

# Policy Brief III



Puntland  
Development &  
Research Center

## The Role of Somali Women in State Building

### Key Policy Messages

- Somali women have a long history of patriotism and have taken a leading role in Somalia's independence, as well as being involved and paving the way for their political struggle for equal rights.
- Somali women carry the burden of a clan-based culture, that promotes strict patriarchal hierarchy limiting their growth and contribution to the country.
- Somali women continue to be marginalized in decision-making, miss out on social, political and economic inclusivity, which is a significant hindrance to the economic prosperity and development of the country.
- There is a growing need for structural and institutional reforms that will enable, support and encourage the inclusion of women in positions of legitimate influence across different levels of government.
- Somali women play a pivotal vital influencing role in reconciliations, and peace building, acting as shuttle diplomats to bridge the division among warring clans and factions.
- Somali women, who despite their meagre earnings as unskilled workers, are the primary providers, breadwinners and the backbone of many households.
- Somali women have played and continue to play an essential role in family reunification, providing for subsistence and welfare needs of their families and local communities in conflict zones
- Somali women empowerment in the justice sector is critical, and reforms need to prioritize women's equal access to justice, legal education and legal profession to increase women's representation and participation in the Judiciary and Justice sector.
- Somali women continue to have a higher unemployment rate than men at 74% compared to men at 61% despite an improvement in access to economic opportunities to women. (UNDP report)
- There is a growing trend of Somali women becoming entrepreneurs, setting up their own businesses and startups to support their families and also to create job opportunities bringing social change and lasting peace and development in Somalia.

### Introduction

Somali's journey towards stability and growth has been aided by the International community's support for state-building in Somalia. The International community's state-building agenda has encouraged Somalis to work on institutions that are instrumental to this growth such as the Federal Government with particular attention to security, taxation and popular representation.

What role do women play in state-building? How does the state-building process in Somalia impact women's participation? While support for Somalia's state-building has been essential for the country's stability and growth, there is a lack of gender analysis of the process as well as real opportunities to promote gender equality. This policy brief presents findings from the 6th PDRCTalks event that took place on 22nd of October graced by Honourable Fawzia Yusuf H. Adam themed 'The Role of Somali Women in State building'. The discussion that ensued revealed that although Somali women have been active participants in Somalia's state-building process before and after the collapse of the nation, inequalities in terms of representation were and are still prevalent. It is worth noting that post-conflict state-building involves a redistribution of power that represents an opportunity to reshape patterns of power to include Somali women.

As such, this policy brief is as a result of this discussion by the guest speakers, panellists, contributors and participants. The discussions covered the role of Somali women in state-building after independence as well as in more recent years, their support for the peace processes, and their struggle for representation and their work in Somalia's development.

### Historical background of the role of women in Somalia

In Somalia, just like in many African countries, women are the main providers and care givers within the care economy of many households - i. e. caring for the subsistence and welfare needs of their extended families, in particular children, the elderly and the sick.

Furthermore, Somali women have a long history of patriotism as well as being involved and paving the way for their political struggle. Indeed the women have continued to sacrifice their lives and wealth to lift the country out of chaos and the continuous conflict that has prevailed for decades.

## The Role of Somali Women in State Building

However, history books have neglected to mention them or their contributions which have been thrown by the wayside. In contrast, their male counterparts have been showered with all sorts of praises and celebrated both by history books, poems and the public at large. Although Somali women political fighters have given birth in prison (under very challenging circumstances), received injuries and death, their names and work as political fighters aren't well documented and they remain largely unknown. Below are a few names worth remembering:

1. Timiro Ukash: She fought alongside the Somali Youth League (SYL), was imprisoned and gave birth in prison.
2. Fatima Hersi Abane: She was a crucial figure in the independence movement in Somaliland during British colonization.
3. Jamaad Abdulle Hassan: She was part of armed resistance led by Sayid Mohamed Abdulle Hassan (called the "Mad Mullah" by the British) against the British, Italian and Ethiopian forces in Somalia.
4. Hawa Yarey: In the '60s, she tried to be elected into parliament as such faced much opposition that led to her being injured.

Between 1969 and 1980s during the reign of the Democratic Republic of Somalia, women had significant roles in all sections of life and as such were seen as role models in many African and Arab countries. A clear example is their fight for the "**Rural Education Campaign**" and "**Development Starts with You Campaign**". There were precedents, during fiefdoms and kingdoms, where Somali women were considered as leaders in the Horn of Africa. It is important to note, however, that, women become more overburdened in conflict situations due to the destruction of infrastructure, and government institutions, when shortages of essential goods and services, reduced security and safety thus an increased vulnerability of the women.

### The role of women during the conflict

During the conflict, Somali women played (and continue to play, in regions where conflicts are recurrent) a significant role in family reunification, providing for subsistence and welfare needs of their families and local communities, as household heads and primary breadwinners for the family and finally in peace and state-building efforts. Furthermore, during hard times, local and diaspora women have always been the pillars that the family and state relies on for provisions amidst poverty and shortages of food, water, medicines, fuel and transportation, brought about by the destruction of physical infrastructure - i.e. roads, farms, hospitals, and schools, because of their resilience, tenacity and ingenuity.

During the uprising against the late President Siyad Barre and the civil war that followed which brought to the fore warlords of all types,

Somali women continued to advocate for the end of the conflict, and they were the thread that connected all the major players for peace talks. The peace and state-building conferences held in Djibouti, Arta, Mbagathi and Eldoret were as a result of all their hard work as significant stakeholders.

They could not stand repeated conflicts, political processes leading nowhere, as such they advocated for:

1. Genuine Reconciliation
2. 30% of women's quota in the established institutions
3. Active Participation in reconciliation processes

Thus their agenda was not only the promotion of women rights but was instead based on their willingness to bring about a broader social change and lasting peace in Somalia.

In 2003, when the country still didn't reach an agreement and peace and a united Somalia was still a dream, they organized big demonstrations – established civil society organizations and women groups which took part in the peace process. They focused on human rights as well as social rights. On March 8, 2003, which coincided with International Women's Day, they organized a massive protest in front of thousands of people demanding the speedy implementation of the 2002 agreement.

As the women grappled with all these roles during the conflict - amidst damaged infrastructure and absence of basic necessities of life, their position was made more vulnerable to property destruction, displacement, gender-based violence as well as death. The number of female and child-headed households has gone up as a result of the conflict due to either - abandonment by men when they go to war, or death. In this case, Somali women assume the roles of both mother and father. They responded to hospitals by taking care of the wounded and assist in managing depression and trauma in their communities.

On a positive note, their involvement gave women access benefits they previously lacked, such as training opportunities, employment, being seen as the backbone of society, learning how to socialise and mobilise people, etc. Fundamentally, they gained confidence, strength and decision-making and leadership skills.

Through these opportunities, albeit facing opposition from traditional elders, they tried to reconcile their contributions and the advocacy for democracy and equality in which they believed a system favourable to their rights would be implemented in Somalia.

### Participation in Peace and State building

#### Somali Women in Peace and Security

Sustainable peace and state-building cannot succeed if women, who make up more than half of the population, are excluded from peace-making processes. Post-conflict reconstruction and governance tend to function better if and when women's representatives are involved in conflict resolution processes, including signing peace agreements.

In a bid to bring sustainable peace, Somali women campaigned for an end to the conflict. They also were advocating for increased involvement of women in the peace processes, and decision-making in both conflict resolution and peace making. To gain consensus and legitimacy for their campaigns, women used regional and international instruments such as the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1979), United Nations Security Council Resolutions (UN-SCR) 1325 (2000) and 1820 (2006). These instruments were also used as tools for advocacy and support. These instruments condemn discrimination against women and call upon UN member countries to adopt legislative measures to prohibit discrimination against women; to establish legal protection for the rights of women on an equal basis with men; to increase the participation of women in conflict resolution at the decision-making level; to ensure women's full participation in decision-making in conflict resolution and national reconstruction; recognising the important role women play in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, in peace and state-building.

### *Towards a State that Represents Women*

At the Conference on National Reconciliation, held in Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) in March 1998, women were officially recognized for the first time in the Somali peace process. The Transitional National Council, which was created at the Conference, required that one-third of its regional delegations be composed of women. The agreement, which was based on power-sharing between the fighting faction leaders, was however short-lived. From May to October 2000, the first Somali Peace and National Reconciliation Conference was held in Arta (Djibouti), with support from the Intergovernmental Authority on Developments (IGAD). During this historic peace conference, a Somali Transitional National Government (TNG) was created, and Somali women finally won a place at the negotiating table.

Exclusive male participation in peace negotiations was further emphasized by the "4.5 Formula," as clans are mostly led and represented by men. To break through this male bias, the Somali NGO Save Somali Women and Children (SSWC) proposed that a "Sixth Clan" would attend the peace negotiations. This ad-hoc clan was made up exclusively of women from all the major clans, and its name symbolized the political act of women declaring their "clanlessness" by forming yet another clan besides the four main ones and the smaller cluster of minority clans. Represented by Asha Hagi Elmi, the president of SSWC and currently a member of the Transitional Federal Parliament, Somali women were finally given a voice in the peace process. As a result, women were granted twenty-five seats in the Transitional National Assembly (TNA), to be equally divided among the clans.

A second Somali Peace and National Reconciliation Conference was held in Eldoret (Kenya) in 2002. The Conference lasted until September 2004 and had by then changed location to Mbagathi in Nairobi.

These two-year-long peace talks brought about ground breaking results. For Somali women, the Conference was a historical event, since it was the first time a Somali woman, Asha Hagi Elmi of the "Sixth Clan," became an official signatory to a peace agreement. As a result of the reconciliation between the Transitional National Government and its earlier opponent the Somalia Reconciliation and Restoration Council (SRRC), the TNG was replaced with a Transitional Federal Government (TFG).

The second Somali Peace and National Reconciliation Conference also adopted a temporary constitution in February 2004, called the Transitional Federal Charter (TFC). This document is an important first step for governance and human rights protection in Somalia. However, many of the articles of the TFC seem to be the direct result of diplomatic and political bargaining. Article 12 of the Charter, for example, states that at least 12% of the Parliament shall be women.

In the Northern part of Somalia, since January 2005 the Government of the autonomous Northeastern state of Puntland has had a well-developed Ministry of Women, Development and Family Affairs headed by Asha Gelle Dirie. In late 2006, the Ministry published a gender policy framework with goals and strategies for achieving gender equality in Puntland. The Government of the independent state of Somaliland also had a Ministry of Family and Social Development, headed by Ms. Fadumo Sudi as Minister.

### **Women in Sustainable Economic Development**

In Somalia, women are disadvantaged when it comes to economic prosperity and sustainable economic empowerment. Somali women don't have equal access to finances and economic opportunities due to the cultural norms that often lock them out from participating in major economic opportunities, unlike their male counterparts who have many more opportunities and access. Somali women are also kept out of existing markets in which they often participate as small informal outfits that are limited and don't have any control over the productive resources. Women lack any say in economic decision making at all levels of major businesses and industries such as Agriculture, telecommunications, Hawala and Banking, Fishing and Livestock.

Women in Somalia are facing a clan-based, patriarchal society that has often left women behind in a clan confusion where the woman may belong to several clans all at once since she is born into one clan marries another, and both may see her as a clanless entity. And so women have been manoeuvring through this vague clan identity, which ultimately has contributed women's discrimination on many fronts. One of those fronts is the perception that a woman belongs inside her home, although women have proved they are capable entrepreneurs and business-minded, are creative, innovative and smart.

Yet they lack the trust and encouragement of businessmen who hold the power of finances and investment. This mindset contributes to women's lack access to finances and thus can't equally participate any significant business venture in a world of male-dominated business people who pool their funds together to establish some of the biggest companies in the country.

Somali women have not been able to manage to pool their own money in the way males across clan lines have. This is due mainly to women not supporting each other, not only in business but also in politics where their number been on the increase in recent years. This lack of access to meaningful investments has hampered women in business to make significant wealth like their male counterparts since the civil war has ended.

Closing the gender gap for Somali women is essential and will contribute to achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, but if this trend continues, there is a possibility for the goals for Sustainable Development not be achieved.

No one can deny the role Somali women assumed during and after the civil which was historic, timely and strategic. They have become heads of households, main breadwinners; they have been paying school fees for their children, managing primary health care fees and have also managed to pay rent, food, and sustenance for their families. Yet, they do not benefit from all that they have contributed to society. Although their contribution to society is respected and cannot be denied, yet they have been left out of any economic empowerment and haven't been accorded an opportunity to shine in this arena.

If Somali women were given these opportunities for economic empowerment, it would boost Somali business productivity, contribute to economic diversification and income equality as well as have a positive impact on development outcomes. Creating access for women to economic empowerment opportunities will enhance the achievement of social justice, reduce poverty and create a stronger role for women to contribute to greater economic growth. When women are given these opportunities, it has the potential to improve the health and education of women and girls and the health of children. Investing in women is central to attaining the SDGs that are beneficial for Somalia as a whole.

In short, the barriers that limit Somali women to gain better access to sustainable economic development must be eliminated. Special programs must be developed for women to get access to finances, investments and greater prosperity overall.

With all these challenges and a disabling environment facing Somali women, still, women-owned small businesses, start-ups and entrepreneurship endeavours have increased drastically since the fall of the Somali Government in the early nineties, earning income for their household and also creating jobs.

### The role of women during the conflict

It is without a doubt that globally women face incredible obstacles in terms of access to decision-making bodies and processes as well as their ability to influence policies. The Gender Inequality Index for Somalia is very high, ranking at the fourth-highest position globally (at 0.776 with a maximum of 1 denoting complete inequality), impacting the role and status of women in Somali society. Although the international community support and emphasize women's presence in decision-making arenas, evidence and studies suggest an apparent lack of women's meaningful participation in political spheres.

In terms of the Somali context, there is pressure to put in place a formula to promote women's participation in politics since clan representation has closed all opportunities to women. It is obvious the clan dynamics with patriarchy as well as the current 4.5 political system has only favoured male aspirants; indeed traditional elders prefer that the positions allocated to their tribe are filled by men who they believe represent them better instead of women who are considered to be part of their husband's clan or are viewed as someone who can't represent their interests.

This trend seems to be changing with advocacy, increasing wealth, autonomy and education of women in the country. A modest yet steady progress has been observed in the growth in participation of women in politics in Somalia. For example, Puntland has been decreasing the number of women at regional level, to the point where the 2019 elections brought about only one woman as a Minister (of a traditionally female Ministry of Women Development and Family Affairs), and only one woman as part of Puntland Parliament, but have secured 17% representation within local councils and have formed the Puntland Women Councillors Network. In the federal parliament of Somalia, the number of women represented has increased significantly due to extensive and successful lobbying in the 2016 elections.

Furthermore, an increase of women at parliamentary level needs to be translated into meaningful influence over decisions. In that regard, women's absence from technical positions such as Director Generals within ministries needs to be changed.

In 2017 at Baidoa, the decision to use Propositional Representation (PR) as a system for the 2020/2021 elections was agreed upon. The political parties would compete in all regions and would submit a closed list of their selected MPs. It was argued that this system best serves countries recovering from conflicts such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and Libya.

According to many Somalis, this system will also give more significant participation opportunities for women. Indeed since the traditional elders are out of the picture, it will be the duty of each party to decide on the number of female members on the list.



There is no doubt that a move from the traditional system of electing decision-makers towards a democratic one will increase the chances for women being chosen based on their abilities, experience and education. One major drawback is that women will still be outnumbered and may be left behind because of the vast amounts of money that not only exchanges hands during an election but are required for campaigns. Campaign funding is one major issue that will still hamper women's participation in this process.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Somali women, who also speak for youth and children, have a message that they're fed-up of the traditional elders, Somali men, member states and the federal government. Indeed they are tired of constant insecurity, neglect of their contributions and endless wars.

They also have a message of hope and reconstruction based on shared understandings and collaboration between all members of society as they want to bring back the country's wealth (human and economic), reputation in the international arena, the dignity of its troops, necessary services such as education, health, and employment. There is a need for a better government and a better future; this cannot be done without the participation of a considerable number of the country's citizens. Evidence from the past 30 years and the lessons that need to be learnt suggest a time for a new direction, new ways of thinking for Somalia to stand tall is now.

If given the opportunity, space and power, Somali women can play a vital role in the establishment of a State that Somalis can be proud of and benefit from.

## Recommendations

Since Somalia is still facing a difficult time in terms of security, economy and governance, compounded by the division between the federal government and federal member states. The following recommendations are based on the keynote speech by Fowzia Yusuf, discussions between the speaker, panellists, contributors and participants of the 6th PDRCTalks event:

- ✓ i. Women should have the right to participate in policy-making and resource allocation;
- ✓ ii. There should be structural and institutional reforms that enable and encourage the inclusion of women in positions of legitimate influence across different levels of government;
- ✓ iii. Both men and women are affected by conflicts, but women (and children) are impacted more because of their productive, reproductive and community gender roles. Women should be considered an essential resource for successful state-building and sustainable peace in Somalia and given equal opportunities;
- ✓ iv. A move from the traditional system of governance is the only possibility for women to showcase their full potential in terms of state-building in Somalia. Democratic elections need to happen soon in Somalia for the shift towards an inclusive government to be successful;
- ✓ v. Somali women should join all political parties as strong candidates; they should work hand in hand with men and youth for them to succeed in the parties;
- ✓ vi. Somali women should not only be accepted as the backbone of the society but should be given opportunities in the economy; entrepreneurship and investments should be made towards them and for them;
- ✓ vii. To have more opportunities and positions of power women need to support each other and must pool all their funds to back strong political candidates;
- ✓ viii. Somali women also need to take their political ambitions serious. They must continue to the end if they want to be taken seriously, in recent years there have been women who cancel their campaign before the end, and this has figured negatively into the struggle of Somali women politicians.

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