Somali diaspora brings back new notions of community, state-citizen relationships and not least gender roles and relations. Somali women who engaged in their home countries had not only a political but also a civic engagement role, engaging in political processes and humanitarian functions, bringing new roles in the political sphere.

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 transformations.

In our reflections on historical developments of the political sphere, promoting societal transformation needs to build on the various ways in which women's empowerment agenda in Somalia, in ways that are incompatible with Somali norms and values.

Further Reading


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.

Elin M. Doeland is a Research Assistant at PRIO.

THE PROJECT

This Policy Brief is part of the project ‘Gender in Politics in Somalia: Access and Influence in a Post-Conflict State’ (GENSOM), funded by the Research Council of Norway. The research was conducted by PRIO in partnership with the Heritage Institute for Policy Studies (HIP). Lead researchers were Cindy Horst, Maimuna Mohamud and Laura Flanmore. For more information see www.prio.org/GENSOM.

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.

Introducing a Women’s Empowerment 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.

THE AUTHORS

Cindy Horst is Research Director and Research Professor at PRIO.

Elin M. Doeland is a Research Assistant at PRIO.
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 sustained 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 provided by the agenda was 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 introduce an empowerment agenda understand it? We argue that there is a risk that the WPS agenda in fact is counter-productive to local understandings of 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 Siad Barre from 1969 until the start of the civil war in 1991, which was guided by Scientific Socialism and opened up great opportunities that challenged fundamental principles in Sharia law. Throughout the colonial period and the first decade of independence in Somalia, women’s movements were few and small in scale. After President Siad 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.

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.

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 granted women the right to divorce and gare (child) custody in cases of divorce, divorce and inheritance. While the law was the culmination of the women’s movement’s struggle, it cannot be argued that it simultaneously had not begun 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 and furthered by the fact that the Somali Women’s Democratic Organization (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 was turned into 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.

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. In this case most notably, the level of material, institutional and social destruction has been immense, deeply affecting every aspect of society. The conflict is characterized as a semi-structured system of political representation which dictates that the four major clans plus the minority clans have a right to a numerical representation. Considering the fact that men from those clans 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 Six Clan. At the peace negotiations in Arta, Djibouti in 1991, women argued for the inclusion of women and justified their status. In May 1992, the first permanent central government since the start of the civil war was installed, which increased expectations that Somali women were to be included in national 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 we are a tribe, and that today we have our own clan.

Asa Hagi Elmi, Nairobi

A third way in which the civil war affected the content 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 the war has had on women and how human rights abuses during war often are gendered, more recent work by Garrod and El-Bushra has looked at the impact of war on Somali men. Men are expected to be perpetuators 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 role. Young Somali men are faced with the loss of a close role from being to manhood, and it has become increasingly difficult to fulfill traditional male roles in the family and wider society.

Many men are also able and they feel that their role in the house has diminished and that their vagina (manhood) has been deprived of them or got lost in the war. There are many men who feel they are not as good as their sister who is not a husband, as brothers and as breadwinners. They do not feel important anymore.

Maryam Muge, 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 Somali women in Somalia to transition towards greater stability. However, residents in many areas in Somalia face considerable levels of insecurity.

Fazza Hussein, Mogadishu

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 granted to women by the military regime. A new discourse has constructed the ideal Somali woman as an obedient daughter and wife. While this discourse is widely contested, 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 feminist voices 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 the need for quotas. I would tell women to learn about Islam. Basically I know about the rights that Islam has granted you.

Hodan Abdi, Garowe

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.
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 nuer 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.

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.

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 gave women the right to own and dispose of their own money, divorce and inheritance. While the law was the culmination of the women’s movement’s struggle, it can be argued that simultaneously it has been its downfall. 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 and furthered by the fact that the Women’s Democratic Organisation (SWDO) was launched in 1977 in the same year the Somali-Ethiopian Ogaden War was 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 independence 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 was, 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

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 21 years. In this case, loss cost those of every social level, material, institutional and social destruction has been immense, deeply affecting every aspect of Somali society. The civil war has affected the male warlords though there are accounts of women also actively engaging in Somalia’s war economy. The Islamic Courts Union (ICU) adhered 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-Shabab. Strict Salafi ideology was imposed on women under al-Shabab control. Punishment for defiance of Salafi rules included public, whipping and recognised as male warlords with the withdrawal of al-Shabab from Mogadishu in 2012 en- abled women to re-enter the political realm.

While several attempts have been made to explain the slow progress, in this policy brief we instead focus 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.

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

The men thought about women’s involvement as tokenism. The chairman said ‘ok 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 clansman?’ I told them ‘I am a clansman’ and that today we have our own clan.

Asha Hagi Elmi, Naraibo

A third way in which the civil war affected the content 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 the war has had on women and how human rights abuses during war often are gendered, more recent work by Gardiner 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 line. Young Somali men are faced with the loss of a close route from boyhood to manhood, and it has become increasingly difficult to fulfills traditional male roles in the family and wider society.

Many men are also and they feel that their role in the house has diminished and that their regularity (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 Musse, Garowe

Recent Developments: The Gender and Islam Debate

While Somali and Puntland have enjoyed relative sta- bility since 1991, except in the contested border area between the two, violent conflict is ongoing. Particularly in the southern Somali region, the first permanent central government since the start of the civil war was installed, which increased expectations that Somali society will become more stable. 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 Mainuma Mohamud argues, certain influential Islamic discourses have further eroded the rights that were granted to women by the military regime. A new discourse has constructed the ideal Somali woman as operating within a specific gender role. This discourse is contested, not least amongst women themselves. Several prominent, deeply religious women, including former minister Maryam Musse, 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.

Fazza Hussein, Mogadishu

These alternative traditions often sit uncomfortably with international proponents of the women’s empowerment agenda, who have defined equal gender roles and responsibilities 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.
Introducing a Women’s Empowerment Agenda from Abroad? Gender and Stability in Somalia

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 defraud 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, but women have at least since the 1960s had leadership positions in government and a wide range of other roles and responsibilities.

The political and civic engagement of Somali women does not merely take place inside Somaliland, but women have at least since the 1960s had leadership positions in government and a wide range of other roles and responsibilities. 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.

Further Reading


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.

Brief Points

• 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.

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.