



# POLICY BRIEF



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## EMPOWERING SOMALI WOMEN: ARE WE THERE YET?

### Summary

Patriarchal systems and cultural practices linked with supporting and perpetrating injustices against women dominate most African countries. The case of Somalia is no different, as patriarchy is intertwined with erroneous interpretations of religion and culture, resulting in high levels of gender inequality. However, efforts by human rights advocates, civil society organizations, the humanitarian community and policy makers, to effect a change in the current status quo are yielding positive results. Nevertheless, Somalia still has a long way to go before equality is achieved. For example, the literacy level for adult women sits at 26%, and the country is ranked fourth globally in the Gender Inequality Index<sup>1</sup>. This policy brief was developed following a thorough consultative process with women, local leaders, policymakers and civil society organizations. It recognizes achievements to date and foregrounds the challenges the average woman in Somalia still encounters daily, offering actionable policy recommendations to ensure inclusivity to boost the attainment of sustainable development.

## **RE-AFFIRMING CURRENT PROGRESS**

The situation for Somali woman today differs from that in the 1970s, when improvements were introduced linked to state-driven advancement of women's rights. Notably, the Siad Barre regime introduced the Somali language literacy campaign and a Compulsory Education Policy to bolster levels of literacy generally in Somalia. Despite the promotion of increased educational opportunities and options for participation in society, these efforts were not specifically targeted toward women<sup>2</sup>.

However, progress made was reversed after the Somali state collapsed in 1991 due to civil war. For the first two decades after the state collapsed, Somali women faced new challenges arising from “conservative elements who consider women rights, gender equality and the participation of women in economic activities as anti-Islamic and contrary to Somali culture <sup>3</sup>”.

Notwithstanding the reversed progress, Somalia has witnessed significant transformations in the last few years. The end of the transition period and the adoption of the Provisional Constitution in August 2012 is a milestone for Somalia. There has been notable progress in support of women's empowerment, evidenced by efforts such as the signing and ratification of charters and protocols aimed at attaining gender equality. Moreover, the drafting of an anti-FGM (Female Genital Mutilation) bill in Somalia raises the prospect of curbing the practice, which currently affects 98% of women<sup>4</sup>.

Over time, the position of Somali women has changed in response to the various influences of culture, religion and identity. On a positive note, there has been a notable rise in the number of females represented in the civil service in recent years. Of the three hundred and thirty-seven persons employed by the Civil Service Commission in the year 2017, eighty were female.

In addition, women are increasingly being considered for high ranking positions, with thirty out of the one hundred and sixty-four persons employed in Jobs Graded A being women. There has been deliberate effort by development agencies to increase the functionality of public institutions in Somalia through efforts including the Capacity Injunction Program<sup>5</sup>. However, the absorption rate of women into empowerment programs lags relative to that of their male counterparts.

## **PREVAILING CHALLENGES**

Despite noteworthy progress in Somalia regarding the inclusion of women, major challenges remain that hinder their self-expression and capacity to excel and fulfil their potential.

The ravages of conflict continue to burden the entire country. Unfortunately, women bear an unequal brunt of the hardships that arise from the deeply enshrined clan-based culture. These include ongoing insecurity and poverty, which promote the subordination of women and the enforcement of a strictly male dominated hierarchy.

Somalia is ranked fourth in the world on the Gender Inequality Index. The inequalities that affect gender-based roles are further aggravated by the limited participation of women in politics and decision-making spheres. The judicial system currently does not serve to advocate for the rights of women, as customary, and traditional law takes preeminence across the country. This creates a scenario whereby Gender Based Violence (GBV) goes unpunished particularly because traditional Somali society does not discuss such issues.

Access to health, including maternal health and reproductive health, is limited for women in Somalia, due not only to the unavailability of health facilities in rural areas but also to security concerns about accessing those available. This is a major factor contributing to Somalia recording among the world's highest maternal mortality rates, with one in 12 women dying from pregnancy related causes<sup>6</sup>.

General literacy levels in Somalia remain low, despite the recorded rise from 22% in 2001 to 31% currently. The adult literacy rate for women is estimated at 26% in comparison to 36% for their male counterparts<sup>7</sup>. There are profound benefits associated with the ability to read and write, which include improved economic prospects, access to health care and better standards of living for families and children. Due to the low literacy levels among women, they continue to experience high rates of unemployment, with the majority working in menial jobs that involve risk, sacrifice and humiliation<sup>8</sup>. Sadly, even exceptionally well-educated and experienced women do not have the

opportunity to compete on a level playing field with their male peers when it comes to accessing employment opportunities.

Women in Somalia also remain relatively excluded from formal decision-making processes. In this regard, Somali culture does not seek to improve the situation of women, rather it serves to marginalize them. For example, it is the "*Odayaasha*", a council of traditional elders comprised of men only, that hears evidence of crimes committed against the woman, including rape; and a man must act as a representative for the woman during a hearing.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **EDUCATION FOR GIRLS**

It is essential to recognize that education is a human right, that should not be denied to anyone. Moreover, the ability to read and write is not only personally empowering, but is a necessity, especially in today's world characterized by technological advancements and globalization. Through education women are not only exposed to better opportunities but can also attain knowledge and skills to significantly enhance their capacity to make informed choices regarding their households and communities. Raising educational attainment for women can be accelerated by putting in place supportive legal frameworks, such as affirmative action policies.

### **WOMEN IN MANAGEMENT**

Qualified, experienced and hard-working women have a right to serve in high-ranking positions. This can be realized by creating an environment that is more inclusive and aware of the plight of women, whose voices have long been marginalized.

Empowering women and allowing them access to job opportunities will have a positive ripple effect on the country's reconstruction process. Improving the plight of Somali woman is highly dependent on placing champions in positions of influence to speak on behalf of marginalized women. Moreover, in the future, empowered women will serve as role models for girls and the community at large.

### **INVITE WOMEN TO PEACE TABLES**

In times of conflict and war, women and children shoulder the heavy brunt of the consequences. It is unfortunate that the most affected individuals are excluded from the peace and reconciliation process. It is essential to include women, in recognition of the differences between women's and men's perspectives. Undoubtedly, incorporating the ideas of individuals of both genders is likely to result in more impactful and well-informed decisions. An official gender quota, stating a requirement for a minimum representative number of persons from either gender, should be endorsed. This will allow women who are empowered an opportunity to advocate for the rights of women through their participation in decision-making processes.

### **STRENGTHEN JUDICIAL SYSTEMS**

It is necessary to report and act upon Gender Based Violence. Having the *Odayaasha* listen to and make decisions on cases of violence against women with a male relative acting as her representative does not result in justice for victims. Such cases should be reported to and persecuted in the courts, to ensure perpetrators are punished in accordance with the law.

### **HEALTH SERVICES**

Improved maternal services must be made available and accessible to the women in Somalia, to reduce the high mortality rates. Reproductive health education should be provided for women and girls to enable them to make informed decisions about the size of their families, so they can adequately manage, in terms of affording their children access to quality education and the provision of healthy food. The FGM bill should be passed and endorsed under the law to ensure girls and women do not lose their lives as a result of undergoing the procedure, or from associated complications during and after childbirth.

**SIPAM** is a non-partisan, independent, not-for-profit organisation focusing on public governance, policies and implementation to develop the capabilities of public officials to competently deal with major governance challenges.

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