

POLICY BRIEF

SOMALI WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND LEADERSHIP- EVIDENCE AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Senators belonging to the Upper House cast their votes to determine the Speaker of the Upper House, as well as the two Deputy Speakers, during an election in Mogadishu, Somalia, on January 22, 2017. AMISOM Photo / Tobin Jones

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Emerging evidence demonstrates that women globally face a “double hurdle” to power, with “formidable obstacles” restricting their access to decision-making positions and processes, as well as their ability to influence within them.¹ Contributing to a key evidence gap in the Somali context, research carried out in 2016/17 by Social Development Direct and Forcier Consulting for the UK Department for International Development’s (DFID) Research and Evidence Division (RED), examines the enablers and constraints for Somali women’s political participation and leadership within government and political structures.²

Despite a strong history of activism on women’s political rights, and valued roles in clan activities and local peacebuilding processes, Somali women have not experienced notable increases in their formal political power or status. The research provides new insight on the strategies and circumstances under which Somali women have, and have not, accessed and influenced the political space in Somalia and Somaliland, and their experiences of doing so.³ This Policy Brief synthesises the study’s key findings and outlines a series of implications for policy and programming. For a more detailed discussion, please refer to the study’s main research report.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Political representation and influence

“The main problem is not about women getting this 30% but actually it’s more about getting women prepared for this. Most of them don’t get what it is like to be in leadership so this will get us back to where we started.”

FEMALE, CIVIL SERVANT, GAROWE

The introduction of a 30% parliamentary gender quota in 2016 marks a significant achievement for Somalia. However, observers emphatically position this as just the starting point.

Following the introduction of a 30% parliamentary gender quota, 66 out of the 275 elected representatives in the House of the People are now women (24%).⁴ Activists in Somaliland meanwhile are yet to achieve the introduction of any quota, in spite of a long campaign driven by an active civil society, urging for such a measure⁵ Whilst observers largely agree that the parliamentary gender quota in Somalia has led to greater awareness of women’s political rights amongst men and women⁶, as a growing body of evidence at the global level attests, quotas cannot alone transform underlying distributions of power or discriminatory norms, nor can they equip women with the political skills required to succeed and influence once in office.⁷

This research found consensus across participants that the quota marked an important step towards women’s equal political representation, but crucially there is further need to build a pipeline of viable female candidates by strengthening education and training opportunities for girls and young women at the grassroots level, and providing access to ‘hard’ resources such as political finance for those women less able to access the funds needed to run for office.

In addition this research identified a need to more effectively support politically-active women to influence and operate within government structures. Research participants were particularly supportive of building more inclusive government institutions by introducing quotas at multiple levels of government, in particular within the civil service and within local level government, as well as supporting merit-based recruitment and promotion.

“The quota has been effective in getting women into politics if that is the end game. If the purpose is for women to have an impact in politics then the 30% isn’t effective as of yet. Quotas for the sake of quotas don’t mean much.”

FEMALE, BUSINESS LEADER, MOGADISHU

¹ O’Neil, T. and Domingo, P. (2016) ‘Women and power, Overcoming barriers to leadership and influence’ (London: Overseas Development Institute), p.9

² Main research report: Parke, A., Stevens, S., Walls, M., Gaid, S., Ali, S., Butterfield, S., Elder, C., Le Déaut, D. (2017) ‘Somali women’s political participation and leadership-evidence and opportunities’ (produced for UK Department for International Development, London: Social Development Direct and Forcier Consulting).

³ Somaliland declared independence from Somalia in 1991 but is not recognised by the UK and other stakeholders in the international community. Where appropriate this Policy Brief has drawn on findings from Walls et al’s recently completed ESRC/DFID-funded research on the gendered dimensions of Somaliland’s political settlement (Walls, M., Schueller, M.L. & Ekman, A.B. (2017) ‘Political Settlement in Somaliland: a gendered perspective’. ESRC-DFID Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research. (London: UCL)) and wider literature in attempt to clearly treat the Somaliland context as distinct from Somalia.

⁴ The politics of Somalia takes place within a federal parliamentary representative democratic republic. The country has a bicameral legislature, which consists of the Senate (upper house) and the National Assembly of Somalia (lower house).

⁵ Walls, M., Schueller, M.L. & Ekman, A.B. (2017) ‘Political Settlement in Somaliland: a gendered perspective’. ESRC-DFID Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research. (London: UCL).

⁶ Koshin, S. (2016) ‘2016 Elections in Somalia: The Rise of Somali Women’s New Political Movements’ (Garowe: Somali Institute for Development and Research Analysis, SIDRA).

⁷ See O’Neil, T. and Domingo, P. (2016) ‘Women and power, Overcoming barriers to leadership and influence’ (London: Overseas Development Institute).

2. Sociocultural norms and expectations

“What elder is going to have a woman represent him? [...] Had it been one man one vote, the results may have differed [...] The elders are still making the decisions.”

FEMALE, SENIOR CIVIL SERVANT, MOGADISHU

Clannism is a significant barrier to women entering politics, and there is support to move away from a clan-based power sharing electoral model. There are identified opportunities to engage with male leaders.

Women are formally excluded from clan discussions and decision-making structures.⁹ In a political system predicated on balancing power between clan and sub-clan groups, women are therefore disadvantaged as the exclusion they experience in clan structures is directly mirrored in formal politics. The formalisation of clan-based power sharing through the “4.5 formula”⁹ has served to further institutionalise this exclusion, and has concentrated power among a limited group of powerful male elders.¹⁰ Somaliland is not part of the 4.5 system, and political power is still shared along clan and sub-clan lines.

Participants from this research commonly described how women are seen as unreliable clan representatives in political office because of their dual affiliation to their father’s and husband’s clan and associated split loyalty, calling for a move towards a one-person-one-vote electoral system. Women already working in the political space described how they had leveraged supportive relationships with progressive male clan leaders and other male power-holders within and outside of the political system to support their candidacies, in addition to strengthening and maintaining support within their communities through regular engagement.

“The one and the only challenge is clan leaders’ perceptions about women representing them in politics.”

FEMALE, SENIOR CIVIL SERVANT, GAROWE

“The number one challenge women are facing in politics is the cultural stigma behind women in power.”

FEMALE, SECURITY SECTOR, MOGADISHU

Accepted norms and expectations prevent women entering politics, and accessing positions of leadership. However, there are opportunities to navigate the ‘rules’.

Women’s roles in customary Somali society have been heavily constrained by the gendered division of labour contained within and enforced through the *xeer* (customary) contract, which has led men to dominate political structures and processes in Somalia and Somaliland.¹¹ Some argue that new spaces for social, political and economic engagement were created for women under Siad Barre’s leadership, and that recent years have seen women gain greater resources and access to leadership positions than ever before. However, there is a lack of consensus on this point, with some critics highlighting a growth in inequality and discrimination for women.¹²

Participants from this research broadly agreed that there is significant ‘cultural stigma’ attached to women entering government, and in particular adopting positions of leadership. This stigma is reinforced through gendered norms and expectations (upheld by both men and women), which delegitimise women’s authority and capacity to lead in political spaces. The role of religion in shaping norms around women’s leadership was contested by participants. Some individuals linked cultural norms and stigma to certain elements of Islamic jurisprudence, which they interpreted to prohibit women from taking on presidential roles or positions of senior leadership including that of judges or Imams. However, other participants, including religious leaders, emphasised the importance of making a clear distinction between ‘culture’ and ‘religion’, highlighting that there is no part of Islam, which prohibits women entering politics.

This research also critically found support for opportunities to re-negotiate limiting norms and expectations, with a selection of women describing the ways in which they have overcome these barriers, to some extent, through connections to (or being from) the diaspora, and through their experiences growing up in supportive family environments, with fathers acting as particularly visible role models for young women. In these cases women described their access to education as a critical factor in building their skills, competencies, confidence and aspiration, in addition to providing them with exposure to professional and political environments.

⁸ See for example Gardner, J. and Warsame, A. M.(2004) ‘Women, Clan-Identity, and Peace-Building.’ in Gardner, J. and Warsame, A. M.,eds.(2004) ‘Somalia- the Untold Story: The War through the Eyes of Somali Women’ (London: Pluto Press), p.153 - 165

⁹ Power is divided among the four major clan groups plus an alliance of minorities.

¹⁰ Menkhaus, K. (2011), ‘Somalia and the Horn of Africa’, World Development Report 2011 Background Case Study (Washington DC: World Bank).

¹¹ Walls, M. (2013) ‘Women’s political participation in Somaliland. Journeys from exclusion to inclusion: Marginalised women’s successes in overcoming political exclusion’ (Stockholm: International IDEA).

¹² See for example Ingiriis, M. H. and Hoehne, M. V. (2013) ‘The impact of civil war and state collapse on the roles of Somali women: a blessing in disguise’, *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 7:2, 314-333; Mohamed, H.(2014) ‘Gender and the Politics of Nation Building: (Re)constructing Somali women’s history’ (Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic).

3. Activism and collective action

"I have always been a political and social activist."

FEMALE, MP, MOGADISHU

Women in government have leveraged experience working and leading in civil society to help them succeed in politics. There are opportunities to advance women's political representation and influence if collaboration and collective action is strengthened between government and civil society.

Women's groups and movements across Somalia and Somaliland have been recognised and renowned for their bold and active advocacy for women's political rights, particularly during the civil war and from 2000 onwards.¹³ New movements led by a younger generation of women are also emerging. However, hard-won early gains in Somaliland have not been sustained and many activists express frustration that patriarchal clan structures remain.¹⁴

This research found that women in government commonly share experiences of working and leading in civil society, with shared histories of political and social activism prior to their political ventures. In these cases, several participants specifically described the ways in which the skills and exposure they developed through these experiences helped them enter and stay operating in government. Participants also frequently emphasised that women's organisations and female politicians are not working well together, and at worst there is a culture of competition between them. Many of the women interviewed as part of this study called for women and male allies within civil society and politics to work together more collaboratively, in order to more effectively advance shared interests around women's political participation and leadership.

POLICY AND PROGRAMMING IMPLICATIONS

Global evidence reveals the multiple pathways towards women's political empowerment.¹⁵ Drawing on the wider evidence base¹⁶, and findings from this research, a selection of potential implications for policy and programming in the Somali context are outlined as follows¹⁷:

1. Promote more inclusive institutions

- Support **merit-based recruitment and promotion**, and provide **incentives**, which encourage the inclusion of women in positions of meaningful influence across different levels of government.
- Support efforts in Somaliland to **establish a quota system** for all elected bodies.
- Strengthen **alternatives to the 4.5 formula** which may provide important opportunities for more inclusive power-sharing. Bodies such as the Somali parliamentary **Women's Caucus** may be well placed as a vehicle to support advocacy and consultation around these agendas, and an equivalent fora could be developed in Somaliland.
- Work to **regulate electoral finances** to support the participation of women who do not have access to financial resources, but want to run for office.

2. Foster women's political leadership skills and capacity

- Build women's **'hard skills' in negotiation, influencing and consensus building** and the technical expertise to enable women to work with legitimacy in key sectors and at all levels.
- Support **leadership training and mentorship**, in addition to providing **regular platforms for public dialogue and debate** and **safe spaces** for women to learn from each other's experiences.

3. Support movement towards more transformative gender norm change

- Encourage shifts in discriminatory norms, which prohibit women's political participation and leadership through **consensus-based dialogue**, which may help individuals and communities to frame these issues in new and constructive ways.
- Support **strategic engagement with clan leaders and religious leaders** to help open up locations of power and decision-making.
- Roll-out **media campaigns**, which promote examples of successful and powerful women role models, in addition to scaling up **girls' education** to grow aspirations and expectations of girls and young women.

4. Support the coordination of locally-led collective feminist action

- Facilitate **connections among different local organisations** in support of the women's political empowerment agenda, to help mobilise around common interests and challenges.
- Support the **coordination of local movements** and a more cohesive feminist agenda, and promote **grassroots awareness-raising** for women on their political and social rights.

¹³ Gardner J., & Bushra J., eds. (2004) 'Somalia - the Untold Story: The War Through the Eyes of Somali Women' (London: Pluto Books); Koshin, S. (2016) 'Elections in Somalia: The Rise of Somali Women's New Political Movements' (Garowe: Somali Institute for Development and Research Analysis, SIDRA).

¹⁴ Walls, M., Schueller, M.L., & Ekman, A.B. (2017) 'Political Settlement in Somaliland: a gendered perspective'. ESRC-DFID Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research. (London: UCL).

¹⁵ See Krook, M. L. (2010) 'Women's Representation in Parliament: A Qualitative Comparative Analysis', *Political Studies* 38: 886-908

¹⁶ Discussed in Parke, A., Stevens, S., Walls, M., Gaid, S., Ali, S., Elder, C. Le Déaut, D. (2017) 'Somali women's political participation and leadership-evidence and opportunities' (produced for UK Department for International Development, London: Social Development Direct and Forcier Consulting).

¹⁷ As discussed in the study's full research report, a number of areas are also suggested for further research, including consideration of: regional and local variations; non-diaspora and minority women navigate; the participation, power and influence of women operating at different levels of government; intersections between influence and leadership in public and private spheres; and the role of gender-based violence in relation to women's political participation and leadership.

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