

The Political and Civic Engagement of Somali Women

Key Messages

- Somali women are often portrayed as victims of mutilation, sexual exploitation, famine and war. While these injustices must not be ignored, it is important to highlight that they are not passive bystanders, and history is replete with stories of extraordinary Somali women.
- The contributions of Somali women to society span numerous sectors and arenas including the family, civil society and business. To fully reflect their experiences of civic and political engagement throughout contemporary Somali history it is essential to look beyond formal domains of political power and influence and include those driving change in other areas.
- Somali women perceive their own status in society and their activism and civic engagement in diverse ways. Broader social and geopolitical changes, as well as personal transformations (i.e., traumatic events), shape Somali women's identities in relation to civic engagement. Our interviews with women show that they employ different aspects of identity (such as clan, geographic location within the Somali region, diaspora experiences, motherhood) when becoming involved in the civic and political process, drawing on their personal histories, connections and resources.
- Women in the Somali region approach civic and political engagement from different standpoints and positions that are informed by varying understandings of what constitutes oppression and the best strategies for social development and empowerment. For example, some women may advocate for greater children's rights given their role as mothers, while others may prioritize advocating for minority clan rights because of their own membership of a marginalized group. Somali women's identity is defined by more than just being a woman. For example, not all women consider women's formal political rights to be a necessary goal of their engagement. Understanding the diversity of Somali women's views, experiences and forms of engagement must be a prerequisite to any debate or policy on women in the Somali region.
- Writing and storytelling are acts of civic and political engagement for both men and women. Histories of the Somali region are male focused so generations of Somali women have written down their experiences to address their exclusion from formal historical accounts. Writing provides a medium through which women's voices can be heard and has been a way for them to convey opinions and solutions to issues like displacement, national reconciliation, education, the environment and radicalization.

Background

International and regional efforts to increase the effective participation of women in peace building and in the reconstruction and development of societies have gained momentum in the past two decades. In 2000, United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 formally addressed the need to change women's continued exclusion from participation in peace processes. UNSCR 1325 acknowledges the pivotal role women should and do play in mitigating conflict and sustaining peace.

The **Heritage Institute for Policy Studies** is an independent, non-partisan, non-profit policy research and analysis institute based in Mogadishu, Somalia.

Furthermore, the African Union has named 2015 as the Year of Women's Empowerment and Development, reiterating the importance of women's representation in peace talks — and in other political processes — both at national and regional levels in Africa. However, at national (and sub-national) stages the implementation and incorporation of international resolutions and declarations have proved to be more challenging.

Some grassroots efforts by women in the Somali region may already have achieved some of the goals charted in international and regional resolutions and declarations such as those listed above. A closer examination of Somali women's long involvement in community development and peace building corrects the narrative that women have largely been absent from these debates. Indeed, Somali women have historically been important stakeholders in processes of state building and development — both before and after the collapse of the state in 1991.

Gender in Politics in Somalia: Access and Influence in a Post-Conflict State (GENSOM) is a two-year research collaboration between the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) and the Heritage Institute for Policy Studies (HIPS) that explores the civic and political engagement of Somali women, past and present.

The research investigates how women in Somalia have defined their achievements throughout history and explores the factors that have enabled and encouraged their successes as well as those that have constrained them.

To date more than 36 in-depth life history interviews have been conducted in Hargeisa, Garowe, Galkayo, and Mogadishu as well as in diaspora locations including Toronto, London, Oslo, Nairobi and Columbus, Ohio.

Today women in the Somali region make positive contributions to their communities by applying their knowledge, skills and financial resources through formal and non-formal political processes. Indeed, their sense of responsibility towards society and family has been a powerful motivator for civic engagement both in the Somali region and abroad.

Despite having a long and diverse track record of civic and political engagement, women in the Somali region have remained largely absent from official narrated and written histories of the region. Likewise, current national and international debates about Somalia's political and economic development largely discard examples of women's contributions. This renders robust debate on women's roles and existing contributions timely and relevant.

This policy brief lays out some ways in which Somali women have addressed their exclusion from history and why writing is an important instrument for civic and political engagement and for combating marginalization.

We also present the multiple ways women define and enact civic and political engagements and argue that it is important to take into account the multiplicity of Somali women's experiences when tackling questions related to their status in society and their chosen forms of engagement.

In the current political configuration, Somali women's involvement in decision-making roles at federal and local political levels has been limited. Yet across the region, women serve as breadwinners and are present in large numbers in higher education institutions, formal and informal businesses and in NGOs. Their representation in government at all levels

The GENSOM project

We hope to contribute to a more gender-balanced understanding of the Somali region, past and present.

The GENSOM project aims to:

- Broaden the narrative of civic and political engagement by including women in the writing and telling of Somali histories.
- Illustrate how women's civic and political engagement has changed over time.
- Highlight how women engage in, and contribute to, Somali society in multiple ways.
- Introduce the great diversity of women's experiences in relation to civic and political engagement.

Writing and storytelling

When a woman writes down her mind, people will know how women think and give them respect. — writer in her 20s, Somaliland.

Women in the Somali region have a long tradition of using oral poetry and storytelling as a means to transfer knowledge, document events and preserve memory. Writing and storytelling can be defined as civic and political acts in a number of ways.

Firstly, Somali women write to ensure that their contributions to society become part of the narrated and written histories of the region. Older generations of women, in particular, feel that their (and other women's) achievements have seldom been recognized in Somali histories.

Younger generations of Somali women consider the first cohorts of female university graduates in the 1960s and 1970s as pioneers, whose past contributions were instrumental in the development of the Somali nation state. These were women who worked in civil service and government, education and health services. Notable female artists and performers have had important contributions to cultural life in Somalia as well.

Today, some of these women document their experiences by writing memoirs, poems, songs and novels as well as non-fictional accounts of historical events. By contributing their voices to historical and cultural discourses, they are continuing to be civically and politically active.

"I started writing because I needed to record events for future generations. My objective is to leave something behind." — member of parliament in her 60s, Mogadishu.

Secondly, writing also fulfills an essential need to be heard. Some women who feel that they have important messages to convey use writing to communicate their ideas and opinions to audiences both inside and outside the Somali region. Women are writing in different languages (including Somali, English and Arabic) on topics that are considered essential to their wellbeing and that of their communities. These include education, displacement, motherhood, the environment, and the negative consequences of qat on society. By writing to convey where they stand on such issues, these women are performing acts of social and political significance.

“We often highlight the successful males in our culture. Our history is very male focused. We don’t hear much about the heroic stories [of women] because they are often downplayed or minimized.” – politician in her 50s, Garowe, Puntland.

Across the Somali region today women writers are considered to be role models who inspire generations of women and men to engage civically and politically. Some women write to ensure that the legacy of their work and sacrifices are preserved for future generations of Somalis. Others write in order to inspire women to pursue their ambitions and to encourage them to be active members in their communities. In all instances, the act of writing is political and is a prime example of civic engagement.

Women’s diverse views

“You may think that circumstances in Somalia are harsh for women now. But the mentality of giving males a preferential treatment is diminishing. After the civil war, parents have realized that women play a major role in supporting their families...there are higher numbers of girls in Mogadishu attending schools and graduating from universities than before”

– civil society activist in her 70s, Mogadishu.

There is great diversity in how Somali women view their own status and role in society today. This is reflected in their views about whether women in Somali region have better access to resources today than before the state collapse in 1991. The social positioning and life experiences of women often inform their views on this debate. These experiences and worldviews do not remain static.

There are two emerging perspectives on this topic. Some women remember the pre-1991 era as a golden age in terms of women’s progress and achievements. They claim that women enjoyed a set of legal rights and were given ample employment and educational opportunities, which facilitated their contributions to society. Proponents of this view believe that Somali women flourished in the 1970s and 1980s. Owing a great deal to their advancement was the introduction of the highly controversial Family Law in 1975, which, in their view, was an important legal instrument that extended women’s equal rights, primarily in inheritance and diya (blood compensation). The Family Law also gave some women leveraging power to advocate for other rights.

Others suggest that women today have more access to resources than in any other previous period in Somali history. Signs of such progress include an increase in the numbers of

girls attending schools and the rise of women university graduates across the region. Some also believe that despite numerous challenges, women in the Somali region have access to more livelihood opportunities. The civil war and experiences of exile have changed the traditional division of labor, leading many women to become heads of households. Arguably this has led to greater autonomy and financial independence for women within the family.

In recent years, diaspora women have been returning to Somaliland, Puntland and south-central Somalia – Mogadishu in particular – to invest the education, skills and resources they have acquired in western countries back into their communities. The return of qualified women is argued by some to be immensely beneficial for communities across Somali regions.

In Puntland and south-central Somalia in particular, women from both camps feel that the current political system is disadvantageous, because it is based on representation through the clan and is not a meritocracy.

There is a strong belief among prominent female politicians interviewed for this project that Somali traditional leaders are more likely to choose men, because they expect them to be better representatives of clan interest in parliament and in cabinet positions.

“Now we have a generation of young people who had only known war and radicalism. Today, we also have the 4.5 formula through which political appointments and decisions are made. Now, traditional men are asked for permission to allow women to participate in politics. A traditional elder will never choose a woman over a man even if she has a PhD. He would rather choose a man who cannot read or write.” – civil society activist in her 60s, Garowe, Puntland.

Identities influence civic engagement

“It isn’t just women who are excluded. Minority groups too are oppressed and marginalized. Minority clans live across all of Somalia, but their voices are stolen. I think it is some time before I am truly equal to the man or woman who come from a majority clan. I am excluded for being a woman and for coming from a minority clan.” – politician in her 50s, Mogadishu.

Identities of Somali women are multifaceted. Their clan loyalty, region of origin, and whether they are members of the diaspora all have implications on how they define and enact civic engagement. For example, women from minority clans who experience double marginalization may prioritize advocacy for minority rights over women’s rights. Other women choose to highlight their identity as Somalis over their identity as women, subsequently aligning their civic engagement towards broader issues that concern Somali society as a whole.

Conclusion

Somali women’s civic and political engagement can be displayed in multiple ways and through both formal and informal processes. For example, women write their narratives and contributions into history. In doing so, we argue, they signal their importance as mothers, community members and as leaders.

Women engage in a wide spectrum of civic and political activities ranging from holding political offices to performing community-based activism and taking care of extended relatives. Given that the Somali region is undergoing rapid social and political transformations today, Somali women's contributions are crucial to development, healing and peace building at all levels of society.

Somali women's roles in society remain a contentious issue. They remain excluded from many of the decision-making roles in formal politics, restricting their influence on policies that impact their communities. While women are acknowledged for playing crucial economic roles in families and communities, other civic and political roles and contributions are often contested and at times opposed.

Policy considerations

Based on our preliminary findings, we present the following recommendations for policy makers and those engaged in development and political reforms.

- More studies should be conducted on women's representation in public life (political posts and civil service) in all governments in the Somali region (the Federal Government of Somalia, Somaliland and the regional governments).
- Until equitable gender representation – rooted in legislation or custom – is achieved, a quota system where women are allocated credible political and civil service positions should be implemented at all levels of government.
- Somali governments and stakeholders must invest in civic education across the region. A civic component in the curriculum must teach students about Somali women's past civic contributions to society. It should also educate children on civic values, responsibilities and volunteerism.

- Female academics, civil society leaders, politicians and artists, in particular, should consider providing mentoring to young women across Somali regions. Somali governments should fund programs that facilitate mentorship between generations.
- Somali governments, Somali research institutes and civil society should support initiatives that document women's past and present achievements. This should include documentation in the form of digital historical archives, documentation of oral testimonies and autobiographies of Somali women as well as celebration and visualization of Somali women's histories via mediums including film, documentary, (digital) art projects and graphic illustrations.

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