



Who Can Stop Me? The Collapse of Digital and Social Boundaries in Somali Society

By Abdulhakim A Sheik
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Somali society rebuilt itself after the state fell on trust, privacy and quiet mediation. A generation raised on the phone is now testing whether any of that still holds.

Picture a house in Mogadishu, or Minneapolis, or Nairobi. A husband and wife are arguing — not violently, but badly, the way tired people argue about money and in-laws. One of them is holding a phone low against the hip. The screen is dark. It is recording.

Weeks later, after the marriage has ended, the recording surfaces in a WhatsApp group. Within two days a diaspora commentator plays it on a livestream to tens of thousands of viewers, pausing for effect, inviting the audience to judge. Strangers write verdicts under a clip cut to make one person look worse than they were. The children hear their parents' worst hour repeated back to them by classmates.

This scene is illustrative rather than a report of any particular case. But its components — the secret recording, the group chat, the monetised commentary, the permanence — are no longer exotic. They have become a recognisable genre of Somali online life. The question this essay asks is not who behaved badly in that house. It is why so few limits now stand between a private disagreement and a global audience, and what a society loses when those limits disappear.

What a boundary actually is

A boundary is not a wall and it is not silence. It is an agreed limit that makes a relationship possible. Boundaries are what allow two people to disagree without destroying each other, and what allow a community to hold competing interests without collapse.

They operate at several levels at once. *Personal* boundaries govern what a person will accept in their own body, time and attention. *Family and marital* boundaries govern what stays inside the house: the argument, the illness, the debt, the intimate detail. *Social* boundaries govern how disputes are raised and who is entitled to hear them.

Digital boundaries govern what is captured, stored and transmitted. *Religious and moral* boundaries govern conduct even when no one is watching. *Institutional* boundaries — courts, schools, professional bodies, mediation councils — decide which conflicts belong in public and which do not.

Somali society was never short of boundaries. Xeer, the customary legal tradition, is a boundary system. So is the elder who takes a dispute aside before it becomes a feud, and the aunt who tells a young couple that this conversation ends at her door. What has changed is not that Somalis stopped valuing limits. It is that a technology arrived which routes around every one of them, and no comparable institution arrived to replace what it dissolved.

It is worth separating two things that are constantly confused in Somali online argument. A boundary is a limit a person accepts for themselves and negotiates with those closest to them. Censorship is a limit imposed by power on what other people may say. Asking a spouse not to record a private argument is a boundary. Asking the state to silence a critic is censorship. The two are not on the same spectrum, and treating every appeal to restraint as an attack on free speech is a category error that has cost Somali public life a great deal.

The global problem, and why it lands harder here

The strain is not uniquely Somali. The World Health Organization's Regional Office for Europe, reporting on a survey of almost 280,000 adolescents across 44 countries, found that signs of problematic social media use — difficulty controlling use, withdrawal, neglect of other activities — rose from 7 per cent in 2018 to 11 per cent in 2022, and were more common among girls.

That is a finding about Europe, Central Asia and Canada. There is no equivalent Somali dataset, and the absence is itself part of the argument: we are debating the effects of a technology on our children without having measured them.

What we do know is suggestive. DataReportal put Somalia's internet users at about 5.47 million in late 2025, roughly 28 per cent of the population, with some 3.51 million social media identities — a minority, but a fast-growing, urban and young one. United Nations Population Fund figures cite roughly 46 per cent of Somalis under 15 and about 75 per cent under 30.

Put those together. A very young society is coming online quickly, into an information environment with weak regulation, little formal media-literacy instruction, and a state that spent three decades unable to perform the ordinary functions — schooling, licensing, adjudication, consumer protection — through which other societies slowly negotiate their relationship with new technology. Somalis did not get the twenty-year on-ramp. They got the smartphone.

When influence replaces institutions

Into that vacuum stepped the diaspora, for reasons that are not mysterious. Remittances are the country's economic backbone: the United States Department of State's 2025 investment climate report puts them near \$2 billion a year, about a quarter of GDP, while IMF-based estimates run lower and informal hawala flows make precision impossible. Money, and with it prestige, flows in one direction.

Interpretation followed the money. A man in Ohio explains national politics to people living inside the events he is describing. A woman in London models a standard of life her audience in Baidoa is invited to want and cannot reach. Guidance that ought to be practical — how to use what is actually available here — is replaced by aspiration toward a life that is elsewhere.

Living abroad confers proximity to resources. It does not confer knowledge, emotional steadiness or ethical judgement, and it is not a qualification to guide a society. The platforms compound this, because they do not select for wisdom. They select for whatever holds attention, and outrage holds attention better than nuance does.

Care is required here. It would be unkind and unfounded to diagnose individual creators or to claim that most influencers are unwell; personal struggle is not disqualifying, and public life has always included people carrying private pain. But the scale is new. A person working through loneliness, grief, a hunger for recognition or a conflicted sense of identity once affected a household. With a large and uncritical audience, the same person can make a coping style look like a value system. When a young Somali watches contempt rewarded with followers, the lesson learned is not about that individual. It is about what works.

The serious question is not whether influencers are troubled. It is who is teaching young Somalis to use these tools at all — and the honest answer, in most families, is no one.

The phone in the marriage

Before the smartphone becomes a weapon inside a marriage, it has usually already become a wall. Consider the ordinary version, which is undramatic and therefore rarely discussed. A family sits down to eat. The father is half-watching a livestream from another continent. The mother is scrolling. The children are answering people they have never met. Nobody is arguing. Nobody is speaking either. Four people share a table while attending to four separate audiences, none of whom live in the house.

Something has been inverted in that room. The people with the strongest claim on one another have become background, and strangers hold the foreground. The cost accumulates quietly, because a couple stops practising the small repairs that keep a marriage working — the aimless talk, the joke, the complaint raised early while it is still small enough to settle.

Grievances that are never voiced do not dissolve. They arrive later at full size, in a household that has lost the habit of settling anything privately, and by then both partners have spent months watching other people's conflicts performed for an audience. From being unable to talk to each other, it is a shorter step than it should be to recording each other.

Legally married couples now record each other. Sometimes openly, as a threat; more often secretly, and the material is kept. It is then deployed: as leverage to force a decision, as a method of control, as punishment after separation, as material for public humiliation, and — increasingly — as content, because a marital collapse performs well.

Researchers studying image-based abuse describe exactly this pattern. Nicola Henry and colleagues, examining victim-survivor accounts, found that nonconsensual images and recordings function less as “revenge” than as coercive control: surreptitious capture, threats to publish in order to stop a partner leaving, and the use of exposure to dominate rather than merely to retaliate. A multinational survey of more than 16,000 adults across ten countries, published in 2025, found that more than one in five respondents reported experiencing some form of image-based sexual abuse. This is a global phenomenon with a Somali expression, not a Somali invention.

Two clarifications matter. First, this is not a male behaviour with female victims, nor the reverse. Men and women both do it, and any account that assigns it to one sex is describing a political preference rather than the situation. Second, not all recording is abuse. Documenting violence, threats or coercion in order to seek help or report to an authority is categorically different from harvesting material for leverage. The distinction is purpose and destination: evidence of harm goes to a trusted person, a mediator, a clinician, a lawyer or the police. It does not go to a feed. What the law permits varies by country and this essay offers no legal advice; anyone in danger should seek qualified help locally.

Marriage in the Islamic understanding rests on trust, mercy, mutual protection and the covering of faults. Surveillance is the opposite of that. A spouse who is being recorded is not a spouse; they are a subject under management. And a household in which each partner holds a file on the other has already ended, whatever the paperwork says.

Prayer is not the whole of the religion

Most Somalis identify as Muslims and many pray five times a day. That is a real achievement, sustained through war and displacement. But it raises an uncomfortable question that this essay cannot avoid: why does so much devotion coexist with so much cruelty online?

The question is not original to me. [Writing in WardheerNews in August 2026, Dr. Abdurahman Baadiyow](#) asked it at national scale — how a society attached to its religion could remain three decades in collapse — and suggested the fault lies in treating worship as an end in itself rather than as the means by which good people and a good society are formed. His image for it is unforgiving: devotion that yields no moral change is milk churned endlessly that never becomes butter. He reduces the matter to four words: “Has

Islam transformed us?” This essay borrows his question and turns it toward a more focused, impactful newer arena — digital and social media.

The Qur’an addresses almost every element of the problem described here directly. It instructs believers to investigate information brought by an unreliable source, lest they harm people out of ignorance (49:6, Saheeh International translation). It forbids pursuing “that of which you have no knowledge” and warns that hearing, sight and heart will all be questioned (17:36). It prohibits ridicule, insulting nicknames, excessive suspicion, spying and backbiting in a single passage (49:11–12). And it warns of painful punishment for those who love to see indecency spread among the believers (24:19) — a verse revealed in the context of a slander campaign against the Prophet’s (PUH) household, which makes it strikingly apposite to the mechanics of a group chat.

The Prophetic tradition is no gentler. “It is enough of a lie for a man to narrate everything he hears,” a hadith recorded in the introduction to Sahih Muslim, is a complete media ethic in eleven words. Another, in Sahih al-Bukhari and Sahih Muslim, defines the Muslim as the one from whose tongue and hand other Muslims are safe. And on the specific matter of marital exposure, Sahih Muslim records the Prophet (PUH) describing among the worst of people on the Day of Resurrection the spouse who is intimate with their partner and then spreads their secret. Al-Nawawi, commenting on that hadith, took it as a prohibition on divulging what passes between a husband and wife.

A society can perform its prayers punctually and still fail the standard those prayers exist to produce. Worship without character is a form incompletely inhabited.

None of this permits the opposite error, either — the assumption that religious identity automatically produces ethical conduct. It plainly does not, or this essay would have nothing to describe. Islamic responsibility includes enjoining good and forbidding wrong (3:104), doing so with wisdom and good instruction (16:125), protecting oneself and one’s family (66:6), verifying before repeating, guarding others’ honour, and acting justly even toward someone one is in conflict with. Those obligations do not pause when a person opens an app.

The fight over the scholars

When the Somali state collapsed, religious scholars absorbed functions no one else could perform: teaching, mediating disputes, counselling families, holding communities together. That debt is real and should not be casually written off.

Yet a loud online movement now mocks and broadly discredits them, and the fair response is neither dismissal nor defensiveness. Scholars are human and make mistakes. Religious authority should not be exempt from respectful criticism; in the Islamic tradition it never was. And the specific complaint raised most often — that religious messaging dwells on women’s obligations far more readily than on men’s misconduct — deserves a serious answer rather than an accusation of feminism, which is not a rebuttal.

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The honest test is simple. Are men and women being held to the same standard from the same platform? Is a khutbah as willing to name a husband who abandons his children's maintenance, or who records his wife, as it is to discuss a woman's dress? Is anyone addressing digital ethics at all — misinformation, blackmail, online humiliation, the exposure of marital privacy — in the places where young Somalis actually spend their evenings?

Where the answer is no, criticism is legitimate and should be met with evidence and accountability. But there is a wide distance between “this scholar was wrong” and “religious authority is worthless,” and Somali society cannot afford the second. Nor should the argument be conducted by insulting women, feminists, the diaspora, young people or scholars as undifferentiated blocs. Every one of those categories contains people making the situation better and people making it worse.

What can actually be done

Restraint is not censorship, and none of what follows requires anyone to be silenced.

Individuals can hold screen-free periods each day, verify before sharing, and refuse to publish family disputes in the heat of the moment. Before posting about another person, one question is usually enough: does this inform, does it repair, or does it only humiliate? If the answer is the third, the post is not speech, it is an act. Guidance about a marriage, a debt or a crisis should be sought privately from a scholar, mediator or counsellor.

Married couples should agree explicitly on recording and privacy — a conversation that is awkward once and protective for years. Intimate knowledge must never be used as leverage, mediation should come before the internet, and children's dignity should survive their parents' conflict.

Parents can teach digital citizenship alongside religious education rather than treating them as separate subjects: talk about influencers, manipulation, privacy and misinformation, and model the behaviour instead of only prescribing it.

Scholars can address digital ethics, men's responsibilities, women's grievances, marital privacy and online humiliation explicitly; communicate on the platforms young people actually use; and answer criticism with patience and evidence. Schools and community organisations can teach media literacy, emotional regulation, consent, privacy and conflict resolution, using guidance built for Somali contexts rather than imported wholesale.

Journalists and content creators can verify claims, distinguish reporting from shaming, and stop monetising family crises; a livestream that turns a divorce into an audience is not journalism. Institutions and policymakers can run public digital-literacy campaigns, develop clearer safeguards against harassment, blackmail and nonconsensual exposure, and invest in youth guidance and credible public-interest media — not to control speech, but to give it somewhere honest to go.

The question underneath

There is a mentality in Somali digital life carried in a phrase the author has heard repeatedly: *fartaan doonaan qoraa*. Rendered word for word it loses its force. What it actually means is simpler and harder: I do whatever I want. It is a definition of freedom as the absence of anyone able to stop you.

That is not freedom. It is only capability, and capability without responsibility is what a society looks like just before it stops being able to trust itself. A people who can no longer speak privately will eventually stop speaking honestly. Reconciliation becomes impossible when every conflict has an audience, because no one can retreat without an audience watching them retreat.

“Who can stop me?” is the wrong question, and its wrongness is the whole problem. It assumes that the only limit worth recognising is one enforced from outside. The better question, the one this essay would leave with every reader who has a smartphone in their hand and a grievance in their chest, is older and harder: *who am I responsible to?*

Somali society already knows the answer. It has simply not yet decided to apply it online.

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Sources and notes

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