Somali Women’s Civic Engagement: Past, Present and Future

On February 6th the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), in partnership with the Heritage Institute for Policy Studies (HIPS) and the Rift Valley Institute (RVI), hosted a conference titled ‘Somali Women’s Civic Engagement: Past, Present and Future’. The conference was organized as part of the research project ‘Gender in Politics in Somalia: access and influence in a post-conflict state’ (GENSOM), and was funded by the Research Council of Norway (RCN) and the Somalia Stability Fund (SSF).

The conference was opened with a powerful poem, ‘I am a Somali woman’, written and performed by Sahro Koshin, who is a writer and advocate from Puntland and a researcher on the GENSOM project. The conference was divided into two sessions: the morning session was a closed event that focused on presenting preliminary findings of the GENSOM project, which were further discussed in three parallel workshops. The afternoon session was open to the public and screened a preview of the GENSOM documentary ‘Gender and politics in Somalia: access and influence in a post-conflict state’, by Abdiaziz Elmi, followed by a panel discussion.

The Gender in Politics in Somalia Project
Cindy Horst, research director at PRIO and leader of the GENSOM project, provided an introduction to the project. She explained why and how the project largely uses the life history method, and illustrated the power of life histories through a number of quotes that reflected women’s experiences in conflict and displacement. Laura Hammond,
head of the Development Studies Department at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, presented a brief background of Somali women’s political and civic roles in the last few decades. This introduction served to illustrate that Somali women, though often not visible in historical accounts, played a major role in society throughout time and had faced a range of opportunities and constraints in different time periods.

Maimuna Mohamud, lead researcher for HIPS on the GENSOM project, then presented preliminary findings. A first finding is that writing and storytelling can be an act of civic or political engagement that women take on - whether consciously or not. Some older women write or recollect their experiences in order to address their own exclusion from Somali history and that of women more generally. Other, mostly younger, women write because it allows them to convey messages and be heard in society. Both groups of women are role models and sources of inspiration for other women.

Secondly, the research shows that the women interviewed have differing perspectives on their role and status in the Somali society and on how these roles evolved since the war. A number of women refer to the pre-war period as the ‘Golden Age’ where women had equal rights in the social and political context of Somalia - even though those rights were championed by the Siad Barre military government and opposition was brutally repressed, doing the women’s movement considerable harm. These women argue that women’s rights have been reversed in present-day Somalia, referring to the impact of the war and the changing role of religion. Other women, however, maintain that women currently have more access to civic resources such as education, citizenship, and livelihoods than in the past. They point out that the women’s movement of the past only benefited a small group of women.

This brings us to the third preliminary finding presented, namely that “Somali women” are not a homogenous group since the experiences of individual Somali women are affected by many more aspects than their female identity. Women have and highlight different parts of their identity, such as their clan, region of origin, urban or rural background, level of education and diaspora background. Different aspects may be important at different times, and all will impact women’s ability and motivation to engage in Somali society. The presentation of findings was followed by vibrant discussions moderated by Dr. Hamdi Mohamed.

In workshop 2, on the resources and access to civic and political engagement, participants discussed some of the obstacles to greater participation in both formal and informal political action. They asked how to bring women together more effectively, as they saw great potential to create alliances. Such alliances could be between so-called minority women and those who belong to ‘majority’ clans; between businesswomen - many of whom are very powerful - and those involved in political action; and between diaspora and local women. One of the principle obstacles to women having greater access to formal political positions is, participants observed, the notion of clan democracy whereby clan elders select individuals to represent them. Whether because
women are not seen as being reliable protectors of clan interest, or because women’s contributions are not valued, they tend to be marginalised from such a system.

Participants were also wary of focusing exclusively on women’s inclusion in formal political process. They noted a need to recognize the plurality of women’s motivations and interests, and to approach the subject of women’s access from the point of view of creating space for women to choose the kind of involvement they want to pursue. Some women may decide to focus on service to their family or community; others may seek formal political office, while others may become active in civil society or business. It is important for women’s solidarity that all of these choices be valued equally.

Workshop 3 focused on the influence of women in leadership positions, exploring what it means to make a difference, as well as how it is possible to do so and what challenges women and men face when trying. Participants identified social resources like support networks, role models, and information; communal resources like freedom and education; and individual resources like courage, empathy, the will to make a difference and trust as crucial for making a positive difference in people’s lives. One main theme of the discussions was the question of power and influence, and the distinction between convincing people and imposing one’s will on them, or between ‘power over’ and ‘power with’ or ‘power through’. It became clear from the discussions that this distinction is not always easy, and that for example donors and diaspora struggle with this. ‘Free choice’ may be seen to depend on education and information, yet knowledge is not neutral and donors as well as diaspora are often accused of imposing foreign (Western) ideas.

Somali women’s own experiences
The afternoon panel discussion started with the former minister of Women Development and Family Affairs in Puntland, Asha Gelle, who spoke of the importance of political participation of women as well as women’s rights. Asha Gelle is currently a chairwoman of the Independent Review Commission on the Constitution. Fawzia Aden, former Minister of Foreign Affairs and Deputy Prime Minister of the Federal Government of Somalia, then shared her experiences of holding a high profile ministry while being a woman. She argued that women needed confidence to actively engage in politics, and encouraged women to take the route of party politics rather than trying to go through the clan system.

The GENSOM project is a 2-year research collaboration between PRIO and HIPS, funded by the RCN. The project aims to understand present-day Somali women’s civic and political engagements through a historical lens. It studies the history of women and power in Somalia; the level of access women have to formal and informal arenas of power; and the influence that women have in Somali society, particularly in relation to gender issues. Data consist of life histories, semi-structured interviews and focus groups conducted in Mogadishu, Hargeisa, Garowe, and with diaspora women.

Dr. Maryan Qasim, former Minister for Women’s Development and Family Affairs in the Federal Government of Somalia, pointed out that civic engagement does not only imply engaging in politics or being a visible social activist. She argued that raising children that will later contribute positively to the community or the collective Somali society is a civic act in itself. Sahra Kiin Abdirahman, Senior Livelihood Officer at Concern International and a social activist, argued that as a young woman civic engagement plays a central role in her life. She shared her views on the importance of encouraging the youth to be civically engaged.

A final panellist was Dr. Hamdi Mohamed, Historian and Adjunct Professor at American University Abroad, as well as co-founder of Kaafi Research and Consulting. Dr. Mohamed discussed the need for documenting the achievements and positive stories of Somalis. She said that ‘the histories [of Somali men and women] have been looted’, and argued that dominant approaches to writing on Somalia focus on experiences of conflict, famine and displacement, without giving space to the many uplifting stories of men and women who rise above their circumstances and who make positive changes to their communities.

The interactive conference took place in Nairobi at the British Institute, and brought together women and men interested in learning about Somali women’s civic and political engagements. The participants consisted of prominent Somali civically engaged individuals, politicians and journalists, as well as representatives of the donor community, the UN and NGOs based in Nairobi.

- Ayaan Ali and Cindy Horst, PRIO

‘Equal Peace?’ Project: Interview with Inger Skjelsbæk

The start of 2015 marked the beginning of a four-year project at PRIO entitled ‘Equal Peace? Women’s Empowerment and Multicultural Challenges in War-to-Peace Transitions’. The researchers involved in the project are Inger Skjelsbæk, Helga Hernes, Torunn L. Tryggestad and Jenny Kathrine Lorentzen. In addition, one PhD scholar and two MA students will be recruited. The project’s preliminary findings and information about project publications will be published in this newsletter over the course of the project period. Julie Marie Hansen met with project leader Inger Skjelsbæk to learn more.
Could you briefly introduce the project to our readers?

The project is about gender equality norms and what they mean in transitions from war to peace. These transitions often involve interventions by external actors with a normative agenda. As such, they are not neutral processes, but embedded with particular agreed-upon norms and desires for peaceful coexistence. These normative frameworks are multicultural and multi-religious in their very essence in that they are thought to be beneficial to all irrespective of culture and religion. In reality, however, these norms may be seen quite differently. Gender equality and women’s empowerment are examples of such norms and are strongly connected to peacebuilding. These normative frameworks are in many cases problematic, and what strategies are used to overcome these differences?

What are the main goals of the project?

Our overarching goal is to analyse the challenges of implementing a global framework on gender equality within the context of different cultural and religious understandings of gender and peace. We have seen that there is a lot of fear that bringing gender equality as a norm in peacebuilding measures can be hampered by religious and cultural characteristics in various countries. Sometimes the fear of offending locals by introducing these norms can be exaggerated.

We have seen that working with gender equality norms is very complex, not least because those who work in this area are also in a way confronted with our own way of life – who we are as men and women, how we interact, how we have different possibilities for engagement based on our gender. These are sensitive issues for everyone. By raising these issues we also bring into question the gender of the mediator, or intervening side, or the people who represent the intervening side, and that is always quite personal. Because of that maybe there is a little bit of a fear, thinking that ‘we can’t deal with this because we’ll offend the religion’, for example.

Therefore what we aim to do with this project is to look at when is it not problematic to implement gender equality norms – when is it easy and when is it problematic, and what strategies are used to overcome these differences.

Which bearers of global and local norms will the project focus on?

We want to focus on what we have labelled ‘norm providers’ and ‘norm adapters’, and the project will be divided into two sub-studies focusing on these providers and adapters.

The providers are the intervening side, which is sometimes a country. For this we will look at Norway in particular because Norway has been engaged in several peace mediation processes. We will also look at the UN and at people who have taken part in inclusive mediation training on gender issues as norm providers. What we want to look at is how various mediators, or interveners, in war-to-peace transitions think about gender equality norms, and how they work with gender. We aim for more of a hands-on understanding of what these interveners actually do when they try to implement these norms.

Then we will look at the adapters who are on the conflict side. These are countries that have been subject to big international involvement in war-to-peace transitions. In this case these will be Bosnia and Rwanda as well as local representatives of the international community to see how they have worked with these issues in the countries in question.

Can you give some examples of the interactions between norm providers and norm adapters in war-to-peace transitions?

A general thing we see in many African conflicts that have ended and are in the post-conflict phase is that many of these conflicts that have ended and are in the post-conflict phase is that many of these
countries have a very high number of women in their parliaments. The Scandinavian countries have always been the countries with the highest number of women in parliament in the world, but I think they now are passed by one or two African countries. So why did this happen? This is the kind of dynamic we want understand better with the project.

Rwanda, for example, has the largest number of women in parliament in the world. Some researchers have called this a ‘quota shock’. Something happened in that transition phase, and for some reason women took power. We are looking at why that happened – did intervening actors have anything to do with it, or were there other mechanisms at play?

Another example is Burundi, which my colleague Torunn Tryggestad has looked at. Gender equality here was an issue in the transition phase in which many people resented the international pressure because the local actors wanted to do it their own way. Yet they ended up having a high level of women involved. But they insisted that this was their way of doing it, rather than something that was enforced from the outside.

There are also cases where women are included politically as a kind of token rather than meaningful participation. It is in cases like these that we need to get the perspective of the norm adapters, and ask questions like: Is this something they do just because they are told to by the intervening side? Is there resentment of the ways of working with gender equality and women’s inclusion in political life? We need to look at what is going on here to understand the dynamic. And each context will be very different, and I am sure this study could be expanded by many more case studies. But we will start here. It is also our hope that we can develop the methodology for understanding this better and that it can then be used in new areas.

What impact do you hope the findings from the project will have, for example in terms of Norway’s peace engagements?

I hope that we can contribute in raising awareness about the role that Norway can play. It remains to be seen and assessed in the project how we think that Norway has fared on the issue of gender equality and peacebuilding. This is an issue high up on the political agenda; it is high up in political speeches and so on. But we want to look at practice. So then it remains to be seen whether they live up to the political ‘speak’. If so, there could be lessons learned that could be transferred to other countries, maybe about how to do things and maybe how not to do things.

I think that Norway has a voice in this field because Norway along with Sweden is regarded as a so-called ‘gender equality country’. It is not just that we have women in the private sphere, political life and so on, but it is part of our identity, a part of who we are. And I think having a lot of legitimacy and authority on the issue of how gender equality relates to peacebuilding is a door-opener. It could be a door-opener for other policy fields for Norwegians. In many ways it is our comparative advantage in a competitive world. So the project can contribute in nuancing or giving the issue more content.

But of course we want to be critical also. With FRIPRO funding we are engaged in basic research. While this research clearly has policy implications and applied potential, this research is first and foremost basic and geared to learning more about norm development and norm treatment in highly contested areas of politics.

Norway Launches a New National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security

On 16 February, the Norwegian government launched a new national action plan on Women, Peace and Security. The national action plan is a mechanism for implementing the priorities set out in the UN Security Council Resolution

Norway’s Prime Minister Erna Solberg at the launch of the government’s new National Action Plan. Photo: Marta B. Haga, Norway MFA.
1325 (2000). It is the third action plan from Norway (previous plans were launched in 2006 and 2011) and outlines the government’s agenda on women, peace and security for the next three years.

**Norwegian Prime Minister** Erna Solberg opened the event at Litteraturhuset in Oslo, stating that the new national action plan is rooted in the fact that women and girls are still the hardest hit in conflict. The action plan sets out four priority areas in which the government aims to focus efforts:

- Peace processes and peace negotiations: ensure the involvement of women and men in peace processes and negotiations, and that peace agreements include the rights, needs and priorities of both women and men
- International operations: take into account the security, rights and needs of women and men in all areas of operations
- Peace building: increase women’s economic and political freedom of action and influence
- Humanitarian crises: safeguard the rights, different needs and priorities of women and men.

The government will focus efforts in five priority countries where Norway is already engaged: Afghanistan, Colombia, Myanmar, Palestine and South Sudan. Moreover, addressing sexual violence in conflict is also highlighted as a central element across all priority areas and countries.

Ministers from the four ministries responsible for implementing the national action plan – Foreign Affairs, Justice, Defence, and Children, Gender and Social Inclusion – also participated in the event to talk about how their ministries will contribute to turning policy into action. In particular, Minister of Foreign Affairs Børge Brende highlighted the need for Norway to set an example by including more women in peace delegations, and took the opportunity to announce a new initiative, the establishment of a Nordic Network of Women in Mediation.

The launch was followed by a seminar which included a keynote speech by PRIO senior researcher Torunn L. Tryggestad on the status and challenges of implementing resolution 1325, and a panel debate on how to make an impact at the national level. The action plan is available in Norwegian and English.

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**Fifth High-Level Seminar on Gender and Inclusive Mediation Processes**

On 24-26 March, PRIO hosted the fifth in a series of high-level seminars on gender and inclusive mediation processes. The seminar was held in Oslo and was opened by Norwegian State Secretary Bård Glad Pedersen, who was joined by Jens Anders Toyberg-Frandzen, Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs at the UN, and PRIO’s Deputy Director Inger Skjelsbæk in welcoming participants.

Thania Paffenholtz, Senior Researcher at the Geneva Graduate Institute, gave the keynote speech on ‘The Inclusion of Women in Mediation Processes: from norms and resolutions to evidence’.

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**PRIO Researcher Appointed to UN Advisory Group**

Torunn L. Tryggestad, senior researcher at PRIO, was on 2 February appointed by the UN Secretary General to join the 4th Advisory Group of the UN Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) for a two-year period, 2015-2016.

The Group is a critical component of the PBF’s governance structure and provides the Secretary-General with advice on the speed and appropriateness of the fund allocation and monitors overall performance. This Advisory Group will play a particularly important role, as it convenes during the time that the 2015 Peacebuilding Architecture Review will be undertaken, and will advise PBF on corresponding follow-up adjustments. The Advisory Group will meet twice a year, and is chaired by Nigel Roberts. The first meeting of the 4th Advisory Group is scheduled for 28-29 April in New York.
International News

Margot Wallström was appointed Swedish Minister of Foreign Affairs in October 2014 and presented in February 2015 a feminist foreign policy agenda, which aims to “strengthen women’s rights, improve women’s access to resources and increase women’s representation.”

The African Union has marked 2015 as the ‘Year of Women’s Empowerment and Development’.

The 59th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW59) took place at the UN Headquarters in New York on 9-20 March. This year’s meeting marked the 20th anniversary of the Beijing Conference. The theme of the session was the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and current challenges to its implementation and in achieving gender equality and women’s empowerment.

A joint workshop of the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations and the Global Study on the Implementation of Security Council Resolution 1325 was organized 14 April in New York. The objective of the workshop was for the panel and the Global Study expert group to jointly identify and discuss, with expert resource persons, key challenges facing implementation of UNSCR 1325 by Peace Operations and to identify realistic, achievable recommendations.

The UN Security Council held an open debate on 15 April on the Secretary General’s report on conflict-related sexual violence.

Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) celebrates its 100 year anniversary and has launched an updated website on Women, Peace and Security – www.peacewomen.org.

Dina Kawar, Jordan’s Ambassador to the UN, assumed the presidency of the UN Security Council for the month of April, making her the first Arab woman to hold this position.

China has sent its first female infantry squad to UN peacekeeping in South Sudan. Read the full article here.

AIDS Free World has leaked a report on sexual exploitation and abuse committed by UN peacekeepers. The UN had commissioned the report but did not publish it.

The Institute for Inclusive Security has launched the National Action Plan Resource Center, a platform for advancing women’s inclusion in peace and security, designed for learning new strategies and sharing analysis, tools, and lessons learned.

News from Norway

The Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI) in collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs organized a Norwegian Consultation Workshop on the UN Peace Operations Review on 7 January. The consultation also included discussions on the inter-linkages between the UN Peace Operations Review and the Global Study on Women, Peace and Security.

The Government of Norway has launched a new National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security for 2015-2018. The plan was launched on 16 February (see separate story).

The Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs organized a civil society consultation on the follow-up of the newly launched National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security on 27 March.

The Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has launched a Nordic Women’s Network for Peace Mediators as part of the government’s new National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security.

News from PRIO

Torunn L. Tryggestad gave a presentation on the Women, Peace and Security agenda at the Norwegian Consultation Workshop on the UN Peace Operations Review on 7 January.

FOKUS and PRIO co-organized a seminar with Sanam Anderlini at FOKUS on 30 January on ‘UN Security Council Resolution 1325: How Far Have We Come?’

Torunn L. Tryggestad was appointed by the UN Secretary-General to join the Peacebuilding Fund Advisory Group for the time period 2015-2017 on 2 February (see separate story).

PRIO and the Heritage Institute for Policy Studies organized a conference about Somali women’s civic and political engagement in Nairobi on 6 February as part of the GENSOM project (see separate story).

Torunn L. Tryggestad gave a keynote address at the launch of the Norwegian Government’s National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security on 16 February (see separate story).

Helga Hernes attended the 59th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW59) as a member of the Norwegian Delegation and concentrated her attention on issues related to the Middle East and Africa.

PRIO organized the Fifth High-Level Seminar on Gender and Inclusive Mediation Processes in Oslo on 24-26 March, in collaboration with the UN Department
of Political Affairs and the Crisis Management Initiative (see separate story).

Kristin Bergtora Sandvik, PRIO Senior Researcher, and Julieeta Lemaitre, PRIO Global Fellow, and Associate Professor at the Universidad de los Andes Law School, have written a blog post about their recent research on gendered political insecurity as a threat to peace in Colombia. Read to the blogpost here.

A PRIO seminar on national action plans on women, peace and security with ambassador Swanee Hunt and Miki Jacevic from the Institute for Inclusive Security took place on 13 April.

Recent PRIO Publications


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