, 2023).

Upholding Somali culture and language in daily life allows the women to maintain their cultural norms and values. It also enables them to pass these on to the younger generation while reinforcing connections to their faith and communities, which span both Zambia and Puntland. These practices are not merely ritualistic but a deliberate venture to preserve a sense of identity and belonging. They reflect a feeling of being different yet included. Daily lives are infused with practices that keep the businesswomen practically and symbolically connected to Puntland. These include Ramadan and Eid celebrations, remittances to family members living in Puntland as well as visits to Zambia by family and relatives in Puntland and vice versa. Hawo, a 50-year-old restaurant owner who had been living in Zambia for 22 years, describes it as follows: “Of course, Puntland is dear to me, one can never forget the place where one grew up, especially if it is one's birthplace. My family and I try to visit as often as possible” (Interview 4, 2023). Yusra, a 35-year-old Somali schoolteacher in Lusaka, reflected on her dual sense of belonging: “Somalis here believe that Zambia has offered us a chance, and we try our best to repay it by being good citizens. However, we first and foremost remain Puntlanders at heart, so we always stay loyal to our homeland” (Interview 5, 2023).

Homeland affiliation and loyalty further manifest in the commemoration of major political and development achievements in Puntland, including the celebration of its national

day on 1st August. Moreover, as Somali businesswomen in Zambia are ardent supporters of political stability. They frequently assist with development and humanitarian causes throughout Puntland and Somalia. They regard political disagreements as a diversion from pressing issues like healthcare, education, and economic growth, particularly those that affect women. Contributions to the establishment of mosques, integrated Islamic schools, a boarding school in Qardho and a greenhouse farm are other examples of engagement. Likewise, some of the businesswomen attend international Puntland diaspora conferences and investment forums in Garowe, such as Puntland Entrepreneurship Week and the Galkayo Peace Summit, engaging with diaspora organisations that advocate for Puntland interests globally.

The engagement in and orientation towards both Zambia and Puntland reflect the transnational lives of many Somalis in the diaspora, expressing belonging to both their country of origin and the host country (cf. Carrier and Scharrer, 2019; Ripero-Muñiz, 2023). Indeed, most of the businesswomen interviewed claim to belong to a transnational Somali community, having a worldwide Somali identity and pride in being Somali. This global vision is further realised through online forums, most notably Facebook, where a *reer* [family] Zambia group page had 600 followers at the time of fieldwork in 2023. This ensemble of transnational ties and networks shapes the humanitarian contributions of the businesswomen at the individual and collective level, as will be further demonstrated.

The Somali Businesswomen's Network

The Somali businesswomen's network was established in its current form in 2002. However, it had informally existed since the mid-1990s as a self-help group without leadership, a treasurer, or regular meetings. It was set up by a small group of businesswomen as an *ayuufo* group (women's savings group) where members contribute a monthly amount and take turn receiving the entire amount. Gradually the group – known as Idil – became a space for members to discuss their business ventures as well as share experiences and advice. The network operates on principles of solidarity (*midnimo*) and shared responsibility, with meetings every other Friday. The role of the meeting chair rotates to ensure that all members can contribute to the organisation's growth and development, and the members take part in *qaraan* money collections, and in mobilisation initiatives undertaken by other groups.²

Connected by common experiences and a sense of belonging, the women frequently look out for, interact with, and support each other. Thus, the network serves as a social safety net for fellow businesswomen as well as other Somali women whose husbands are frequently absent. In Guddomiso's words, "a united group is more powerful than individual efforts because it entails sharing ideas and resources and standing by each other in business ventures in a new world" (Interview 6, 2023). Although not formally registered, organising a network has made the women more visible in the Zambian context where they felt left out in the male-dominated Somali Zambian Friendship Association. The latter association never had women in its leadership ranks nor involved them in public engagements or formal Zambian government events. Idil, thus, serves both internal

and external purposes in terms of mutual support as well as visibility and representation for (business)women in the Zambian and Puntland contexts.

At the time of fieldwork in 2023, Idil counted 127 members, with shared clan background and Puntland affiliation. They can be categorised into three groups, reflecting time and reasons of arrival in Zambia. The first and biggest group of women arrived in Zambia before the Somali war started in 1988 or are descendants from this group, born in Zambia. Most of them migrated to Zambia between the 1970s and 1980s, in search of better standards of living, safety and reunion with family members, and have resided in Zambia for between 40 and 55 years. The majority of this group holds permanent residence permits or are Zambian citizens. Twenty eight of the interviews that this article is based on were with this group.

The second group of network members are businesswomen with refugee backgrounds, reflecting that refugees can open businesses in Zambia. They came to Zambia from the Somali civil war in the 1990s or thereafter, ending up in Lusaka as neighbors, community members, and colleagues at work. This group faced numerous challenges, with minimal service provision available to them and without the right to buy land or access justice. Four interviews were conducted with this group. Finally, the third group of members are Somali diaspora women from USA, Europe, Australia, or Kenya who have relocated to Zambia with their families to set up businesses. Often holding Canadian or British passports, these women maintain strong connections to their former countries of residence and to Somali diaspora groups based there. In doing so, they form part of a wider transnational social field. Two interviews were conducted with this group.

Over the years, these women have gained economic and political influence through their expanding businesses in Zambia and, in some cases, in major Puntland towns as well. At first, they established small businesses in Zambia as a means of supporting their families. They were often the primary breadwinners for their families due to the absence or inability of men to provide economic support. These were followed by butcheries, carwash services, restaurants, and grocery stores. Later, the women entered cross-border trade and began importing goods from major exporters for hoteliers and grocery store owners. This development led to the further expansion and diversification of their enterprises. Today, these include large-scale businesses such as petrol stations and automobile spare parts shops. Many of these cater to clients involved in truck repairs and servicing, reflecting the enduring significance of this line of business among Somalis in Zambia. They have also ventured into industries such as oil and gas, transport and logistics, real estate, export and import trade, milling companies, and cargo delivery. Their businesses have developed the urban economies through job creation and employment of not only Somalis in the area but also Zambians, with many of them being household names.

What started out as a small saving and mutual support group thus gradually expanded into a network of transnational female entrepreneurs with shared clan background and a collective sense of affiliation with Puntland, indicating the pertinence of transnational modes of being and belonging. In 2002, the women appointed Mrs. Shamso Sheikh Ali as Guddomiso – their designated leader. In addition to her mature age and experience,

Guddomiso exemplified the qualities the women needed at the time. These traits included being well connected, having knowledge of the local rules – including how to register businesses and keeping money safe – following up on action items, and good leadership skills, as noted by a network member (Interview 7, 2023).

Guddomiso – Businesswoman and Community Leader

The first meeting with Guddomiso took place in her home in Lusaka in April of 2021, a modest yet welcoming space filled with the aromas of Somali *uunsi* essence and spices, reflecting her cultural heritage. A tall and dark-skinned woman who is married and the proud mother of three children, devout and religious; Guddomiso embodies a blend of tradition and modernity in her life in Zambia. Her daily routine starts with the morning prayers, *Fajr*, followed by preparing tea and breakfast for her family before heading to her shop. She keenly explained the Somali migration history that originated in the labour agreement between Somalia and Zambia in 1966. Taking out an old photo album, Guddomiso showed photos of the early arrivals of Somalis in Zambia. Among the images were pictures of Somali truck drivers and families in Ndola, the Copperbelt capital, where many truckdrivers would pass through to transport copper to other parts of Africa. She also showed photos of Somalis attending public political events as well as pictures of her own family in Puntland.

Born in 1958 and growing up in a large family in what is now the Mudug district of Puntland, Guddomiso's journey has taken her from the Horn of Africa to the heart of southern Africa. She arrived in Zambia as a young woman in 1978 with her paternal uncle in the hope of a better life. As one of the first Somalis to settle in Lusaka, Guddomiso became the go-to person for information and connections in the early 1980s when more Somalis started to arrive. By then she had a tea shop, a lodge that offered eight beds, and a car wash in Gotka, which is located off of the road to Ndola. This became a meeting point for Somali truckdrivers who sought accommodation and ate at her restaurant. This became a way to share news and connect. In 1999, Guddomiso started her current business, a lucrative shop selling spices, clothing materials, and other household goods in Lusaka. Like her business in Gotka, her shop quick became a hub of Somali social connections and shared assistance, with posters of outdated cultural events and fundraisers for disasters adorning the walls. It would also be full of Puntland flags, reflecting Guddomiso's explicit Puntland support. During fieldwork, Guddomiso repeatedly mentioned the identity of Puntland within the broader Somali state. She cited its history of resilience and unity in previous crisis, relaying how Puntland was neglected during the reign of President Barre as well as by the current federal government.

Guddomiso has thus functioned as a community leader for decades. This is enabled by her successful business and her compassionate, yet decisive, leadership style that has earned her respect and admiration. Well-known for her calm demeanor and fearlessness, she has advocated for the rights and well-being of Somali refugees and migrants, organised community events and fundraisers, and served as a mediator in disputes. She has

also expressed ambitions for going into Puntland or Somali federal politics. With numerous connections in a transnational social field that extends to Canada, Minnesota, and Australia, Guddomiso feels a connection to many places she calls home and where she can mobilise support. She accesses and shares information on Puntland news, humanitarianism, and investment and often travels to Puntland where she is regularly invited to participate in government and businesses conferences. Likewise, she has contributed to the establishment of several girls' schools. In her words: "We try to stay connected to our families, relatives and to friends back home in Puntland and globally. So, if somebody needs assistance and we can support, then why not?" (Interview 8, 2023). This attitude has also become a central ethos of the Somali businesswomen's network.

Over the years, Idil has indeed grown and developed into a robust community network. In addition to taking care of members' business interests, Idil works for the welfare and wellbeing of all Somalis in Zambia and Puntland through providing mutual assistance at a range of social, cultural, and religious gatherings. It also serves as a dedicated humanitarian network. The businesswomen have improved access to education, healthcare, and other necessities in Puntland. They also regularly give assistance to people who visit their Puntland-based businesses for support during natural disasters and other calamities. Additionally, they have contributed relief assistance to over a dozen different emergencies in Puntland as well as other parts of Somalia. They have supported affected families and individuals by creating awareness, organising outside travel for those in need of urgent medical help, and donating funds and remittances. Praying for victims constitutes another form of support, especially during Ramadan where collections and distributions are intensified.

The Qardho Flash Floods

The flash floods that hit the town of Qardho and caused tragedy occurred during the holy month of Ramadan, on the 27th of April 2020. An immediate response to the disaster was challenging due to the limited availability of local resources, combined with slow external assistance from the international humanitarian system and the Puntland state.

"Before Morning, We Had Devised a Strategy" – First Response

On the evening of the floods, Guddomiso was about to go to bed when she received two WhatsApp notifications on her phone from her brother-in-law living in Bosaaso, one of the major towns in Puntland. "I clicked open, and I saw the video images. It was shocking to see the devastation" (Interview 9, 2023). Now wide awake, she contacted a relative to understand the magnitude of the disaster: "I called my niece Hafsa in Qardho to collect accurate information about what had happened, the details of the impact, and what was required, but I couldn't get through to her. I became concerned." Guddomiso then called friends in Garowe, the capital city, who confirmed the news and forwarded more images of the floods. Having enough information to act, she reached out to the network of

businesswomen, creating awareness and igniting discussion. By this time, nearly all members had received information directly from relatives in Puntland.

Accessing real-time updates through television, radio, newspapers, and online news services, Guddomiso shared the news and footage she had received with Idil as well as with the Puntland diaspora WhatsApp groups and other social media groups. Residents in Qardho posted updates with regular photos and videos on platforms like Facebook, Twitter,³ and WhatsApp, using the hashtag #PrayForQardho. Soon social media users shared and re-shared numerous images of the floods, causing the news to trend. In particular, Twitter saw a huge surge of activity during the disaster. Community groups in Qardho posted updates about the emergency and images of the flood, displacement and loss. *People feared the contamination of food and water supplies as well as the spread of COVID-19, which had been declared a pandemic one month prior. Hawo, a focus group participant in Lusaka, recalled, "we were told there were broken sewerage pipes and tanks that had collapsed"* (Focus Group Discussion 1, 2023). Evidently, the situation in Qardho was dire.

Despite the absence of direct communication with the affected families and relatives, contacts in Garowe helped the businesswomen to verify the needs of the survivors and the impact of the floods. Guddomiso emphasised the need for reliable information in the network's WhatsApp group. Kaaha, a 29-year-old second-generation network group member, elaborated, "There was so much publicity about the Qardho floods case on social and traditional media platforms that we didn't know what to believe and what not" (Interview 10, 2023). Moved by concern for their relatives and a moral duty to help, the women spent the night discussing the events in the WhatsApp group, reaching out to their transnational relations and kin networks to access information and resources to make informed decisions. Fatuma, a network member whose elderly parents lived in Qardho, explained:

I was worried about my parents. That whole night I kept on talking about the Qardho disaster in the WhatsApp group. I didn't sleep much; other women were also awake, and we continued to receive real time footage of the destruction. Before morning, we had devised a strategy to provide assistance (Interview 11, 2023).

Having been extensively involved in humanitarian work in Puntland for an extended period, Guddomiso was well-acquainted with the processes and promptly took action. She reached out to local leaders and networks, including her long-term friend and fellow clan member, Sheikh Halimo, in Qardho. Sheikh Halimo is a highly educated Muslim scholar, widely known for her strength and kind spirit, as well as her community care work, particularly in helping women and girls. This allowed Guddomiso to obtain information about the humanitarian supplies needed on the ground, such as mattresses, blankets, shovels, torches and batteries, clothes, as well as the COVID-19 protection needed, including masks, gloves, facial masks, and hand sanitizers. Dry supplies could quickly be donated from a business outlet in Bosaaso since several of the Idil businesswomen operate businesses and shops across Puntland. In Qardho, Guddomiso arranged

volunteers to receive and distribute the emergency supplies, coordinating the transfer and distribution of supplies with Sheikh Halimo, with whom she had worked on similar projects in the past.

The aid process thus proceeded from identifying the immediate needs through contacts in Puntland, to mobilising donations from Somali businesswomen in Lusaka who owned shops in Puntland, to organizing transportation for the collected resources. Hence, in the early morning hours of 28 April, lorries and trucks carrying supplies entered Qardho from Bossaso. Within an hour – well before the Puntland President Said Abdullahi Deni arrived to assess the damage – local contacts had distributed the supplies, including 107 blankets, 52 mattresses, 76 woven mats, 26 shovels, and dozens of carton boxes of COVID-19 protection gear to survivors.

“We Raised Over 43,000 USD in One Day” – Local and Transnational Fundraising

In addition to the immediate delivery of emergency supplies, the businesswomen engaged in individual and collective financial transfers. Like Guddomiso, almost every network member has a family member or relative who lives in Puntland, including several in Qardho. When the disaster struck, they immediately called their relatives and sent financial assistance via Amal money transfer to those affected by the flood disaster, either on the evening of 27 April or in the early morning the day after. This took place at an individual family level – without coordination with Idil or Guddomiso – and reflects usual remittance practices.

Shortly thereafter, they engaged, locally and transnationally, in collective fundraising for emergency relief. Several of the businesswomen, without directly affected relatives, wanted to donate, but did not know how and to whom. Consequently, they initiated fundraising in the WhatsApp group, sending the donations to Guddomiso, who then sent them to Sheikh Halimo the day after the floods. An urgent appeal was made by Puntland President Deni on Twitter on the evening of 28 April, which led the group to organise another fundraising event on 29 April:

The flash flooding in #Qardho killed 6 people and others are missing. A number of properties and businesses have been destroyed. Qardho needs urgent humanitarian support. Mobilizing to the best of our ability but also urging for the FGS and our intl. partners to provide urgent support (Deni, 2020).

Heeding the appeal, Guddomiso and her group went to work, organizing on-site and online fundraisers the following day to maximise support from the Somali community in Zambia and elsewhere. The on-site events were held at the Al-Ummah primary school hall and the Abraar Mosque in the Chaisa township, both of which are well-known to the Somali community and are popular meeting places. The women living close to these locations set up donation boxes at the entrance, exit, and other places within the

school and mosque so that people could easily deliver their contributions. They printed large banners and put them on the boxes for visibility as well as at the doors and gates. In addition, they organised group fundraising activities in which family members and friends combined their funds to make bigger contributions. A local Somali tyre company, for instance, donated USD\$1000 and a family of six donated USD\$650. The online part of the fundraiser reached diaspora members worldwide, coordinated through social media and community groups. Along with other sympathisers, they used the hashtag #PrayForQardho that was already in use on social media to share information about the disaster, (re-)posting live videos to illustrate the reality of the disaster and invoke attention and sympathy from the Somali diaspora in Zambia and elsewhere.

As a result, Idil managed to fundraise nearly USD\$43,000, with the internet campaign contributing about USD\$18,000 of the amount. The businesswomen also contributed themselves. Showing a list of contributions made by 39 Idil members, Guddomiso explained that “we raised over USD\$43,000 USD in one day. Some of our members initially contributed USD\$50, others sent USD\$100, and still others sent USD\$200 to aid the flood victims, depending on their ability and circumstances” (Interview 12, 2023).

Taking place 2 days after the flash flood occurred in Qardho, the funds raised were sent directly to a small committee and used for critical emergency relief supplies for the flood survivors, like food, water, and shelter. Led by Sheikh Halimo, the selection criteria focused on needs and vulnerability, with vulnerable relatives and family members coming first. Other groups in need, such as internally displaced persons of Somali minority clans, were not excluded. However, they received less assistance, which indicates that kinship and pre-existing social ties played a role in the distribution of aid.

In addition to this initial support, the businesswomen sent additional financial donations via a dedicated government-established bank account launched by Puntland President Deni for emergency donations. Guddomiso explained:

We learned that the President of Puntland established a national bank account. This was announced on Puntland TV and on the President’s own social media after we had sent our initial individual contributions. We submitted a list of the women contributors showing how much each person sent along with their full names, surnames, and family nick name for which they are locally known in Puntland (Interview 13, 2023).

Submitting a list of all female contributors in response to Deni’s appeal, Guddomiso made an effort to frame their contributions as support to state-coordinated relief activities – and to be visible and recognisable in that regard, as a kind of performative giving. She thereby positioned herself and Idil as humanitarian actors in the diaspora-homeland state relationship (cf. Ho et al., 2015), ensuring their contributions beyond family-related remittances – or care as social reproduction – were not overlooked. Furthermore, they continued their transnational mobilisation, reaching out via social media and personal connections. This was not without challenges. Due to the absence of the international banking system in Puntland, there were restrictions on the hawala system – the local Somali money transfer

system – limiting transfers to an equivalent of USD\$350 per transaction at the time. Furthermore, the hawala systems had increased their commission rates in 2020, following the COVID-19 pandemic. In combination with economic strains due to lockdowns across the globe (cf. Kleist et al., 2025), these constraints made it difficult for diaspora groups to find people willing to donate.

Despite these challenges, the businesswomen managed to connect with other Somali diaspora groups, drawing on family relations in Australia, Nairobi, and Minnesota. Importantly, this implied support to humanitarian initiatives in Qardho from other diaspora actors. For example, Idil donated about USD\$11,000 to support the delivery of medical supplies to Qardho, organised by the Somali diaspora in Melbourne, Australia. Drawing on their experience and networks, Idil members managed customs regulations and legal requirements in Puntland. They worked with local authorities to coordinate logistics and overcome checkpoint hurdles in Bosaaso to ensure that the supplies sent from Australia reached the recipients in Qardho. Furthermore, the women linked up with other Puntland diaspora groups in the UK and contributed to their infrastructure reconstruction in Qardho. Finally, they followed up after the floods and supported about 15 businesswomen who had lost their entire businesses due to the disaster. In this way, their emergency response reflected practices of care across borders, with gendered but also political aspects as we now elaborate.

Care and Politics in Action

The case study of Guddomiso and Idil's contributions to the Qardho flash flood emergency relief demonstrates the diverse and gendered dimensions of diaspora humanitarianism. As successful and transnationally connected businesswomen, they were able to engage fast and efficiently. They donated and delivered in-kind supplies within few hours of the flash flood – well before any state-organised or formalised humanitarian response. Likewise, they were able to mobilise individual and collective financial contributions due to their local and transnational connections or, with reference to Levitt and Schiller (2004), their transnational ways of being. Highlighting their positions as mothers and sisters, they prioritised providing humanitarian aid to vulnerable groups such as children and women-headed households. Importantly, they contributed to local initiatives in Qardho, coordinated by Sheikh Halimo, and in response to the appeal by Puntland President Deni. And, equally importantly, they made sure that local contributions were made visible vis-à-vis the President's appeal, signaling loyalty and support. Their contributions, thus, reflect the entanglement of ways of being and belonging (Levitt and Schiller, 2004). Likewise, their engagement – particularly that of Guddomiso – has a political dimension.

Being a staunch supporter of Puntland, Guddomiso infused Idil's humanitarian activities with Puntland political messages and motives that reinforce Puntland identity and solidarity. She brought the Puntland flag to humanitarian fundraisers, and she wore blue clothes that matched the upper horizontal stripe of the flag. Furthermore, she asked Idil members to wear t-shirts with the #PrayforQardho hashtag on the front and

the map of Puntland on the back. Likewise, she requested that they hang up posters of the relief and fundraising efforts for Qardho and other calamities in their businesses, offices and shops as well as on their trucks and cars.

In these and other ways, Guddomiso promoted the idea that supporting the community in Puntland constitutes an act of loyalty and duty to family and homeland, as part of a collective movement dedicated to preserving and building it. Her involvement thus intertwined her political hopes for Puntland's stability and independence with humanitarianism and commercial interests. While Guddomiso expressed ambitions for a political career in Puntland or Somali federal politics, taking up public political office would entail staying in Puntland or Mogadishu. As she explained, "I am not sure I would want to do that at this time, but I am thinking of moving there permanently in the future. But right now, there are too many people dependent on me in Lusaka" (Interview 14, Lusaka, 2023).

Guddomiso's engagement illustrates how Somali diaspora women act as organisers, fundraisers, and political actors, even within patriarchal structures in Lusaka and Puntland. Her quick mobilisation, reference to moral and religious repertoires, use of symbols of national pride shows a leadership style that is affective, relational, and nationalistic. She leads through informal channels, business ownership, community trust, and diaspora networks, rather than formal office. Her legitimacy is reinforced by her maternal positioning and community-centered approach, appealing to shared experience, moral obligation and Puntland affiliation.

While a political career in Puntland or Somalia was relegated to the future, Guddomiso's engagement in Puntland, particularly the emergency relief in response to the flash floods in Qardho, has nevertheless placed her as a *de facto* political leader in the diaspora since 2020. She has organised welcome parties in Lusaka for politicians from Puntland and has been invited regularly to Puntland to take part in important political events, such as the 2022 Puntland Diaspora Summit and the 2021 and 2024 Puntland Anniversary celebrations. Her business influence in Puntland has expanded significantly, with invitations to the Puntland Business Forum in 2021, 2022, and 2023. At the local level, authorities, flood committee members, and community representatives in Qardho acknowledged her and the other businesswomen's critical role in flood relief, expressing gratitude and citing them as excellent examples of locally driven, successful humanitarian efforts. Prayers and duas – a Muslim prayer of invocation – were done for them and everyone was encouraged to do the same. Taken together, such recognition suggests a broader shift in Somali community perceptions of female leadership, particularly when combining business success, community activism, and political awareness.

Guddomiso and Idil's emergency relief efforts, thus, reflect a humanitarian ethos that is entangled with politics and nationalism. It aims to alleviate suffering in their (ancestral) homeland as well as framing it as diaspora support to the humanitarian response organised by the Puntland state. The nationalist framing makes their humanitarian engagement visible to Somali communities in Zambia, the diaspora and not least in Puntland as politically motivated and an extension of a Puntland transborder citizenry (Schiller and Fouron, 2001; cf. Kleist, 2008; Majid, 2022), positioning themselves as a responsible

and responsive diaspora. Their humanitarian engagement is thereby coupled with ways of belonging relating to political identity and ambitions.

There are notable analytical implications from this study for diaspora humanitarianism that link two well-established points on crises, politics, and diaspora engagement. On the one hand, diasporas' contributions to crisis relief in their homelands may go hand in hand with being politically involved or ambitious (Adamson, 2016). On the other hand, crisis responses constitute political performances to various publics (Kleist, 2013; Neumann and Sending, 2020). As a starting point, these points question mainstream understandings of humanitarianism as a phenomenon that is and should be fundamentally apolitical and guided by an exclusive focus on alleviating the suffering of distant and abstract others (cf. Radice, 2022). Diaspora humanitarianism, in contrast, disturbs distinctions between "humanitarian care" motivated by a sense of injustice towards an abstract and unknown other and "intimate care" that is embedded in personal relationships (Ho et al., 2015: 209). Likewise, they suggest that humanitarian responses by diaspora groups and states alike may have a performative political dimension.

Furthermore our case study demonstrates that humanitarianism – including diaspora humanitarianism – is not a zero-sum game where care towards relatives or distant others are mutually exclusive. Additionally, such care is not cancelled by political framing. As demonstrated, some of the businesswomen contributed support without having directly affected relatives. Likewise, while the beneficiaries consisted of relatives in need – who did receive most assistance – they also included other affected groups, such as internally displaced persons from other clans. Hence, the range of beneficiaries were determined by vulnerability and kinship but also shared Somaliness.

We can therefore understand Guddomiso and Idil's engagement as an expression of feminist care ethics (Ho et al., 2015) that centers on alleviating the suffering of known others – family, kin, clan, or broader Somaliness – but with varying degrees of familiarity. Likewise, it advocates for ethical decisions that prioritise a focus on care, empathy, and social justice. As shown, these forms of care are embedded in familial, communal, and business networks that stretch across borders, echoing Al-Sharmani's (2010) observation that Somali women play central roles in sustaining transnational family ties and care. Likewise, they reflect what Ripero-Muñiz (2023) describes as the strategic agency of Somali diaspora women who navigate religious norms and gendered expectations to build respectability and influence in both intimate and public spheres. In other words, this study has showcased care and politics in action.

Conclusion

In this article, we have examined Somali businesswomen in Zambia and their humanitarian engagement in Puntland in the wake of the Qardho flash floods in 2020. As an extended case study of emergency relief, we have analyzed the chronological, material, and affective perspectives involved in awareness creation and fundraising for supplies and finances in both Zambia and the diaspora. This includes the delivery of humanitarian aid as well as the political positioning of this relief effort. Together, these elements

provide a unique lens through which to understand how and the specific contexts in which such diaspora giving unfold. The businesswomen's engagement illustrates how diaspora humanitarianism is embedded in transnational ways of being, where family and kinship networks can provide critical early warnings. Likewise, it illuminates the remarkable speed of mobilisation and delivery of supplies, enabled by their transnational businesses. While significant in itself, such an example of humanitarianism "from below" is particularly important in fragile contexts where the state retreats or is weak or absent (cf. Sadouni, 2019).

Our analysis has been guided by the analytical couplet of ways of being and ways of belonging (Levitt and Schiller, 2004) that sheds light on transnational connections and identity expressions that may or may not co-exist. In the case of Guddomiso and Idil's humanitarian engagement, there is a close coupling of these two dimensions. Ways of belonging to Somalia fuels a moral imperative to help, while ways of being – social and economic embeddedness in Zambia and Puntland – provides the resources and stability to act. Approaching this as an expression of gendered care and politics in action, we highlight how women's diaspora humanitarianism constitutes a manifestation of transnational identity and responsibility. We thereby make four overall contributions.

First, our paper contributes to the literature on diaspora humanitarianism, demonstrating that multi-scalar and multidirectional care and connectivity are the preconditions for fast and effective emergency relief. Adopting a transnational social fields approach, we show that connections between the country of settlement, the ancestral homeland and the wider diaspora are crucial for such support. Furthermore, that the businesswomen's assistance reflects shared identity, trust, and a sense of moral obligation (cf. Ripero-Muñiz, 2023), amped up in speed and intensity thanks to their willingness to give.

Second, our paper adds to the nascent literatures on the gendered dimensions of diaspora humanitarianism and female humanitarian leadership, centering the often-overlooked contributions of women as organizing, donating to and leading emergency assistance. We show that Somali businesswomen in Zambia have emerged as central figures in community organizing, caregiving, and informal welfare provision. As remittance senders, caregivers, and cultural custodians, their engagement in humanitarian efforts challenges dominant narratives in policy and academic discourses that often center on male elites or international NGOs. While Guddomiso's leadership and political ambitions were not widely shared by the other businesswomen, her case is nevertheless a testimony to the multifaceted roles of women' humanitarian assistance – from afar but also providing needed on-the-ground relief.

Third, our paper adds to the literature that questions a distinction between "pure" humanitarian care to distant strangers and "partisan" care to loved ones (cf. Brković, 2023; Ho et al., 2015). It thereby disturbs understandings of humanitarian engagement as the prerogative of the international humanitarian system and as separate from personal interests and engagement, whether in terms of familiarity with the recipients or business or political interests. On the contrary, Guddomiso employed political and nationalist framing to link emergency contributions to national identity, endowing contributions to the alleviation of suffering with demonstration of a pro-Puntland stance.

Humanitarian engagement may thus involve political positioning and add to recognition. We thereby also suggest that the most important defining characteristic in humanitarianism is alleviating suffering, not distance to recipients.

Finally, the paper offers unique knowledge on the history and present lives of Somalis living in Zambia, showing how diaspora formation may include mobility flows linked to employment, displacement and business interests. Our final contribution is thereby to the emerging and still under-researched literature on African diaspora groups in Africa, with a much-needed focus on women's experiences.

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Consent to Participate

Informed consent was obtained verbally before participation.

Consent for Publication

Not Applicable.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Ethical Considerations

Approval was received through a national research permit from Directorate of Research and Research Ethics, National Research and Health Authority (NRHRA), Lusaka, Zambia.

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Notes

1. Fieldwork in Zambia was supplemented with fieldwork in Qardho, Puntland, between December 2023 and January 2024, examining the delivery and recipient perspectives of this emergency assistance which falls outside the scope of this paper.
2. *Qaraan* is a century-old Somali tradition, social safety net and communal response where members of a clan provide financial and moral support to another member or family struck by misfortune.
3. The platform had not yet been renamed X during the period studied.

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Soin et politique en action : L'aide humanitaire des femmes d'affaires somaliennes de Zambie vers le Puntland

Résumé

Cet article examine l'engagement humanitaire des femmes d'affaires de la diaspora somalienne en Zambie et la manière dont il s'entrecroise avec des intérêts politiques et commerciaux. En nous concentrant sur un réseau de femmes d'affaires à Lusaka et leur présidente, Guddomiso Shamso Sheikh Ali, nous étudions la mobilisation genrée, la distribution et la communication de l'aide d'urgence en réponse à la tragédie des crues soudaines de Qardho en 2020 au Puntland, en Somalie. Cette étude de cas ethnographique repose sur des méthodologies de recherche qualitative, notamment des entretiens approfondis de récits de vie et des observations. Elle s'appuie sur le couple analytique des modes d'être et d'appartenance dans les champs sociaux transnationaux ainsi que sur l'éthique féministe du « care » pour mieux comprendre l'engagement humanitaire des femmes d'affaires somalo-zambiennes, soutenant qu'il constitue le soin et la politique en action. Nous remettons ainsi en question les distinctions nettes

entre le soin humanitaire « pur » envers des étrangers lointains et le soin « partisan » envers les proches, en soulignant comment l'humanitarisme diasporique peut être lié à des activités commerciales transnationales et à des intérêts politiques.

Mots-clés

Puntland Somalie, Diaspora, éthique féministe du care, humanitarisme, leadership, transnationalisme, femmes