

**Somali Women: Agents of Change**  
**The untapped pedigree of Somali women's political participation**  
**By Yasmeeen Maxamuud**  
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***“Wixii Xun ba Xaawa leh” (All that befalls a family comes from women)***

A Somali proverb

*Grim news from Somalia has become so predictable that one would expect it to include anyone of the amusing, sensational pieces that has become a feast for those who think nothing positive can come out of the horn. Although most of the news is predictably sad, Somali women seem to only make it to the pages in the most unfortunate situations. In recent months watching any news from Somalia has become intense, considering most of the major media organizations urgently landed in Mogadishu to report on the recent famine. As if that wasn't enough, we have also witnessed the countless accounts of rape against the victims of the famine. And while some of these news items may reflect the reality on the ground, it begs to question where are Somali women leaders? Except for some predictable ceremonial cabinet positions, Somali women leaders appear to have gone MIA. Somali women were firm to pacify warring factions for two decades, but Somali women have not been given their due in political gains. The following research will attempt to answer some of these questions.*

## **Introduction**

Women are often the voiceless victims of war-ravaged societies, yet they find ways to contribute peace and reconciliation. Somalia is no exception. A woman's role is usually confined within the walls of her home, reflecting a cultural reality rooted in religion. Patriarchal and lineage based traditions have limited women's participation in education, economic and politics, and have kept them out of decision-making processes.

Somali society can be described as a male dominated patrilineal and patriarchal society. Traditionally Somali women are regarded as the backbone of society, primarily because they are responsible for the biological reproduction of the lineage and interclan alliances. <sup>1</sup>A women's position in Somali society is ambiguous. When married a woman still belongs to her father's clan and her behavior can reflect on the honor of her father's lineage. Her male relatives are committed to protect her and to claim compensation if she is mistreated or murdered. On the other hand, she must be loyal and devoted to her husband's clan to which she is linked through her sons. Women in Somali society were tra-

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<sup>1</sup> Lidwen Kapteijst, Women, and the Crises of Communal Identity (Boston University Press, 1994).

ditionally not limited to participate in the official clan decision - making, because they are not a permanent member in any clan. However, they were always influential through both their affiliation to their husband at the household level and the networking capacity across clan boundaries.

There always existed a disparity in the distribution of physical and intellectual tasks between the genders. Somali women's role has been to provide all the labor necessary to ensure the daily survival of the family. In addition women were always responsible for preparing the family's meals, breeding, caring for and educating children. Intellectual and social activities were usually the domain of the men. This disparity was also reflected in educational matters. Young girls were more likely to be engaged in physical labor and domestic chores, whereas young boys had greater opportunities to develop their intellectual skills. Women's social activities were further hampered by their daily obligations, which would absorb most of their time.

Due to societal changes however, the role of the Somali women has gone through changes. State independence in 1960, as well the collapse of the state due to civil strife in 1991 has witnessed some changes in Somali women's role. The "promulgation of the family law" enacted in 1975 gave men and women equal rights in matters of marriage, divorce and inheritance. This law also promoted the equality of women in the workplace and in 1978 gave Somali women equal opportunities to participate in government and to reach positions of leadership. However, when these laws were enacted, not many women embarked on political life. Instead, a number of women started to enter the field of trade and business at all levels according to their ability to raise funds for family or other savings schemes such as *Hagbad*. Furthermore, Somali women gained a strong autonomy in business and demonstrated management capacities equivalent to that of men. Consequently, Somali women seem to have gained a new status ever since the civil war. The common opinion shared by many Somali experts, is that women have become the major breadwinners in Somalia. It is believed that 80% of the families in Somalia rely on women's income. Yet, there are a few women heads of household. Women may engage in income generating schemes because the men are unemployed. Moreover men do not undertake such activities because society may look down on them and therefore they may lose their status. There is a dichotomy in the contribution of Somali women to civil society, conflict resolution, their involvement in government, and their participation in currently functioning political systems. Additionally, the International aid community does not consult women in serious decision-making matters such as humanitarian aid contributions, although these same organizations worsen the plight of women by investing more power on clan leaders who are not as active in the betterment of society and the reconciliation process.

But despite the many forces marshaled against Somali women (their lack of financial training, of management skills and credit facilities, the absence of family and social encouragement and the weakness of early education) in urban centers, they are playing a central and expanding role in trade, finance, and NGO activities. Since the war, women have filled simultaneous roles as home managers as well as breadwinners. But they face numerous obstacles to further achievements.

## **General Literature on Women's political involvement in war times**

The writings on women's organizations in peace building demonstrate that these organizations were not founded to advance women's rights but are mainly engaged in the post conflict struggle or national struggle of a society in turmoil. In the case of the Palestinians women's organizations, writers like Orayb Aref Najjar<sup>2</sup> illustrate women's struggle by examining the national versus the gender issue. Indeed, women see their fate and rights very much tied to a Palestinian State. She further reiterates that the Palestinian women's struggle for a Palestinian state does not have the luxury of requesting changes in their legal status because they are stateless. Instead, the women's struggle in Palestine is very much intertwined and conducive to the end of Israeli occupation and to the establishment of statehood.

Since the traditional conservative Arab culture limits Women's functions to the private sphere, it has limited their involvement in public affairs. The writer further analyses the "public /private" dichotomy of western feminism, which led her to the realization that if women are neglected in the struggle and their organizations, which contribute significantly to the betterment of a society under siege are not empowered, it will be to the detriment of the society as a whole.

Najjar further explains women's organization leaders' recognition that the personal, is interlinked with the national agenda. She stresses yet again that when women organize to bring about social reform within their communities, women are engaged in politics, although society categorizes such action as social reform.

## **Poetry as Resistance**

Female writers Hassan, Adan, and Warsame trace the Somali women through the traditional roles and social awareness. They attribute the Somali woman's strength to her non-submissive nature and further illustrate how these women refused oppression throughout history by expressing their grievances and hopes through poetry handed down by generations. These three women conducted a research to study the Somali women's status in society. They discovered that although customs and traditions have limited them as women, Somali women feminism was not a borrowed western ideology, but an indigenous one. They contend while women in the West expressed their dissatisfaction in the written form, Somali feminists expressed their protests through poetry, work songs and children's lullabies. These women also formed informal networks, kinships, groups, and religious associations to strengthen themselves and fight oppression. These writers further articulate how Somali women have been ignored socially and intellectually throughout history. Somali poetry and literature, which is an important aspect of Somali life, lacks the great contributions by women. Although there were great many female poets,

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<sup>2</sup> Bystydzienski, Jill. Ed. Women Transforming Politics (Indiana University Press, 1992) 143-161

their contribution to social literature has not been mentioned much. In the same manner women's contribution in the struggle for independence has never been recognized.

It is apparent from the research conducted by these three Somali women writers, Hassan, Adan, and Warsame whose essay appears in "Subversive Women" that Somali women were fighting for their rights as early as the 1940's<sup>3</sup> against foreign occupation. In 1959 the first women's organization "the Somali Women's Association" (SWA) was formed. The leadership was composed of the wives of leaders in the political parties. Although SWA voiced women's rights, most of its activities were in the area of social welfare. After independence, the plight of Somali women continued as the newly elected leaders did little to improve the conditions of women.

"The Somali women's movement" came to live as an answer to the continued political struggle of women. Educated middle class women spearheaded the foundation of the movement and one of its major goals was to fight for the social, political, cultural and economic rights of Somali women. The fruits and ideology of this organization was short lived as the Siad Barre regime came into power in 1969. As a result of this regime's principle of scientific socialism, all political parties and organizations were dismantled. The "Somali Women's Democratic Organization" was later established by the regime. This was a governmental organization that took advantage of the government's machinery to be a vehicle in women's rights and equal justice. The organization's main objectives were the following:

- Mobilizing Somali women and raising their political awareness
- Training and expanding leadership in women's groups and the community
- Create priorities in the establishment of change

Amina M. Warsame contributes the complete absence of women from the public decision-making process due to the following:

- Clan based system of governance which does not give women a decision making position
- Male decision makers who are not eager to share a platform with women
- Conservative religious male diction which excludes women from public decision making
- Cultural perception of women as weak leaders
- Women's lack of education

Despite these existing obstacles, Warsame focuses on the hope that exists within women's organizations. She also thinks women are beginning to effect social change and female stereotyping by uniting and working together for the improvements of women's lives. Civil society organizations are achieving this objective by raising awareness

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<sup>3</sup> Saskia Wieringa, ed. Subversive Women (Zed Books, Ltd) 165-182.

through lobbying for women's rights, especially in their leadership role. It follows then that Somali Women civil society organizations would unite under one common agenda. If they were to do so they would be a force to reckon with in society if all their energies were utilized collectively. The consensus of the majority of writings in this issue is that women need to organize and be unified while accomplishing their individual objectives<sup>4</sup>.

There seems to exist a repetitiveness of the traditional role of Somali women in most of the literature on the subject. Most of the literature committed to this area rarely expands on other spheres such as the political involvement of Somali women. An essay written by Asha H. Elmi, Dekha Ibrahim, and Janice Jenner in Dorothy Hodgson's *Rethinking Pastorilsm In Africa*, investigate *Save Somali Women and Children and Wajiir Women for peace*,<sup>5</sup> two women's organizations, and their impact in society. Their essay elaborates on the strengths of the Somali female and her many roles in conflict resolution and peace making traditionally and currently.

In this essay as well as in others, we encounter women contesting injustices through *buraanbur* (the genre of women poetry). Their essay also touches on society's reluctance to accept these women into roles that are perceived as traditionally male or powerful. Once more, we encounter society's unwillingness to allow women in roles other than those passed to them traditionally. The two civil society organizations detailed here; Save Somali Women and Children and Wajiir Women for peace, emerged for the same reasons as their counterpart, but these organizations are beginning to mobilize their energies to be part of any formal negotiations that impact their communities. They are demanding with very limited success direct participation in negotiations leading to any final peace accord that may impact their community. Although forging these new roles for themselves in the face of political and social opposition remain to be seen, it is clear that Somali women are taking initiatives to redefine roles for themselves in the new Somalia.

Authors such as Alice Bettis Hashim in her book *The Fallen State*, tries to dissect the problems that have led to the deterioration of the state. Hashim tries to explain these problems by following the history of the Somali state from colonial period to the civil war era. She starts by setting forth a new paradigm that should explain the Somali situation. She elaborates on the theory of the state and ethnicity and conflict theories to explain the Somalis case. She insists, although homogenous in many aspects such as race, cultural values, language and religion, the hostility, which clans generate against each other in Somalia equals, and sometimes surpasses that of totally distinct groups. Hashim's analysis of the Somali situation entirely overlooks the role of women in the society and hardly mentions their contribution<sup>6</sup>.

Lyons and Samatar follow a similar route to Hashim's in their book *State Collapse, Multilateral Intervention and Strategies for political Reconstruction* by first ana-

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<sup>4</sup> Amina M. Warsame, *Queens Without Crowns*, (Life and Peace Institute, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> Hodgson, D. L. ed. *Rethinking Pastorilsm In Africa*, (Ohio University Press, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Hashim, A. B. *The Fallen State* (University Press Of America, 1997).

lyzing the political situation that has led to the state collapse and social disintegration. This book begins by explaining the historical basis of the Somali pastoral system. The authors further explain in great detail political norms and cultural values that are the link between society and economic structures by way of kinship ideology. The role of imperialism is also explained in light of the corrosion of the old Somali moral order. The characteristics of the generation that brought independence in Somalia is described in this book as a group seeking “rare chance to win personal profitable place”<sup>7</sup> in the new state, the biggest winner of the lot was Siad Barre, whose regime led to the civil strife of the nation. The authors dedicate a small space consisting of few lines in the whole book to articulate the Somali women’s state in society during and post civil war. They reveal that women are marginalized by the patriarchal Somali society. Although the authors do not discuss the role of Somali women in any significant detail, the small space they have committed to explain the condition of the Somali female is sufficient to point out that Somali women are paying the highest price by not being given a voice in society to help their situation. The authors come to the conclusion that these women’s need for security, democratic life, material well-being, respect, and equality takes a back seat to other issues confronting society.

One particular essay by Hilarie Kelly titled *The Potential role Of Women Groups in Reconstruction* explains how Somali women’s organized local groups, such as *Abbaya Sitti* and *Hagbad* can transcend family, clan, and even ethnic ties. Kelly strongly suggests in including women in the reconciliation process because their cooperation, particularly in terms of sharing resources and vital information is strategic for survival and improved welfare. She recommends that political leaders pay more attention to these Somali Women’s groups especially at the local level, to solve the various problems that face the nation. Kelly also points to the limitations of these women’s groups as organization with limited focus and sometimes parochial in nature. Kelly is another writer that thinks traditional roles set for women are limiting especially since these traditions do not encourage women’s decision-making abilities.<sup>8</sup>

In retrospect, Somali women are active participants of clan politics in Somalia as we speak. It is also well documented that Somali women were part of the instigation at the onset of the civil war. The poetry they have used for decades to fight against injustices and colonialism was used to support one tribe against another. In a manner of speaking, they were the cheerleaders behind the warring factions. Some were even carrying weapons and a few women warlords are also pointed out. But the time has come for Somali woman to look beyond their involvement as peace builders and think of themselves as political leaders that can lead the state to political stability. It’s disheartening that Somali women are in an apologetic mode when it comes to claiming that spot, or that they are waiting in the sidelines for their political involvement to be handed down to them, although they know better.

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<sup>7</sup> Lyons, T, and Samatar, A. *Somalia: State Collapse, Multicultural Intervention, and Strategies for Political Reconstruction* (The Brookings Institution, 1995).

<sup>8</sup> Adam, Hussien, and Ford, Richard. Ed. *Mending Rips In The Sky* (The Red Sea Press, Inc, 1997).

Since Somali women are already active in many roles in society, the bricks for their political involvement and decision-making process have already been laid. Somali women hold political capital that has not been tested before, because the international community as well as current leaders are all involved in the impasse and infighting between differing factions, warlords, and ad hoc leaders that are holding the entire country hostage. The political pedigree of Somali women has been ignored, ultimately to the detriment of society. In the 2003 talks in Kenya Somali women demanded 25% representation but were given only 12%. Ever since then every TFG administration as well as local administrations such as Somaliland and Puntland have appointed women to feel good, safe and predictable ministerial positions such as Minister of family, and Minister of Women Affairs. It's as if women have relaxed because they have been appointed to a few ceremonial ministerial posts. According to a study done by NDI although the gender quota of female participation in Somalia is 12%, in reality only 6% of Somali MPs are women. It's imperative therefore, that women are presented in all level of political spectrum and in the decision making process because Somali women's political rights are fundamental in the political framework. Studies have shown that women's participation in the political process contributes to the betterment of policies and improve the situation of society as a whole and in particular policies that strengthen family situation in society are strengthened.

### **Female heavy political participation**

Much research in the area of women in political participation shows that women legislators prioritize family sensitive legislation and they are more likely to sponsor legislation that support the betterment of family issues. It's therefore vital that Somali women have more serious, organized and cohesive political role within the executive branch of government. Governments worldwide have taken great measures to include women legislators to support women's election to high offices. And they have also increased the number of women in legislative and executive branches of government.

One of the countries that does this really well with female heavy political agenda is Sweden. Sweden has the most effective party quotas for gender mainstreaming in the participation of women in the political process. Women representation in parliament is currently at 47.3% (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2007a). Swedish women have been mobilizing to pressure political participation since the 1920s for political parties to elect more female candidates. Their efforts ever since the 1920 resulted in strengthening political parties to promote women representation in parliament until it reached 47.3%. One tactic that worked for Swedish women is when they threatened that they would form their own political party, if other political parties were not promoting their agenda to include more women in their mix. Political parties in Sweden also feared the loss of female voters which is another reason the quotas for female participants in politics are some of the highest in the world.

For Somali women it may seem futile to ask political leaders and traditional leaders to increase their political participation in all branches of government while things are

still chaotic on the ground. And since currently there are no voting systems where women in society participate to vote their leaders into office, the entire suggestion may appear ineffective. But since a cohort of international elements including donor countries such as the EU, US as well as others are mostly influential in the Somali context today, and since current leaders are usually handpicked by these powers, Somali women may seek support from these players by directly lobbying for their cause. Some general recommendations that could help women realize their political gains are:

1. There are already quota laws for Somali women to participate in all aspects of political life in Somalia. But these laws have not really been put to use. It's imperative that these laws are followed and that women participation is encouraged by leaders as well as the donor community and international players who at this time hold the power of who gets elected. Also let us keep in mind that quota laws are most effective when they have quota targets (say 30 to 40 %) mandates that guarantee women's placement in winnable positions on candidate lists as well as strong enforcement mechanisms. Countries that follow highly enforced quota laws include Costa Rica and Argentina where women legislators comprise 39%.
2. Improve campaign financing for women running for office. It's a large hurdle for women to attract financing at this time. The regular sources of funding through traditional clan leaders as well as asking backing from international donors seems a daunting task. But if there is an organized way of targeting potential backers, that can be overcome. To this end, unless lists of possible financial backers are not prepared any potential women candidate will meet many hurdles. This is one of the most important issues to handle before the idea of women candidate is ever realized.
3. Educate and train citizens of the country on the importance of gender equity. A change in consciousness at home, schools, and among women themselves remains fundamental. With this training and change in the way people think of women not only as breadwinners, domestic beings but also as political game changers contributes greatly to the success of women's participation in the political arena. Also with great awareness, citizens will demand that quota laws, and other political efforts meet with great success, in particular when citizens internalize that women are the change the country needs at this time to halt the current violence, and destruction that has been stamped on Somalia for the past two decades. Women political candidates also need to be trained and empowered on gender equity. Potential women participants need to generate a network of solidarity among women, both nationally and internationally.
4. Creating a united front. Unity need not create further division from men, which can serve as strong allies. Conferences that bring together women of different backgrounds, tribal affiliation and geographical areas, and other networking venues could serve as ways to solidify unity and solidarity with allies

from across ethnic, tribal and gender lines to increase cohesion and discuss future strategies.

## **Policy Recommendations**

The international community must realize the benefits of including women in political participation and must push for women involvement in bringing stability to the country. The United Nations fourth World Conference on women in Beijing in 1995 called for the empowerment of women and their full potential in the development of their societies and their equal opportunity to exercise leadership. But recommendations alone are not enough. In the Somali context, numerous obstacles remain to achieving parity with men. To build on past success and the gains Somali women have achieved towards gender equity in decision making the following policy recommendations are suggested:

### **1. Training and education:**

Prioritize Somali women's education and economic independence:

In order for the Somali public to meet its full potential of its citizenry, there must be an increase in the number of females in higher education. This step will ultimately broaden the pool of female candidates with qualifications and experience necessary to run and win political office. It's important to move from the thinking that women can only study in certain field and not others, therefore diversifying the field in which women get their degrees from (engineering, politics, science, economics, law, etc).

### **2. Effective gender quotas are a must:**

Gender quotas are nothing more than words on a page if they are not implemented fully. They need to specify a moderately high proportion of women (30 to 40 percent) and the quotas must include strong enforcement mechanism, which women must campaign for.

### **3. Training and educational programs for Somali women:**

If not enough Somali women consider running for political office, then the international community, NGOs, and government agencies could offer training and educational programs to women encouraging them to get involved in politics.

These are just a few recommendations in order to encourage Somali women to get involved in the political process. Women's groups, political leaders, and the international community need to promote women's equality and development in more effective ways to increase Somali women's access to the political arena. The journey to political equality is long, and while Somali women have made significant progress in different areas of society, the path to achieving these goals is long and tedious and needs the full participation of every citizen and in

particular women groups, traditional leaders and those who want to see a better, safer, more stable Somalia.

By Yasmeeen Maxamuud

Author, Nomad Diaries

Founder and Executive Director,

The Center for Bridging Communities, San Diego, California

Email: [Nomadiaries@gmail.com](mailto:Nomadiaries@gmail.com)