Implementing the Women, Peace and Security agenda? Somali debates on women's public roles and political participation

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Abstract

In conflict and post-conflict settings, the international community operates with the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda supporting gender equality. During and after war, gender roles are often deeply contested as part of larger societal transformations and uncertainties. In Somalia since the 1960s, gender identities and roles have undergone substantial changes, influenced by contemporary political systems, the women's movement, civil war and religious transformations. The international community's role in these societal transformations should not be over-estimated. Life history research with Somali women shows that debates on women's roles in the public sphere are taking place irrespective of the international agenda. Somali women have, at least since the 1960s, held civil-political leadership positions, despite substantial disagreements on the public role of women in Somalia. Furthermore, the "international" and "local" are difficult to disentangle. The Somali female elite have often spent years abroad and introduced new gender perspectives from places as divergent as Egypt, Russia and the United States. Global cultural and religious trends are influencing post-war Somalia, Somaliland and Puntland. In this complex socio-cultural landscape, the international WPS agenda can support – but also risk delegitimizing – Somali processes and perspectives. The article illustrates the gap that exists between global norms and local realities by focusing on Somali discourse on women's public roles and political participation.

Keywords: gender, Somalia, women, civil war, social change, diaspora, state-building, nation-building, peace, security

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Introduction

War and gender are interrelated in intricate ways. If we understand gender as relational and acquired, as "socially constructed roles and relationships, personality traits, attitudes, behaviors, values, relative power and influence that society ascribes to the two sexes on a differential basis",[1] it becomes clear that gender shapes war and war shapes gender. Women and men play different roles in war and are affected differently by war and its aftermath.

A comprehensive international normative framework on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) has been developed over the last two decades to address the fact that women are targeted in war in specific ways as part of warfare, while having limited influence in post-war political processes. The WPS agenda is "a global policy architecture supporting gender equality and today a significant reference point in the management and resolution of, as well as recovery from, violent conflict."[2] While its origins are many decades older, this international agenda reached the highest international political fora with the adoption of the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 in 2000, followed by seven further resolutions between 2008 and 2015.[3] The adoption of internationally agreed-upon norms and standards on women, peace and security has been an important political milestone for women's empowerment in the peace and security sector. The two main focus areas originally were addressing sexual violence in conflict and increasing women's participation in formal peace processes. In later years, the WPS agenda evolved to focus on participation, prevention and protection.

This article focuses on participation by exploring how the international normative agenda to increase women's political participation after war relates to local realities and debates in Somalia, Puntland and Somaliland. Moving beyond formal participation in peacekeeping and peace negotiations, this article looks at post-war public roles and political participation more broadly. Efforts to implement the WPS agenda take place with the conviction that addressing chronic gender inequality and increasing women's political participation leads to more inclusive societies and more sustainable peace. In post-conflict settings, the agenda emphasizes female political participation as a means towards reconstruction. There has been limited progress in the implementation of the WPS agenda during its first decade and a half, explained variously by a lack of political will and the limited resources available to implement the agenda.[4] At the same time, it is clear that there is a tension between global norms and local realities, which may also hamper progress.[5]

It is important to question the assumed global nature of the liberal norms behind the agenda by contrasting those norms with local realities in conflict and post-conflict contexts. While the tension between global norms and local realities has been noted in the literature, few have explored this tension empirically.[6] This article explores how women's public roles and political participation have been debated in Somalia, Somaliland and Puntland since independence in order to contextualize post-war gender realities historically.[7] Over time,

these debates show a variety of perspectives on women's public roles and political participation, many of which do not match the international normative framework. For example, the focus on women's political participation is much contested, even though those who disagree with this focus may well support more inclusive societies and more sustainable peace processes.

In the Somali region, women's roles and position in society have historically been defined by the Somali clan structure, with its customary law system (*xeer*), and Islam.[8] Some of the main periods of transformation and contestation around gender issues in modern history include the period during the rule of Mohamed Siad Barre from 1969 until the start of the civil war in 1991.[9] The devastating civil war has affected social relations – including gender relations – on various levels. With the establishment of a government in Mogadishu in late 2012 and greater levels of stability throughout the country, gender roles and relations have again become a subject of much debate in recent years. In addition to the region's internal dynamics, the influence of those who migrated from and – from the 1980s onwards – fled the country plays a central role in these debates as well. The Somali diaspora in the Middle East, Europe and North America has played an important role in socio-cultural and political development since the 1960s and 1970s. The return of increasing numbers of women and men from the diaspora in recent years contributes to this reality.

This article is based on 35 life history interviews, 45 semi-structured interviews and 10 focus group discussions with female Somali leaders in Mogadishu, Garowe, Hargeisa and the diaspora.[10] The majority of the women interviewed for this study were older (more than half of the life history interviews were conducted with women over 60), and their public civic participation encompassed a wide range of roles and responsibilities including leadership in formal politics, the women's movement, civil society, art, media, education and health. The women's origins were roughly equally divided between the three regions, and we aimed for diversity in clan backgrounds. A minority of the women were interviewed while living outside Somalia, and several women we interviewed in Mogadishu, Garowe and Hargeisa had returned from abroad. Many of those who we interviewed in urban centres, and especially the older women, were born in rural areas. One clear bias in the data relates to the fact that the majority of the women we spoke to had attained higher education and thus was part of the elite. This was partly due to the fact that we aimed to talk to female leaders.

Based on the data collected, I argue that local realities are not taken into account in international attempts to support more inclusive societies and greater (gender) equality in places like Somalia. This is particularly the case if local understandings of the meanings of "gender equality" and "inclusion" differ from those of international actors introducing an empowerment agenda. As a consequence, the WPS agenda risks being counter-productive to local negotiations on women's roles as political and civic leaders in places like Somalia. If the political participation of women is a means to an end, the focus on the means – primarily exemplified in quota systems – obstructs international actors from reaching the end goal of

greater equality and inclusion. As the ethnographic material collected in multiple sites illustrates, debates on equality and inclusion are not guided by universal principles but are instead influenced by a wide range of "local" experiences and perspectives.

With these points, I aim to further the feminist critique of how peacebuilding uses "liberal-inspired gender discourses of gender equality to help enforce its norms and inform its practices on the ground".[11] This article will illustrate that attempts to influence gender realities could benefit from greater engagement with processes identified as "local" in contexts where peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction and statebuilding efforts take place. It will also show that such "local" contexts are not static, unified and isolated cultural realities, but have undergone major changes in just a few decades, partly because of international influences like the role of returning diaspora members and global religious influences. This leaves the "local" context extremely fragmented and contested.

In order to fully understand the landscape in which international initiatives to increase women's civic and political participation in the Somali region operate today, it is crucial to sketch the modern history of women in the Somali region in some detail, drawing on earlier attempts by Gardner and El-Bushra as well as Mohamed.[12] First, I will outline the situation of the women's movement in Somalia during the Barre regime from 1869 to 1991. Then I will discuss the period of upheaval and civil war starting from the late 1980s, focusing on the gendered implications of the war. I will then go on to discuss more recent efforts to support a new governance structure and current debates on the role of women in civil society, highlighting viewpoints on the ways in which cultural and religious norms and practices enable or restrain Somali women's public role.[13] Finally, I will discuss the influence of the Somali diaspora and international actors in this debate.

The Barre era: dictatorship and the women's movement

Throughout the colonial period and the first decade of independence in Somalia (beginning in 1960), efforts towards a women's movement were few and small in scale. This changed after President Mohamed Siad Barre came into power in 1969 through a military coup that overthrew a democratically elected but corrupt civilian government. Barre declared Somalia a socialist state in 1970 and introduced scientific socialism, which was progressive in some areas – for instance, in providing literacy campaigns and opportunities for women – but introduced a high degree of centralized state control.[14]

Under scientific socialism, the mandatory education of boys and girls alike created a new generation with different perspectives on gender roles and relationships. This was particularly so because all children were encouraged to take on leadership roles and enjoy civic participation. Before independence, the main barrier to education for both boys and girls had been financial. After independence and then during Barre's regime, primary education became obligatory for all children. The shift occurred in a relatively short time period: before and during the 1960s, it was mainly the urban elite who sent their daughters

to school, but during Barre's regime educating girls became more widespread. While there was some resistance in those days to educating girls, many of the older women who participated in our research were educated due to obligatory primary schooling for all children. What's more, quite a few pursued further education abroad, in Egypt, Sudan, Russia, Italy or the United Kingdom.

Barre's scientific socialism effectively provided a form of state feminism.[15] Women were involved in all parts of society, and orientation centres were established in towns throughout the country to encourage women to listen to lectures, sing revolutionary songs and report abusive husbands. These developments were promoted in several ways by groups who were interested in moving society towards greater equality, for women but also for certain groups of men. In an interview with Amina Daud, who was involved in setting up a women's organization in the late 1960s, the interviewer asked whether it was Barre's ideas about socialism that stimulated the promotion of freedoms for women.[16] Amina responded:

> Yes, but also he found a lot of support; women were ready for it, because women were advancing in the civil service, there were army women, there were women pilots, women were – it was very easy for this to take off. [...] And also even the men were more liberated. Even the men at that time, the cadres who were running the revolution, were very enlightened people. They were mostly, I mean, the army were Soviet-trained, with cadres which… Siad Barre himself was not a socialist. He didn't understand anything. [...] The people who were really behind this were European communists; European, not Soviet. [...] And also I think Somali women are a force very difficult to suppress given the opportunity, given the opportunity. [...] The social atmosphere and aspirations of that generation had no ceiling.[17]

During this time of intensifying state control and increasingly restricted individual freedom, women's issues were being promoted. In particular, debates about women's legal rights and their position in the *xeer* system flourished amongst the urban elite. Women were able to count on Barre's backing in such debates, as the military government supported women's emancipation in line with socialist principles.[18] In 1972, Barre passed a resolution to erect a monument to Hawa Osman Taako, a woman who was killed during a 1948 Somali Youth League-organized demonstration.[19] Acknowledging the role of women in national independence and the revolution, Barre publicly declared on 8 March 1972 (International Women's Day) that women "should attain full emancipation in all aspects of life," and that the "revolution guarantees such rights and decrees laws to this effect".[20] Subsequently his (male-dominated) regime championed various progressive laws and policies for women.

Gender equality and women's political participation, however, remained a contentious issue in an otherwise patriarchal and conservative society. The enactment of the Family Law in 1975, which challenged fundamental principles in sharia and *xeer* law and gave women equal rights in marriage, divorce and inheritance, was a prime example of this. While the law was the culmination of the women's movement's struggle and the most important piece of legislation towards gender equality, it was highly controversial. The introduction of

the law prompted severe protest from the religious community, which the regime responded to by executing 10 religious leaders in early 1975.[21] Barre's crackdown on the religious right due to their criticism of his actions to improve women's rights fundamentally undermined the women's movement.

It was in the aftermath of these events that the Somali Women's Democratic Organization (SWDO), dedicated to seeking greater social and political representation, was established on International Women's Day in 1977. The SWDO was state-sponsored and did not function independently.[22] In the first decade of its existence, the SWDO grew in a period of the paradoxical elevation of women's rights and simultaneous curtailment of civil rights in general. Thus, the SWDO grew increasingly affiliated with – and tainted by – the Barre dictatorial regime until it "was not only subject to political control, it, itself, was an instrument of control".[23]

A counter-movement started as discontent with Barre's dictatorial regime escalated and the traditionalism of the religious right grew.[24] By the late 1970s and 1980s a small number of Somali women in Mogadishu wore the full chador with face covering, "signifying an internationalization of more conservative interpretations of Islam".[25] Somali society largely perceived the new conservatism as "a challenge to their freedom of movement, association and dress, a challenge to the autonomy that women inherited from their nomadic culture and transplanted to urban centres".[26] At the same time, some of these early-day Islamists came to the conclusion that women were important in educating the family on Islam. Sheikh Mohamed Moalim Hassan, considered central in Islamic revivalism in southern Somalia, was in the 1970s among the few religious scholars to open quarters for educating women in Mogadishu.[27]

Older women who held elite positions during Barre's regime remember the 1970s and 1980s as a golden era and highlighted how they took their obtained rights for granted. Amina explained:

> We thought it was the natural order of things […], the orientation and indoctrination was so intense. We thought all people are equal, all people are the same, everybody has the right to do this. This is what communism is, and no one blinked an eye.[28]

While many of the women we spoke to – who themselves played an important role in the women's movement in the 1970s and 1980s – presented similar views, others argued that very few of the women in central leadership positions were recognized politically. While they were encouraged to play a role in the women's movement, they were not given formal positions in government. Furthermore, the generally repressive climate and the regime's manipulation of civil society, which focused on maintaining political control at all costs, also affected Somali women's associations.[29] At the same time, the growing public role of women and their political participation led to counter-reactions not only with conservative religious sections of society, but also among many middle- and lower-class women.[30]

The civil war: disrupting the social order

Barre's increasingly repressive regime and the severe human rights abuses carried out in the north of the country led to mounting discontent and resistance, and the Somali civil war finally erupted in January 1991. The ongoing conflict has affected Somali citizens inside and outside the Somali region for over 25 years. As with most civil wars, the level of material, institutional and social destruction has been immense, deeply impacting every aspect of society. The consequences for individuals have been gendered: women have not only been robbed, displaced and killed but also disproportionately abandoned and sexually assaulted. And, as Bryden and Steiner as well as Ingiriis and Hoehne document, women have been both victims and perpetrators of the violence, contributing to the hatred and fear fuelling the conflict.[31]

> Women have lent spiritual and material support to the militia, cooked food for fighting men, and taken care of the wounded. Women have sold their jewellery or collected funds to contribute to the war effort. Women have helped to mobilize militia forces through public rallies, *buraanburs*, and more subtle pressures.[32]

While women were both affected by and executors of the conflict, formal politics remained the domain of men. Following the collapse of the state, the northwest region of Somaliland declared independence in May 1991 and embarked upon a series of peacebuilding conferences that proved successful in reintroducing stability to the region. Throughout this time, women worked to mobilize the elders, prepare the venues and food and encourage participants to carry on until an agreement could be reached. But when the final decisions were made, the women were asked to leave the room.[33]

As a consequence of the ways in which the Somali conflict developed regionally, the women's movement also divided along regional lines, which in particular affected political collaborations and partnerships. Women who before had fought side-by-side for increased gender equality were now no longer able to collaborate, because they were fighting for fundamentally different political projects.

Besides this regional division, there are several other ways in which the civil war has impacted the women's movement. First, the rights women obtained during the Barre area have been lost, and women's extensive participation in education disappeared with the collapse of the public education system. Second, due to the political manipulation of clan, and the use of clan to inspire hatred between citizens, the war solidified clan differences in unprecedented ways.[34] This culminated in the so-called 4.5 system of political representation, which dictates that the four major clans plus the minority clans have a right to numerical representation. Considering the fact that married women, as part of their father's and husband's (and thus children's) clan, often have multiple clan affiliations, and considering the fact that women do not have political representation in the clan system, the 4.5 system structurally disadvantages women.

Prominent Somali women recognized this, and during the 2000 Somali National Peace Conference in Djibouti formed a sixth, women's clan.[35] The notion of the "sixth clan" subsequently gained currency among female Somali activists. Asha Haji Elmi, the wife of former Prime Minister Abdi Farah Shirdon, later went on to lead a delegation of women at the 2002 Somali Reconciliation Conference in Kenya, where the sixth clan was officially recognized and secured a quota of 12% of the 275 seats in the subsequent Transitional Federal Parliament, though the actual number was lower.[36] The sixth clan was borne out of the desperation of Somali women caught between clan loyalties as a result of the civil war, as Hodan Abdillahi describes:

> They behaved terribly; that is where the sixth clan originated. I saw and experienced the clan hostility that had never been there before the war. My husband and I came from the same city, both our fathers were friends, his mum and my mum… people who love each other [...] They put enmity between my husband and me. I thought about the other women who are in the same position. They are pressured from both sides. [...] I had two options, either I go mad and psychologically suffer or I do something about this. I changed my anger and negative thoughts into positive opportunity. […] For us, women, peace is our life because when we had peace these things didn't happen to us. If your own family is discriminating against you what would you expect from the rest of society? During that period, women were killed by their in-laws.[37]

A third way in which the civil war affected the context of the women's movement is by fundamentally altering gender roles and relations. Recent work by Gardner and El-Bushra has studied the impact of war on Somali men.[38] Men are expected to be the perpetrators in war and are thus most often the targets of violence, leading to a far greater number of deaths amongst men. Due to the death and disappearance of men, Somali women have had to take on much greater responsibility during the war. After war, men are deeply affected by changed gender roles and the lack of economic opportunities. Furthermore, young Somali men have lost a clear route from boyhood to manhood, as it has become increasingly difficult to fulfil traditional male roles in the family and wider society.[39] Maryam Muse, a woman in her 60s who has been engaged with women's issues both through a woman's organization and as a midwife, explained:

> Many men are also idle and they feel that their role in the house has diminished and that their *raganimo* [manhood] has been deprived of them or got lost in the war. There are many men who feel they are not as good as they used to be as husband, as brothers and as breadwinners. They do not feel important anymore.[40]

During the war, men were largely unable to protect or provide for their families while women maintained their caregiving roles and often took on new responsibilities, a pattern that has also been revealed in other (post-)conflict contexts.[41] This situation deeply undermined the position and psyche of men while simultaneously strengthening many women who had discovered new levels of resilience and self-reliance during the everyday reality of conflict.

Women's political participation in recent years

After the onset of war and a period of localization and stabilization between 1996 and 2006, the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) ushered in a brief period of stability but was overthrown in late 2006 following the US-backed Ethiopian invasion.[42] This left a power vacuum in Mogadishu that was quickly filled by the militant Islamist group al-Shabaab. Strict Salafi ideology was imposed on women under al-Shabaab control, and punishment for defiance of Shabaab rules included public whipping and execution. The Transitional Federal Government and the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM), a peacekeeping mission operated with approval from the United Nations, recaptured Mogadishu in late 2011, though al-Shabaab continues to carry out attacks in the city.

In late 2012, the first permanent central government since the start of the civil war was installed, which increased expectations that Somalia would transition towards greater stability. However, residents in many areas in Somalia continue to face considerable levels of insecurity. Within this (post-)conflict context, what has the political participation of women been? And how have understandings of the public role of women developed in recent years?

As Franceschet, Krook and Piscopo argue, the past two decades have witnessed unprecedented gains in women's access to elected office around the world, and this is mainly caused by the adoption of gender quotas.[43] Such quotas do not just increase the number of women in office, but they also allow for diversifying the types of women elected (*eg*, by including women from different clans), raise attention to women's issues, change the gendered nature of the public sphere and inspire female voters to become politically involved.[44] Scholars have argued, however, that improving gender equality in politics requires creating gender balance in governance as well as government.[45] While a high proportion of women representatives in government may be desirable, it is of limited value if women's *influence* in politics is not given sufficient attention.

Paxton, Kunovich and Hughes distinguish between descriptive representation and substantive representation, describing the former as "numeric similarity between legislative bodies and the electorate they represent in terms of gender, race, ethnicity or other demographic characteristics" and the latter as "advocating the interests and issues of a group".[46] Without substantive representation or attention to women's interests in the form and content of policymaking, the interests and priorities of half of the population will not be addressed adequately.[47] Furthermore, a more equal representation of all groups in society can have great cultural meaning and ramifications. Symbolic representation has been defined as "public attitudes toward women in politics and trends in the political engagement of female constituents".[48]

Our research confirms that introducing a gender quota per se is not enough to enable proper representation of women in Somali politics. First, gender quotas are not compatible with the 4.5 clan quota system wherein the four big Somali clans enjoy equal shares of

political footing and a variety of "minority" clans (the "point five") are given half a share to distribute amongst themselves. As many women we spoke with pointed out, clans would never want their share of representation to go to women. Shadia Khaliif, who was interviewed in Garowe, argued "if I am here, and I am educated and well-qualified, but then there is a male cousin of mine who wants the same position, I can never win".[49] Nawal Hussein from Mogadishu added "They do not see women as leaders".[50] Maryam Qaasim, who is from a minority clan and was minister of Human Development and Public Services in the Transitional Federal Government from 2012 to 2014, highlighted how clan and gender interact in complex ways within the 4.5 system, further influenced by international demands on women's participation:

> The big clans, they will get the big shares, the good portfolios. They will get the President, the Prime Minister, Defense, Foreign Affairs, Finance, they will get those. *Point five* cannot touch those things… they will get the Social Sector, they will get something. […] There must be a woman post, the international community wants this, there have to be at least two posts for women, otherwise the UN and the international community will not support it. So we have to bring women. 'Who will accept this post to be given to a woman? Big clans will fight. So let's give the *point five*'. That is the way it works in Somalia.[51]

Secondly, even if some women do manage to access political office, this certainly does not mean they manage to advocate women's interests. The women we spoke to who had held political positions told us how difficult it was for them to make a contribution to gender equality – to have substantive representation – despite having achieved descriptive representation. Fartun Suleiman, one of few Somali women who held high political office in Hargeisa, remembered:

> I was the only female minister, and at that time – including ministers, vice ministers, president and vice president – there were about 50 men. I would always come with gender-related policy. If the cabinet would have a conference on Thursday, I would always come before and tell them 'please read this document'. They would just laugh at me and they would say 'everything you talk about is women'.[52]

Ellerby argues that one of the main characteristics of women's political participation in post-conflict situations is that women continuously have to insist on their participation, as they are not seen as stakeholders.[53] Around the world, substantive representation is resisted as women struggle for recognition and participation as stakeholders. Ellerby explains this by highlighting the continued – though incorrect – pervasiveness of gendered binary logics of masculine–feminine and war–peace.[54] She argues that, because peacebuilding focuses on how formal actors participate in conflict and can be encouraged to take part in peace processes, a focus on women's participation and activism is largely absent. And, since war is conceptualized as masculine, women are generally not considered primary stakeholders in peace negotiations because only those who have participated in active conflict are deemed to be equipped to create peace. In her analysis, Ellerby identifies the main challenge to be that peace processes are understood as elite and exclusive events leaving no space for civil

society and citizens – including women's movements and women more generally – as stakeholders with rights to participate in decision-making.

Somali women – like Fartun in Somaliland – recounted to the research team experiences of exclusion, discrimination or simply not being taken seriously. Fartun's experience reflects the reality of many women seeking political office in post-conflict settings who have to operate in male-dominated political cultures. At the same time, there are also great suspicions amongst those we interviewed about the political integrity of the women who do make it. These women are often connected to powerful men or families and are seen to have their own agendas. Strong fragmentations exist based on clan, region and class. Several women participating in our study highlighted how men use women to incite crowds against politically successful women. Not only is it very difficult to obtain access to political office and use that position to actively promote women's interests, but it is also extremely difficult to remain in that position because the role is always under threat from the clan and the intricate politics between women.

Current debates on the role of women in public life

Within this reality of limited political representation, participation and influence by women, how have understandings of the role of women in public life and Somali society evolved among local men and women? This is a much-contested question, as evidenced by the dialogue surrounding the issue in Somaliland. After a film screening in Hargeisa in early 2016, an interesting discussion on the ways in which gender roles had changed as a consequence of the war arose between the male and female participants. One of the men who took part in the debate argued that the main cause of shifting gender relations was that *men* had lost their authority and respect during and after the war:

> Kassim: But when did this start?
> Sahro: There was a point when women were respected. 'This is your role…' and they were respected. When there was an argument and the men could not resolve it, they said 'let's come back tomorrow'. They would discuss with their wives, and come back with a solution.
> Kassim: Now, do you want to go back to that or take over from men?
> Zahro: What percentage of men work today? How many are breadwinners? If I am the breadwinner, can I be respected? If he's sitting there, and he wants me to give him money for *qat*; but I can't even take a political position? They will say 'that is not a woman's job'.
> Ilham: Indeed, women finance the political process but they can't take political positions.
> Kassim: But are you trying to go back to the good old days, or do you want a new position?
> Sahro: Let us not go back but go forward.[55]

Many of the women we spoke to – in a similar vein as Sahro and Ilham – argued that it is only natural for women to contribute to public affairs, whether in political decision-making roles or more broadly. Several others argued that the traditional division of tasks between

women and men is clear and that women should not engage politically. As Khadra Hussein asked during her interview:

> This idea that the only way women can be seen to have influence is if they take the lead – why is that? Why do they need to take leadership roles? Why do they need to sit under the tree with the men? The men can represent us very well. A woman was asked why she wasn't negotiating together with the men for her raped daughter, and she said 'I don't see a better way in which she can be represented'.[56]

Others believe that women can play a political role, but question whether political positions should be the central focus of women's struggles when there are so many other important roles women fulfil. According to Fardosa Ibrahim from Hargeisa, "Khadija was a successful businesswoman, Aisha was a scholar. We should not just be obsessed with politics: women are great mothers, they can be great scholars".[57] Khadija and Aisha are two of the wives of the Prophet Muhammad; such religious arguments and references are often a central aspect of the debate on the public role of women. Two of the principal questions today are how much of the guidance on the role of women comes from religion and what Islamic positions towards women's political participation actually are. It is clear that "lived Islam assumes culture-specific characteristics, dependent on the conditions of a particular place and time".[58]

While the previous excerpts from the research come from men and women in Somaliland, the debate on the role of women in the public sphere is just as lively amongst women from Somalia and Puntland. Several of the women we spoke to pointed to the fact that current understandings of women's roles in society are not guided by Islam but by patriarchal cultural practices and attitudes. Former minister Maryam Qaasim argues this point strongly during public debates. During a seminar in Oslo, she indicated that "non-Islamic practices have been integrated into various Muslim cultures so much so that many Muslims think that those practices are part of the religion […] So that is how there are misconceptions around the issue of women in Islam".[59] There are differences in how women's roles in "traditional" Somali society is understood.[60] However, most would subscribe to the view expressed by Bryden and Steiner:

> In the traditional setting, women are not considered for formal positions of power in society and are typically excluded from formal meetings, regardless of whether these are focused on conflict resolution or other community concerns. Their contribution to public life is restricted to the private influence they wield over their husbands, fathers, sons, brothers, and uncles as they sit together under a tree or in another shady place and talk until the conflicting parties come to an agreement.[61]

A further argument often made in the debate on gender, culture and religion is that the version of Sunni Islam that is becoming increasingly prevalent in Somalia – which mostly restricts women's roles to the private sphere – was imported to the region from Arab states. Abdi locates this trend in the late 1970s and 1980s, when discontent with Barre's regime and

increasing internationalization of more conservative interpretations of Islam influenced the increasing power of the religious right.[62] Mohamud's article on Islamic discourses in contemporary Somalia corroborates the assertions of those we interviewed who said that the changes in religious interpretations are prompted by Arabization through the influence of Salafist Gulf states.[63] A number of the women we interviewed saw this as the imposing of external cultural norms otherwise alien to Somali culture. The rising conservatism preaches separate roles for women and men, wherein women are to be essentially invisible: modestly dressed, submissive and entirely absent from public spaces. This expectation contrasts greatly with the life histories of many of the women we spoke with for this study, especially the older women who held public positions during the Barre regime.

The present-day conservative view also contrasts with the early days of Islam. Several of the women we interviewed argued that women, in order to support gender equality, should increase their knowledge of Islam and aim to work "within contemporary Islamic and cultural discourses".[64] This is a shift from the more secular narratives used by Somali women activists in the past and part of a wider tradition of Islamic feminism worldwide.[65] A number of the women we interviewed who were what might be described as "Western" feminists during the Barre regime have now accepted a religious way of life and re-examined the belief that only Western values can advance the position of Somali women. As Faiza Hussein from Mogadishu said, "I am pro women's advancement, but it goes beyond fighting for gender equality, beyond being confrontational, and beyond the need for quotas. I would tell women to learn about Islam"[66]. Maryam Qaasim, who is a strong advocate for this line of thinking without necessarily using the term Islamic feminism, has argued:

> What we read – because I was not there 1,400 year ago – but we read the life of the prophet and we read the life of the women around the prophet. It is completely different from what we see now. Very different. Those days, women participated in public life. In the early period of Islam, Muslim women enjoyed the freedom of movement. They participated in many spheres of social life. They cooperated with men. Both in military and social life. As the early Muslim society gave women their fundamental rights to education and self-development, many women could leave their mark on the pages of history. [...] Islam never prevented women [from participating] in social, economic and political life.[67]

The numbers of women in public office in Somaliland, Puntland and Somalia are still low, and the past and current discourse among Somali women and men surrounding this issue illustrates fundamental disagreements on the roles of women in Somali society and on the best way to achieve greater gender equality and more a more inclusive society. For this discourse to inform international approaches to women, peace and security, international actors must understand the diversity of perceptions of women's private and public roles in local contexts and how religion plays a central role in women's lives.

Foreign influence and debates on the role of the diaspora

The women's movement in Somalia has received support from abroad for some time through donor funding and diaspora engagement, but this support has opened some Somali initiatives and organizations up to criticism for being ostensibly Western-led. Opponents maintain that foreign support is provided with the aim of transforming Somali society in ways that are incompatible with Somali norms and values, but such attempts to discredit initiatives do not prevent some local actors from seeking the support of others abroad. The sixth clan initiative and its predecessors, for example, received strong backing from the Djibouti government and a range of other international mediators, but was also vulnerable to attacks of being driven by a Western feminist agenda.

In the local discourse on the public role of women, the impact of international actors is much debated. Central questions surround who supports organizations and initiatives financially and who initiates and implements agendas or programmes. An exchange during a focus group session in Hargeisa illustrated the concerns and disagreements well:

> Sahro: Then, this issue of the West – this is not a Western agenda. They support, when they see women fighting for equity. But women alone cannot win this fight, we need men who are on our side.
> Nadifa: But do you have all women on your side?
> Sahro: I know some women don't agree with me.
> Nadifa: Women who fight for this, are women from the diaspora. The thing is, the majority of local women don't agree with that.
> Sahro: That is not true. There are no diaspora women in [NGO X]. They are all local. All these NGOs are local. Only Zeinab [from NGO Z] is not. The majority is local.
> Nadifa: This movement is not local.
> Hani: We already have the rights that Allah has given us. Gender is about the roles and responsibilities that we received from Allah. Not from Norway.
> Ilham: We don't need the men to be convinced. What women need to do is to raise their boys.
> Kassim: [NGO X] is the most prominent women's movement, with many female members (Sahro: also men). Can I ask you who is paying them? Which local member is paying contributions out of their own pockets?
> Fardosa: But these donors contribute to infrastructure funding. I never hear anyone complain about foreign agendas when they build infrastructure?
> Kassim: But this discussion is about women's rights to hold political positions, change laws, introduce gender policy... All of this is funded by the international community.
> Sahro: We women appreciate.
> Kassim: But we men don't appreciate.[68]

As this exchange shows, organizations focused on gender equality in Somalia can be delegitimized in discourse by pointing to international funding and key actors as contrary to the local agenda. Another related accusation was that the ostensibly "local" actors involved are in fact not local but diaspora women. Whether these women had lived the larger part of

their lives in Somaliland or Somalia – as many of our diaspora returnee respondents had – seemed to be irrelevant: the fact that their perspectives and practices had been influenced by several years of living abroad made it possible to disqualify them as not really local. Furthermore, women of the Somali diaspora who are still abroad also engage in gender issues transnationally. These contributions are an important potential source of transformation – and contestation – as Somali diaspora members transmit new notions of community, state–citizen relationships and, not least, gender roles and relations:

> Somalis who were educated abroad later came back with open-minded ideas and tried to convince the people of the benefits of educating a girl. In addition, this generation [of diaspora Somalis] has many educated men and women. When a person is educated, she or he knows the importance of education; whether it is a man or woman. The pursuit of knowledge does not know gender.[69]

The number of diaspora members returning to Somalia has increased considerably.[70] While no statistics are available, anecdotal evidence (full daily flights into Mogadishu offered by Turkish Airlines, for instance) suggests that return to Mogadishu is now much more frequent than it was a few years ago. Return to Somaliland has a longer history, but has become more substantial especially since the introduction of the multi-party system in 2003.[71]

The more recent returns are particular in the sense that they are post-conflict returns of individuals who fled Somalia and lived abroad for a decade or more. At the same time, these returns continue a long tradition of Somalis returning after leaving to gain education and employment opportunities or for political reasons. As such, the impact of Somalis who have spent a number of years abroad and returned, potentially with transformed perspectives and practices, has a long history. The extent to which people's "roots" or "routes" are seen to determine their claims to belonging and rights to political or civil participation after return not only depends on static perceptions of identity and belonging, but also on whether the aim is to delegitimize the contributions made.[72]

A unique aspect of present-day return is that part of it is stimulated and essentially financed by foreign donors. Many of the young Somali women returning do so with jobs from international organizations. They are hired for a wide range of functions by international NGOs, consultancy firms and fund managers, or by QUESTS-MIDA to work for the various regional governments.[73] They assist in numerous reform processes, are advisors for various ministers or engage in capacity-building activities.[74] There are also a number of women who manage to get such positions or engage in such activities independently, but the vast majority are returns with a donor-paid salary. These young women are educated in the United States or Europe and travel to the Somali region with different experiences and perspectives than many of the local women they meet there. They are often children of the Somali elite from the period of the Barre regime. The education and positions with which they return gives them some leverage – in particular in the eyes of international actors – to

contribute to governance processes of various kinds. [75] These processes often take place from a strong, liberal peace agenda, including the WPS agenda. As such, the early returns of women who were already active in the women's movement in the 1970s and 1980s are of a fundamentally different nature than these recent returns of the generation that fled the war as children.

Conclusion

In September 2013, the Federal Government of Somalia and the European Union endorsed the Somali Compact, which promised a new architecture for future relations between Somalia, its citizens and the international community.[76] The New Deal for engagement in fragile states that the Somali Compact is part of, calls for five peacebuilding and statebuilding goals, none of which reference of gender or women specifically or mention the WPS agenda (though one goal does focus on inclusive political settlements). Yet women's participation is as crucial in statebuilding as it is in peacebuilding, making the current article all the more relevant. There is a gap between global norms and local realities in the implementation of the WPS agenda, and in recent attempts to deal with fragile states in ways that actually *do* take local realities as a starting point, the WPS agenda is completely absent.

In this article, I have argued that a narrow focus on political participation within the WPS agenda may defeat the agenda's underlying aims towards greater gender equality and a more inclusive society. Our research has revealed that women and men in the Somali region fundamentally disagree as to what the "ideal" role of women in society should be, and public roles in particular are much contested. While some believe that women should contribute to society as mothers and wives, others argue for the full civic and political participation of Somali women; many hold views that are somewhere in the middle.

This article has aimed to make a contribution to the discussion of women's political and public participation in post-conflict contexts that starts from recognizing and recording "local" discourse on these issues. In discussions on the international WPS agenda, such local discourse is surprisingly absent, as if international normative agendas are simply "diffused" or "appropriated" in a historical and geographical vacuum. [77] The concept of "norm diffusion" within the WPS literature somehow creates the impression that the aim is to pass on international norms from the "international" to the "local" domain. Yet when different women debate women's political and public participation in local contexts, the ensuing discussions may be grounded in local perspectives and practices that sit very uncomfortably with some of the underlying gender norms of those driving the WPS agenda. Religious perspectives that underline God-given roles for women and men and viewpoints that do not necessarily argue for political representation clash with such norms.

Notions of women's agency in feminist analyses need to be expanded to include the perspectives of those who do not necessarily choose to resist patriarchal or religious social

norms in the ways that have been advocated by Western feminist scholarship.[78] Furthermore, we may need to expand the notion of agency as collective, since human subjectivity and action is always relational, structurally embedded and historically shaped.[79] As Hudson suggests, it is important to challenge binaries such as agent–non-agent and male protectors/aggressors–female victims when discussing women's roles and the creation of more inclusive societies.[80] This is crucial if we are to move beyond liberal-inspired discourses on gender equality that impose particular global norms on local realities that are not sufficiently understood in their complexity. This article has aimed to show just how complex the Somali context is by exploring some of the disagreements and differences in local perspectives and their evolution.

This article has demonstrated that, at times, local debates and realities sit uncomfortably with international proponents of the WPS agenda, who have defined equal gender roles and relationships in particularistic ways that leave little room for alternative models. At the same time, such debates and realities have changed over time, not least as a consequence of war, and show a great diversity of perspectives and practices. Furthermore, I have tried to problematize the dichotomy of international/local that I started off with. Somali women who have lived outside the Somali region for many years – many of whom take on leadership roles – play an active role in debates on the public role of Somali women. Their opponents may use their diaspora identity as a way of delegitimizing their perspectives or even their right to participate in the debate. However, international influences have always been part of the local landscape in the Somali region, and perspectives from the Middle East, Europe and the United States have shaped religious perspectives and the discourse on gender equality for decades.

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Notes

1   Goldstein, *War and Gender.*

2   Kirby and Shepherd, "Reintroducing Women, Peace, Security", 249.

3   United Nations, *Resolution 1325*; Kirby and Shepherd, "Reintroducing Women, Peace, Security".

4   Coomaraswamy, *Preventing Conflict and Transforming Justice*; Kirby and Shepherd, "Futures past"; Tryggestad, *Women, Peace, Security Agenda;* United Nations, *Challenge of Sustaining Peace*.

5   Coomaraswamy, *Preventing Conflict and Transforming Justice*; Kirby and Shepherd.

6   Groβ, "The journey from local to global".

7   This article uses "Somalia" to refer to south-central Somalia, Puntland and Somaliland, though there is political disagreement as to whether these are federal states within Somalia or independent national units. When I refer to one of these political units in particular, I will indicate this clearly by referring to Somaliland or Puntland.

8   Mohamed, *Gender, Politics of Nation-building.*

9   For interesting descriptions of colonial and pre-colonial gender realities, see Kapteijns, "Gender, Transformation of Tradition" and Mohamed, *Gender, Politics of Nation-building.*

10   Life history interviews and focus group discussions were conducted by Maimuna Mohamud (for the Heritage Institute for Policy Studies [HIPS]), Sahra Koshin (for HIPS), Muna Hersi (for HIPS), Laura Hammond (SOAS and HIPS) and the author. Maimuna conducted interviews and focus group discussions in Mogadishu, Nairobi, Columbus, Toronto and Doha; Sahra conducted interviews in Garowe; Muna conducted interviews and focus group discussions in Hargeisa; Laura conducted interviews in London and Hargeisa; and I conducted interviews and focus group discussions in Oslo, Nairobi and Hargeisa. The current article builds on Horst and Doeland, *Women's Empowerment Agenda.*

11   Hudson, "Decolonising Gender and Peacebuilding", 197.

12   Gardner and El-Bushra, *Somalia: The Untold Story;* Mohamed, *Gender, Politics of Nation-building.*

13   Horst and Nur, "Governing Mobility through Humanitarianism.

14   Gardner and El-Bushra, *Somalia: The Untold Story.*

15   Davidson, "Somalia in 1975".

16   All names are pseudonyms with the exception of public figures whose perspectives are well-known, and who have agreed to be named.

17   Amina Daud, Interview, London.

18   Mohamed, *Gender, Politics of Nation-building.*

19   Aideed, "Haweenku wa garab".

20   Gardner and El-Bushra, *Somalia: The Untold Story,* 96.

21   Mohamed, *Gender, Politics of Nation-building.*

22   *Ibid.*

23   Brons, *Society, security, sovereignty in Somalia, 200.*

24   Abdi, "Convergence: Reimagining Somali women",

25   *Ibid*, 189.
26   *Ibid*, 189.
27   Mohamud, "Women, Piety, Political Representation".
28   Amina Daud, Interview, London.
29   Gardner and El-Bushra, *Somalia: The Untold Story.*
30   Mohamed, *Gender, Politics of Nation-building.*
31   Bryden and Steiner, *Somalia between Peace and War*; Ingiriis and Hoehne, "Civil war on Somali women"
32   Bryden and Steiner, *Somalia between Peace and War, 44.*
33   El-Bushra, "Feminism and Peace Activism".
34   Kapteijns, *Clan Cleansing in Somalia.*
35   Dickert, *Building Inclusive Security;* Gardner and El-Bushra, *Somalia: The Untold Story.*
36   El-Bushra, "Feminism and Peace Activism".
37   Hodan Abdillahi, Interview, Nairobi.
38   Gardner and El-Bushra, Impact of War on Men.
39   *Ibid.*
40   Maryam Muse, Interview, Galgacyo (Puntland)
41   El-Bushra, "Gender Relations and Armed Conflict"; Tec, Resilience *and Courage.*
42   Lindley, "Between a Protracted and a Crisis Situation".
43   Franceschet, Krook and Piscopo, *Impact of Gender Quotas*.
44   *Ibid*, 2.
45   see Goetz, "Women in politics"; Tripp, "Autonomy and Cooptation in Africa"; and Burnet, "Gender Balance in Post-Genocide Rwanda".
46   Paxton, Kunovich, and Hughes, "Gender in Politics", 265; *ibid*, 272
47   Carrol and Dodson, *Reshaping the Agenda: Women.*
48   Franceschet, Krook and Piscopo, *Impact of Gender Quotas, 13.*
49   Shadia Khaliif, Interview, Garowe (Puntland).
50   Nawal Hussein, Interview, Mogadishu (Somalia).
51   Maryam Qaasim, Interview, Oslo.
52   Fartun Suleiman, Interview, Hargeisa (Somaliland).
53   Ellerby, "Understanding Women's Substantive Representation".
54   *Ibid*
55   Film Screening and Focus Group Discussion, Hargeisa (Somaliland). The film we screened was developed by the research team based on the same data discussed in this article. It is called *Somali Women's Civic Engagement: Past, Present and Future*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OYZ2NSERhLU
56   Khadra Hussein, Interview, Hargeisa (Somaliland).

57   Fardosa Ibrahim, Interview, Hargeisa (Somaliland).
58   Abdi, "Convergence: Reimagining Somali women", 185.
59   Maryam Qaasim, "Somali Women in Diaspora: Opportunities and Challenges" (speech, Oslo, November 11, 2015).
60   Kapteijns, "Gender, Transformation of Tradition".
61   Bryden and Steiner, *Somalia between Peace and War*, 51.
62   Abdi, "Convergence: Reimagining Somali women".
63   Mohamud, "Women, Piety, Political Representation"
64   *Ibid*, 13.
65   Badran, "Understanding Islam, Islamism".
66   Faiza Hussein, Interview, Mogadishu (Somalia).
67   Qaasim, *Somali Women in Diaspora*.
68   Focus Group Discussion, Hargeisa (Somaliland).
69   Idil Qambi, Interview, Mogadishu.
70   Horst, "Making Difference in Mogadishu?"
71   Bradbury, Abokor, and Yusuf, "Somaliland: Politics over Violence"
72   Clifford, *Routes*; Horst and Nur, "Governing Mobility through Humanitarianism".

73   QUESTS-MIDA, which stands for Qualified Expatriate Somali Technical Support – Migration for Development in Africa, is a project of the United Nations Development Programme and the International Organization for Migration.

74   Horst, "Making Difference in Mogadishu?

75   Horst, "Making Difference in Mogadishu?

76   Hearn and Zimmerman, *New Deal for Somalia?*

77   Tholens and Groβ, *Diffusion, contestation and localisation*.

78   Mahmood, *Politics of Piety.*

79   Hudson, "Decolonising Gender and Peacebuilding".

80   *Ibid.*