Introducing a Women's Empower- ment Agenda from Abroad? Gender and Stability in Somalia

In conflict and post-conflict settings, the international community operates with a Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, aiming among other things to increase women's political participation. An underlying assumption is that increased participation leads to a more inclusive society and more sustainable peace. Experience from Somalia shows that debates on women's roles in public spheres are taking place irrespective of the UN WPS agenda, and that Somali women have at least since the 1960s had leadership positions in government and civil society. In the struggle over women's public role as political and civic leaders in Somalia, the women's empowerment agenda from abroad has both provided support to local actors as well as risked delegitimizing their motivations and aims.

Brief Points

- During and after war, gender roles are often deeply contested as part of larger societal transformations and uncertainties.

- Since the 1960s, gender roles and expectations in Somalia have undergone substantial changes, influenced by the political system of the time, the women's movement, civil war and religious transformations.

- The international community's role in these societal transformations should not be over-estimated.

- The women's empowerment agenda can both receive support from and be delegitimized by influence from abroad, in the shape of funding or diaspora leadership.

Cindy Horst *Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)*

Elin M. Doeland *Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)*

Gender and War

The WPS agenda, initiated with the adoption of the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 in 2000, has been an important political milestone for women's empowerment in the peace and security sector. Efforts to implement the agenda take place in the conviction that women's participation in peace processes leads to 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 agenda during its first decade and a half.

While several attempts have been made to explain the slow progress, in this policy brief we instead question the underlying assumptions behind the global agenda and contrast those assumptions with local realities in Somalia. Based on life history and semi-structured interviews with Somali women in Mogadishu, Garowe, Hargeisa and the diaspora for the GENSOM project, we ask two questions. First, if political participation of women is a means to a goal, might it be that the focus on the means – primarily exemplified in quota systems for female political participation – obstructs international actors from reaching the goal of greater equality and inclusion? Second, and relatedly, to what extent are local realities taken into account if local understandings of what gender equality and inclusion means differ from how the international actors introducing an empowerment agenda understand it? We argue that there is a risk that the WPS agenda in fact is counter-productive to local negotiations on women's public role as political and civic leaders in places like Somalia.

In Somalia, women's roles and position have historically been defined by a range of value systems which most importantly include the Somali clan structure with its customary law system (xeer), and Islam with Sharia law. Some of the main periods of transformation and contestation include the period during the rule of Siyad Barre from 1969 until the start of the civil war in 1991, which was guided by Scientific Socialism and opened up great opportunities for women. Then, the devastating civil war affected social relations – including gender relations – on various levels. Besides internal dynamics, the influence of those who fled the country and constituted the Somali diaspora plays a central role in this respect. In recent years, with the establishment of a government in Mogadishu in late 2012 and greater levels of stability throughout the country, gender roles and relations are again the subject of much de-

bate. The return of increasing numbers of women and men from the diaspora contributes to this reality. Furthermore, as in earlier periods, international support for the women's agenda has influenced local dynamics.

The Barre Era: State Support for the Women's Movement

Throughout the colonial period and the first decade of independence in Somalia, women's movements were few and small in scale. After President Siyad Barre came into power in 1969, that changed. In particular, debates about women's legal rights and their position in the xeer system flourished amongst the urban elite. Barre was seen to be sympathetic to such developments, as the military government supported women's emancipation in line with socialist principles.

Acknowledging women's role in national independence and the revolution, on International Women's Day, 8th March 1972, Siyad Barre publicly declared that women "should attain full emancipation in all aspects of life" and that the "Revolution guarantees such rights and decrees laws to this effect". Subsequently his (male-dominated) regime championed various progressive laws and policies for women. Women were the greatest flagbearers of Barre's scientific socialism which effectively provided a form of state feminism. Orientation Centres were established in towns throughout the country encouraging women to listen to lectures, sing revolutionary songs, and report abusive husbands. Women were involved in all parts of society:

We had many opportunities then and it was not a strange thing to see a woman running on the sports track of a stadium for a marathon or taking part in some other kind of sports.

Hodan Abdi, Garowe

Gender remained, however, a contentious issue in an otherwise quite conservative Islamic society. A turning point for the women's movement came with 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. While the law was the culmination of the women's movement's struggle, it can be argued to simultaneously have become its defeat. The introduction of the law prompted severe protest from the religious community, which the regime responded to by executing ten religious

leaders. These developments fundamentally undermined the women's movement. This was delegitimized further by the fact that the Somali Women's Democratic Organisation (SWDO) was launched in 1977 in the same year the Somali-Ethiopian Ogaden war broke out marking the downfall of the Barre regime. The SWDO became tainted by an increasingly dictatorial regime and grew in a period of the paradoxical elevation of women's rights and simultaneous curtailment of civil rights in general. It broke down with the collapse of the state in 1991. Older women who held elite positions at the time remember the 1970s and 1980s as a golden era, and highlighted how they took their obtained rights for granted:

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. We were directors, or deans, or pilots. In the army, girls were trained in national service for military training the same as boys.

Amina Dahir, London

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. However, 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 positions in government. Furthermore, most of this urban elite reality had little effect on the everyday realities of ordinary women, in particular in rural areas.

The Impact of the Somali Civil War on Political and Social Structures

The Somali conflict has affected Somali citizens inside and outside the Somali region for over 25 years. As is the case in most civil wars, the level of material, institutional and social destruction has been immense, deeply affecting every aspect of society. Politics remained the domain of mostly male warlords though there are accounts of women also actively engaging in Somalia's war economy. The Islamic Courts Union (ICU) ushered in a brief period of stability but was overthrown following the US-backed Ethiopian invasion, leaving a vacuum of power in Mogadishu which was quickly filled by

the militant Islamist group al-Shabaab. Strict Salafi ideology was imposed on women under al-Shabaab control. Punishment for defiance of Shabaab rules included public whipping and execution. The withdrawal of al-Shabaab from Mogadishu in 2012 enabled women to re-enter the political realm.

Following the collapse of the state in 1991, Somaliland, in north-western Somalia, declared independence and embarked upon a series of peacebuilding conferences that proved successful in reintroducing stability to the region. Though restricted from taking part, strong local women's groups in Somaliland and Puntland are at present actively pursuing gender equality in the region. In parallel, women in south-central Somalia claim political and civic rights. They do so with the memory of the 1970s and 1980s, but within a fundamentally changed context.

Besides the fact that the women's movement is divided along regional lines, which in particular affects political collaborations and partnerships, there are several ways in which the Civil War has impacted the women's movement in Somalia. First, the rights obtained during the Barre area were lost, and for example women's extensive participation in education disappeared with the collapse of the public education system. Private schooling disadvantaged women as parents prioritized the education of their sons.

Second, due to the political manipulation of clan and the use of clan for inspiring hatred between citizens, the war solidified clan differences in unprecedented ways. 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 often have multiple clan affiliations, as part of their father's and husband's (and thus children's) clan, 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 took the initiative to create the Sixth Clan. At the peace negotiations in Arta, Djibouti in 2000, women argued for the inclusion of women as a 'sixth clan'. After fierce struggles and with support from the president of Djibouti and the UN, they were granted access to the negotiations:

The men thought about women's involvement as tokenism. The chairman said 'ok bring five women' [...] I said no

Mr Chairman, it is not five women. We have our own clan. [...] I said to them there is something you are forgetting. Our tribe has equal rights, equal rights with the other clans. They protested saying 'are you mad, how can you be a clan?' I told them that was yesterday, and that today we have our own clan.

Asha Hagi Elmi, Nairobi

A third way in which the civil war affected the context of the women's movement was through the fact that violent conflict fundamentally altered gender roles and relations. While several studies have looked at the impact war has had on women and how human rights abuses during war often are gendered, more recent work by Gardner and El-Bushra has looked at the impact of war on Somali men. Men are expected to be perpetrators in war and thus are also most often 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. Men furthermore are deeply affected by changing gender roles after war and in exile. Young Somali men are faced with the loss of a clear route from boyhood to manhood, as it has become increasingly difficult to fulfil traditional male roles in the family and wider society.

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.

Maryam Muse, Garowe

Recent Developments: The Gender and Islam Debate

While Somaliland and Puntland have enjoyed relative stability since 1991, except in the contested border area between the two, violent conflict is ongoing in south-central Somalia. In late 2012, the first permanent central government since the start of the civil war was installed, which increased expectations that south-central Somalia is transitioning towards greater stability. However, residents in many areas in Somalia face considerable levels of insecurity.

While great differences exist in the conflict and post-conflict contexts of Somaliland, Puntland and south-central Somalia, one trend that cuts across geography is a noticeable shift in debates on gender and Islam. As Maimuna Mohamud argues, certain dominant Islamic discourses have further eroded the rights that were guaranteed to women by the military regime. A new discourse has constructed the ideal Somali woman as operating outside public life. Yet this discourse is also contested, not least amongst women themselves. Several prominent, deeply religious women, including former minister Maryan Qasim, argue that women are excluded by patriarchal culture and not by Islam.

Contestations often take the form of Islamic feminism, where activists attempt to change current understandings of women's public role by engaging with Islamic discourses and drawing on knowledge of the Quran and the Prophetic traditions. Islam is used by these women as an essential source to promote their rights and broaden their access to public spaces, and this is represented as a shift in perspective by several of the women interviewed:

The extreme and blind belief that only western family values can advance Somali women is being re-examined today. There are many Somali women who were feminists in the past but now have accepted a religious way of life [...] 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. Basically know about the rights that Islam has granted you.

Faiza Hussein, Mogadishu

These alternative traditions often sit uncomfortably with international proponents of the women's empowerment agenda, who have defined equal gender roles and relationships in particularistic ways that leave little room for alternative models. Furthermore, women who have lived outside the Somali region, which includes many of those in leadership positions, play an active role in this debate as well. Their opponents may use their diaspora identity as a way of delegitimizing their perspectives and at times even their right to participate in the debate.

Concluding Remarks

In our reflections on historical developments of the women's empowerment agenda in Somalia since the 1960s, we have argued that a narrow focus on political participation may defeat the aim this agenda is trying to achieve by focusing on formal political representation without considering how such representation may then impact societal transformation. As a participant in a focus group discussion argues:

Nowadays, things are improving and women are increasingly present in education and business, but politically speaking there is not much progress […] The truth is that women politicians are not working towards empowering themselves politically even though they get increasing representation in political parties. […] When a woman joins these political parties she does not speak for other women but just for herself.

Focus Group Discussion, Hargeisa

Political participation and public civic participation is more than just participating in formal politics. The women we have interviewed for this study show how their leadership roles encompass educating communities about the importance of taking on civic responsibilities; creating alternative stories through art; being role models as doctors, lawyers or activists for the younger generation of women and a wide range of other roles and responsibilities.

The political and civic engagement of Somali women does not merely take place inside Somaliland, Puntland and south-central Somalia but women in diaspora also take responsibility towards their community and nation; either transnationally or by returning. This is one important potential source of transformation as well as of contestations, as the Somali diaspora brings back new notions of com-munity, 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.

Idil Qambi, Mogadishu

In Somalia, the women's empowerment agenda has both received support from and has been delegitimized because of influence from abroad through donor funding and diaspora engagements. Opponents maintain that such foreign influence aims to transform Somali society in ways that are incompatible with Somali norms and values.

Recommendations

- Foreign support for the WPS agenda can easily do more harm than good when it is not sensitive to local realities. By acknowledging and building on the historical and present-day societal contributions of women, rather than implementing the WPS agenda as set out in National Action Plans, new and more fruitful ways of promoting the agenda can be developed.

- Rather than focusing exclusively on the formal political sphere, promoting societal change focused on women's empowerment needs to build on the various ways in which women are engaged in formal and informal arenas.

- For the WPS agenda to be meaningful in local contexts, norm adaptations within the 'global agenda' might be necessary. For instance, religion has a large influence on ideas of what men and women's roles should be. INGOs and the UN can therefore not afford to engage a-religiously in places where religion plays a dominant role in society.

- Gendered realities are by nature interconnected and it is impossible to discuss the women's empowerment agenda without discussing the empowerment of men after decades of violent conflict. ■

Further Reading

Gardner, J. & J. el-Bushra (2015). The impact of war on Somali men: An inception study. *Rift Valley Institute Briefing Paper.*

Mohamud, M. (2016). 'Women, piety, and political representation: Islamic discourses in contemporary Somalia', in *Journal of Women of the Middle East and the Islamic World*, 14, 1-21.

Tryggestad, T. L. (2016). The Women, Peace and Security Agenda – 15 Years On: The Global Study on the Implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325. *GPS Policy Brief* 1. Oslo: PRIO.

UN Women (2015). *Preventing Conflict, Transforming Justice, Securing the Peace: A Global Study on the Implementation of United Nations Security Council resolution 1325.*

Note on Quotations

All names of the women we interviewed are replaced with pseudonyms except for Asha Hagi Elmi and Maryan Qasim, who are public figures expressing viewpoints they are known for.

THE AUTHORS

Cindy Horst is Research Director and Research Professor at PRIO.
Email: cindy@prio.org

Elin M. Doeland is a Research Assistant at PRIO.
Email: elidoe@prio.org

PRIO

The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) is a non-profit peace research institute (established in 1959) whose overarching purpose is to conduct research on the conditions for peaceful relations between states, groups and people. The institute is independent, international and interdisciplinary, and explores issues related to all facets of peace and conflict.