



Women Agency in Peace, Security, and Political Discourse in Somalia

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Pathfinders in Policy and Practice

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WOMEN'S AGENCY IN PEACE, SECURITY AND POLITICAL DISCOURSE IN SOMALIA

The Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda, established against the backdrop of the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 of 2000, calls for women's full, equal, and meaningful participation in political and peace processes. Widely considered a cornerstone in the field of women, peace, and security, UNSCR 1325 is built upon four foundational pillars: Participation, Protection, Prevention, and Relief & Recovery. Somalia provides a particularly complex setting for the realisation of this vision. Decades of civil war, state collapse, and religious and social transformations have resulted in a deeply entrenched patriarchal, clan-based political order that limits gender equality and women's participation in both politics and security decision making. Somalia consistently ranks among the world's most unequal nations, and ranked 169/177 in the 2023/24 WPS index, indicative of how far the country is from achieving the aspirations of UNSCR 1325.

This paper addresses the participation pillar of the Women, Peace, and Security agenda and looks to examine the scope of Somali women's political and security influence. It moves beyond the formal structures of parliament and cabinet to consider the range of their informal influence. It reviews both visible and less visible spheres of engagement, from women serving in parliament, security institutions, and the justice sector, to those exerting influence as mediators, fundraisers, and civic mobilisers at the community level. The analysis highlights the barriers to equality and evaluates the work of women-led civil society organisations.

Beyond Barriers: Somali Women in Politics, Security and Peacebuilding

Somali women are increasingly visible in political and security spaces, yet entrenched structural and cultural norms continue to limit their ability to influence society and politics. Somalia's society is built upon a deeply patriarchal clan system in which lineage and power are transmitted exclusively through the male line – ambiguously positioned within these kinship structures, women are often considered transient, neither belonging to their father's clan nor that of their husband¹. While this multiplicity can be an asset in building community networks, it also weakens women's claims to political representation. Traditional gender roles often confine women primarily to the domestic sphere, and those who enter public life face intense scrutiny, neglectful labelling, and a "double burden" of balancing professional and household responsibilities. Additionally, customs such as the male-run traditional justice system (*Xeer*) and conservative religious interpretations are frequently used to legitimise the exclusion of women from authority².

Formal redress, such as the 30 per cent parliamentary quota, have had limited impact as the clan elders routinely undermine it, perceiving women as peripheral to political life. Even when women attain leadership positions, they struggle with a lack of support networks, face challenges to their authority, and are pressured to conform to traditional expectations, which ultimately dilutes their effectiveness. The Federal Government itself pays lip service to gender reforms while simultaneously advancing a more conservative agenda that sidelines women; a striking example of this contradiction as recent as 2024 is the appointment of a male general to lead the Ministry of Family and Human Rights Development³. This exemplifies how gender specific portfolios can be

¹ Affi, L. (2020). *Excluding women: The clanization of Somali political institutions*. Chr. Michelsen Institute.

² Affi, L. (2020). *Excluding women: The clanization of Somali political institutions*. Chr. Michelsen Institute.

³ Horn Observer. (2024). *Shock as Somali general who oversaw women prisoners raped appointed as the new minister of human rights*.

treated as bargaining chips rather than genuine commitments to advancing women's rights or leadership.

These patterns are evident in the security sector, where women serve in the police, military, and community policing initiatives but are confined to auxiliary roles or lower ranks. The leadership positions within the armed forces and intelligence service are male dominated, reinforcing a perception that women lack authority in all matters defence and security.

Despite these barriers, Somali women continue to carve out space for influence. As attempts towards formal inclusion often pass as tokenism, Somali women have turned to activism and informal political participation to create meaningful impact on politics and peacebuilding. Beyond formal structures, women exert considerable informal influence as mediators and community “peace mothers” shaping outcomes through informal influence, moral authority and women-led civil society organisations, which continue to act as first responders and advocates in this fragile and often hostile political landscape. Somali women as the silent backbone play a crucial under-recognised role in mediating local disputes and countering violent extremism within the household among others.

Somali Women's Political Participation and Informal Influence

Contradictions mark women's political participation in Somalia, key among these include -- the contrasts between formal commitments and weak implementation; symbolic representations and limited real power; and the manner in which women's informal influences stand in opposition to their formal exclusion.

Formal Commitments and Weak Implementation

The recently ratified National Election Law of 2024 has the provision for a 30% parliamentary quota for women⁴. representative of a formal commitment to gender inclusion and participation. However, this quota is not institutionalised in Somalia's Provisional Constitution and comes after a highly controversial legal and constitutional reform process. It is widely perceived as failing to represent a genuine political settlement. It does not guarantee greater political influence and cannot, in itself, be perceived to advance the principles of the participation pillar of the WPS agenda. Entrenched patriarchal norms and the clan-based political order—the ultimate arbiters of power in Somalia—often undermine these commitments, resulting in weak implementation. In the April 2022 federal elections, only 67 women were elected to the 329-seat bicameral legislature, representing 20.37% of the total—a decline from the 24% achieved in the 2016 electoral cycle.

Structural barriers embedded in the system continue to disadvantage women, who are often considered unable to represent their clan, partly due to fears that the clan would lose its position if a female representative married outside her birth clan⁵. Whilst the quota still remains unmet, a handful of women are beginning to break through the glass ceiling and be entrusted with key leadership positions. This represents a modest and symbolic improvement, but it does not mean women leaders exercise real influence over decision-making.

Subnational contexts often mirror the federal experience. While there are signs of progress, women's political participation at the state level remains limited and varies significantly between

⁴ Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2016). [Somalia](#): House of the People (People's Assembly).

⁵ Affi, L. (2020). [Excluding women: The clanization of Somali political institutions](#). Chr. Michelsen Institute.

regions. In Puntland only one female MP out of 66 was elected in 2024⁶. Similarly, in the newly formed Northeast State, only four women were elected, although the first deputy speaker – a position that is ostensibly influential – is a woman⁷. Despite these modest gains, women remain underrepresented in the cabinets and are rarely appointed to senior security or finance portfolios. This pattern is, however, not uniform across all states: in Southwest State, Jubaland, and Hirshabelle, women hold multiple ministerial and deputy ministerial positions despite low numbers in legislative assemblies.

At the local level, the same patterns repeat. The Wadajir Framework for Local Governance (2016) set out a process for forming District Councils that should connect communities to the state⁸. Civil society and international partners have sometimes succeeded in ensuring that women occupy roughly 30 percent of seats in these councils, yet many of these women are regarded as placeholders for more powerful male figures and rarely shape substantive policy.

Efforts by local civil society organisations to institutionalise quotas face resistance from clan elders who dominate clan selection. Another challenge is that many elected women are diaspora members whose frequent travel and limited local engagement hinder their political impact, highlighting difficulties in integrating representatives who are not locally based.

Though Somaliland operates under a different political framework with relatively stable democratic institutions, women's political representation remains strikingly low. Only one woman was elected to the 82 seat House of Representatives in Somaliland's most recent parliamentary and local council elections in 2021⁹, despite women constituting over 50% of the voters. Women fared slightly better at the local council level but still fell short of the 30% target. Proposals to introduce a formal quota have repeatedly stalled in the face of opposition from male elders, politicians, and religious leaders. As in the federal context, women's participation in high-level decision-making on vital portfolios such as security and finance remains minimal.

Looking ahead, the proposed One-Person-One-Vote (OPOV) elections scheduled for 2026 may further frustrate the realisation of the quota at the grassroots level, as entrenched social norms and the dominance of clan-based political networks across the federal member states continue to restrict women's meaningful participation in Somali politics. This gap between formal policy and political reality underpins the structural constraints that continue to restrict women's access to meaningful roles in Somali politics and public institutions.

⁶ Horn Observer. (2024). *Gender disparity persists as 66 newly sworn-in Puntland lawmakers include just one woman*.

⁷ The East African. (2025). *Amran: First female deputy speaker in Somalia's Northeast State*.

⁸ Mohamed, M. A. (Burtinle), & Samantar, M. S. (2019). Factors influencing women participation in politics at federal, state and local elections in Puntland State of Somalia. *International Journal of Contemporary Applied Researches*, 6(5).

⁹ African Arguments. (2022). *How did Somaliland end up with zero female MPs?*

Federal Member State	Total MPs	Female MPs	Women in Leadership/Ministerial Roles
Jubaland	75	8	1 Women's Caucus leader, 3 ministers, 1 deputy minister
Southwest State	94	13	2 ministers, 2 deputy ministers
Hirshabelle	90	8	2 ministers, 3 deputy ministers
Galmudug	89	8	1 minister
Northeastern State	83	4	1 deputy speaker of parliament
Puntland	66	1	6 (in 3 the executive cabinet and 3 deputy)

Women's current representation in the parliamentary and cabinet position in Somalia at the federal members states

Symbolic Representation and Limited Real Power

Women are increasingly present in parliamentary seats and committees. In the bicameral federal parliament, for example, data from 2025 shows that 7 of the 22 sub committees are chaired by women¹⁰. Yet they remain excluded from influential portfolios such as national security, defence, and finance which are exclusively all-male. This exclusion is mirrored in the executive branch where, as of September 2025, there is only one woman¹¹ – the Minister of Women and Human Rights – serving in the 25 Member cabinet under the Prime Minister, with eight others serving in deputy or state minister positions¹². Notably, no woman occupies senior bureaucratic posts such as the director-general positions which are considered highly powerful and instrumental in shaping policy within ministries. Because draft legislation is normally developed inside line ministries such as Defence, Finance, or Internal Security—where women are largely absent—their perspectives rarely shape policy until after key decisions have been made. While visible in numbers, women's absence from these strategic spaces underscores a significant invisibility in actual influence.

This exclusion also reflects deeper structural and ideological barriers. Powerful Islamist movements and conservative religious actors are instrumental in shaping Somalia's political culture, reinforcing patriarchal norms that confine women to "soft" portfolios while reserving the influential ones for men. This influence also manifests in the legislative arena, where proposed gender equality reforms have met resistance on religious and cultural grounds. During the Mohamed Abdullahi Farmaajo administration (2016 - 2022), for instance, a gender equality bill (*see case study below*) briefly raised hopes but stalled in the face of such ideological opposition. In this case, women's symbolic visibility does not translate into substantive influence, as structural and ideological gatekeepers maintain firm control over the most consequential areas of governance.

These dynamics are likely to extend into political parties as well. The newly launched Justice and Solidarity Party (JSP) party, for instance, mirrors the same patterns; the senior leadership positions are male dominated, and the women have been relegated to supportive roles. This demonstrates how even new political initiatives reproduce old hierarchies, constraining women's potential to exercise real power and influence within Somalia's evolving political order.

¹⁰ Chocron, E. (2022). *Somalia: Parliamentary and presidential elections 2022*. Make Every Woman Count (MEWC).

¹¹ Mustaqbal Media. (2022). *Khadijja Al-Makhsuumi, the only female among Somalia's 25 cabinet ministers*.

¹² UN Women. (2025). *Women in politics: 2025*.

Collective women's agency has been instrumental in transforming Somali political spaces. A prime example of this occurred during the fragile peace talks at the Somali National Peace Conference in Arta in 2000. Drawing on an in-depth understanding of clan dynamics, Asha Haji Elmi and other women activists successfully co-founded the 'Sixth Clan,' a movement that lobbied for a parliamentary quota for women¹³. This achievement was a landmark victory; it provided the first formal space for women in Somali politics and laid the groundwork for advancing the 30% parliamentary representation quota. This shows how women have effectively coordinated their informal influence to drive systemic change, even within deeply entrenched patriarchal and clan-based structures. This political influence is inseparable from their economic power. Somali women are the backbone of the nation's economy, driving critical sectors like agriculture and entrepreneurship. Furthermore, they contribute significantly to political financing, yet they are not at the forefront of leadership, and their real contribution is rarely understood. This disconnect—where women power the economy and finance political processes informally while being formally excluded from leadership—highlights a critical gap in understanding their real influence in the country.

Though Somali women leaders combine formal authority with informal leverage, entrenched politics and conservative religious ideologies limit their ability to turn such positioning into lasting influence. Fadumo Dayib's 2016 presidential bid¹⁴ lacked real prospects of success as she did not invest in a structured campaign – reportedly because she was sure of failure due to stringent traditional norms coupled with conservative religious influences, but nevertheless helped to symbolically expand the horizons of women's political engagement. Building on this precedent, Fawzia Yusuf H. Adam leveraging her experience as Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, contested the 2022 presidency and later pursued the 2024 African Union Commission (AUC) Chairperson role, mobilising national and international networks. Her subsequent withdrawal under pressure from Somali political elites¹⁵ underscores how women's informal influence remains vulnerable to patriarchal and clan-based structures that ultimately gatekeep formal authority.

Political violence and intimidation against women in Somali politics is also a reality that creates a hostile environment and discourages participation. Women in politics risk facing psychological and verbal abuse, threats from clan elders and political rivals, and, in some instances, lethal violence. The killing of activist Almaas Elman Ali in 2019¹⁶ inside the heavily fortified airport compound—though attributed to a 'stray bullet'—was widely perceived as politically motivated, given her peacebuilding activism. Similarly, the assassination of Hibaq Abukar, Head of the Women Affairs Department of the Prime Minister's Office and a parliamentary candidate, in a 2021 suicide car bomb claimed by Al-Shabaab¹⁷ underscores the acute risks women face as visible and vocal participants in political life.

¹³ Jama, F. (2010). *Somali women and peacebuilding*. In *Accord Issue 21: Somalia: The Invisible Conflict*. Conciliation Resources.

¹⁴ ABC News. (2016). [*Fadumo Dayib: 44yo refugee-turned-academic is the first female in Somalia's history to run for president*](#).

¹⁵ Hiiraan Online. (2024). [*Former Somali minister withdraws candidacy for AU Commission Chairperson election*](#).

¹⁶ Durosomo, D. (2019). [*Prominent Somali activist Almas Elman shot and killed in Mogadishu*](#). OkayAfrica.

¹⁷ Somaliguadian. (2021). [*Senior official at Somali PM's office among 8 dead in suicide car bomb*](#).

Women Participation in Somalia's Security Sector: Linking the Women Peace and Security Agenda

The WPS agenda highlights the need for women to be included at all levels of decision-making in peace and security institutions. In Somalia's security institutions, the idea that gender-balanced representation improves operational effectiveness faces significant constraints. The military, intelligence, and police are male-dominated spaces in which women cannot easily access leadership and frontline roles, reflecting societal norms that designate security as a male domain.

The military, police, and intelligence services are male-dominated, with leadership and frontline roles particularly inaccessible to women. Those who seek visibility in these traditionally male spheres often face accusations of transgressing cultural norms or violating religious propriety¹⁸. Resistance is also articulated through narratives of “protection” and “purity”, with clan elders and families contending that women lack the physical or moral disposition for command or combat. Public security roles, especially those involving weapons or confrontation, are widely regarded as inappropriate or unsafe for women, and opposition from family or clan members frequently deters women from pursuing these careers¹⁹.

Structural and contextual challenges work hand in hand to constrain the participation of women in security institutions. The convergence of protracted humanitarian crises, environmental degradation, active conflict, threats from extremist groups such as Al-Shabaab among others, affect both recruitment and retention. Economic survival is a key driver for many women – particularly those from internally displaced persons (IDP) camps -- to join security forces. Retention in these institutions is then hampered by psychological stress, lack of gender-sensitive facilities, including lack of fitting uniform, and heightened security risks, reflecting broader structural and institutional barriers to women's full participation.²⁰

Al-Shabaab often exploits systemic vulnerabilities to reinforce discrimination against women. It targets female recruits and portrays women in security roles as morally transgressive or clan traitors. The group leverages patriarchal narratives to discourage families and communities from supporting women's entry into the sector. In its propaganda women in uniform are portrayed as undermining religious and cultural norms, thereby creating a stigma that isolates women within security institutions. The group has in the past attacked female officials and police, so as to weaponise fear and drive women out of public life. This interplay of systemic exclusion alongside targeted intimidation means that women in Somali security forces carry a “double burden”: fighting not only violent extremism but also entrenched structural and cultural barriers within their own institutions and communities.

Policing Sector

Efforts to expand women's participation in Somalia's security institutions are most visible within the Somali Police Force (SPF), particularly at the state level. While representation remains modest and uneven, there are signs of gradual progress. According to the 2023 UNDP Somalia Rule-of-Law and Human Rights Annual Report, a graduating class in Galmudug included 400 new recruits, of whom 64 were women – roughly 16%– marking a significant improvement in women's

¹⁸ UN Women. (2019). *Assessment of Somalia women's movement (1980–2018)*.

¹⁹ UN Women. (2019). *Assessment of Somalia women's movement (1980–2018)*.

²⁰ Sahar Interview with security expert based in Kismayo, September 2025

inclusion²¹. During the establishment of the federal police forces in Jubaland, South West State and Hirshabelle between that began around 2016, women inclusion ranged from between 4-8% and has continued to grow in the years since through donor support²². For example, in 2023 in Jubaland's police recruitment, of the 151 new regional police recruited, 20 were women²³.

The SPF has recruited women into a range of operational and specialist roles, including community policing, gender-based violence (GBV) desks, and traffic units, while some are also joining armed units. Yet women remain a minority and are frequently channelled into gender-labelled portfolios rather than mainstream command structures. In 2018, Brigadier General Zakia Hussein Ahmed became the first woman to ever achieve the Brigadier General rank in the history of Somalia's security forces²⁴, challenging entrenched cultural norms and offering a visible precedent for women aspiring to senior posts. She established the first all-female armed special forces unit and the 50-member all-female unit which was integrated into the Haramcad (Cheetah) Special Police Unit, and trained in Turkey under a bilateral security cooperation agreement²⁵. The establishment of this unit is a significant step for gender integration in the country's security sector. In Somaliland, female police officers have similarly played an important role in safeguarding voters – particularly women – during elections, contributing to more inclusive and accessible electoral processes.

At the institutional level, women police officers are increasingly deployed to specialised GBV desks, which operate across federal and regional structures. These desks were established to provide survivor-centred services, build trust between communities and law enforcement, and strengthen reporting and prosecution of sexual and gender-based crimes. Impact remains constrained due to lack of specialised prosecutors, judicial pathways, and logistical support. Further, police stations are often under-resourced and under-equipped, limiting their ability to respond effectively to GBV cases. Essential investigative tools such as DNA testing are rarely available, and literacy gaps among some female officers further impede evidence documentation. These shortcomings undermine the effectiveness of gender-sensitive policing, even as demand for such services grows²⁶.

Military

Somali women have a longstanding history of military service, most notably during the Ogaden War under the Siad Barre regime, when they played crucial logistical roles²⁷. In today's reconstituted Somali National Army (SNA) and its elite components, women's participation is more visible than in the past, though still far from parity. Early in September 2025, the government reported – although this has been disputed by many online – that for the first time in Somalia's history, eleven women graduated as officers from the Türkiye-Somalia military academy in

²¹ United Nations Development Programme. (2023). *Rule of Law and Human Rights Global Programme – [Somalia: Key results 2023](#)*.

²² Sahan Interview with gender expert based in Mogadishu, September 2025

²³ African Union Transition Mission in Somalia. (2023, February 21). *Jubaland boosts police force with 151 new graduates*. ATMIS. <https://atmis-au.org/so/jubaland-boosts-police-force-with-151-new-graduates/>

²⁴ Al Jazeera. (2022). *The Somali general fighting al-Shabab and the patriarchy*. *Al Jazeera*.

²⁵ Horn Observer. (2021). *Turkey trains first batch of Somali women police unit*.

²⁶ United Nations Office for Project Services. (2022). *A summary of research to inform area-based problem-driven security and justice programming in Somalia*. Somalia Security and Justice Programme.

²⁷ Van Hauwermeiren, R., (2012) "The Ogaden War: Somali women's roles", *Afrika Focus* 25(2). doi: <https://doi.org/10.21825/af.v25i2.4944>

Mogadishu, and will now serve across the Army, Navy, and Air Force. The U.S.-backed Danab Brigade has also integrated women, primarily in non-frontline, technical, and support capacities.

Women participation in regional militias and clan-based forces such as the Ma'awisley, is limited to logistical and morale support with limited recognition, and few opportunities for advancement. Leadership positions for women are rare, and those who succeed often do so against entrenched barriers. A prominent example is Lieutenant Colonel Iman Elman, a former refugee who returned to Somalia and now serves as a divisional commander responsible for hundreds of soldiers in active operations²⁸.

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National Intelligence Service

Though female personnel in the National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA) are less visible, they play an important role, despite being high-value targets for extremist threats. This is most evident in the high-profile unresolved abduction and killing of Ikran Tahlil Farah, a NISA officer whose murder in 2021 triggered public outcry after NISA blamed Al-Shabaab, only for the group to deny responsibility and accuse the agency itself²⁹.

Female intelligence personnel are often deployed in intelligence gathering, analysis, administration, and human resources—roles that, while less conspicuous, are central to the agency's functioning³⁰. Somali women's social roles within communities give them distinct operational advantages for intelligence collection and trust-building that are now increasingly recognised. Socially conditioned norms make women less likely to be perceived as immediate security threats in many conservative settings, allowing them access to private or gender-segregated spaces from which men are excluded³¹. These settings often serve as critical hubs for human intelligence, where information on displacement, local grievances, recruitment attempts, or early warnings is exchanged.

Civil Society and Grassroots Activism

As formal institutions continue to lag in enforcement, oversight, and sustained commitment, Somali Women-Led Organisations (WLOs) have become central in advancing the WPS agenda. Operating in one of the most hostile and politically conservative contexts, these organisations navigate significant structural and security constraints. Their work is often viewed with suspicion or outright resistance by traditional elders who perceive women's activism as a challenge to

²⁸ Centre on International Cooperation. (2020). [The Somali soldier fighting for gender equality](#). *Medium*.

²⁹ Hiiraan Online. (2021). [Al-Shabaab distance themselves from the abduction and killing of Ikram Farah](#). *Hiiraan Online*.

³⁰ Martin, A. J. (2015). America's evolution of women and their roles in the intelligence community. *Journal of Strategic Security*, 8(3 Suppl.), 99–109. <https://doi.org/10.5038/194>

³¹ Rossman, L. (2024). *Applying women, peace, and security in the intelligence community: Integrating gendered perspectives into intelligence analysis* (Master's thesis, Harvard University).

entrenched patriarchal authority. They rely almost exclusively on short-term, project-based international funding and lack the flexible core funding needed for sustainability³².

Despite this, WLOs have demonstrated measurable impact at the community level, through grassroots peace networks, they provide mediation, conflict resolution, and early warning functions, often reaching areas inaccessible to formal institutions. Launched in mid 2023, under the Joint UN Programme on Women, Peace and Protection, Somali Women Peace Network (SWPN) now operates across 17 districts, bringing together more than 250 women peacebuilders from diverse backgrounds, including displaced women, women with disabilities, youth, business leaders, and members of local administrations³³. The network conducts mediation, facilitates community dialogues and promotes women's leadership, bridging the link between informal and formal peace structures.

Despite these successes at the community level, WLOs continue to face the same structural threats that constrain wider civil society in Somalia, including security and access constraints and clan dynamics that hinder the delivery of unbiased support to vulnerable women. Many of them are led by either a single individual or individuals from certain clans or affiliations that influence their ability to provide support among a cross-section of communities in Somalia. In very rare incidences in Baidoa and Kismayo, however, communities report cases where several CSO joined hands to unify and amplify their message across different levels of authority within the federal state and have reported positive reception as opposed to when each organization operated individually³⁴.

Grassroots to Governance

One of the most intractable structural challenges facing WLOs is the profound disconnect with national decision-making. High-level political and security decisions are frequently taken with little to no consultation of local WLOs or affected communities, undermining community-level peacebuilding work and contributing to a mismatch between national policy and grassroots priorities. To bridge this gap, WLOs themselves have identified critical capacity-building needs. Beyond funding, they require support in financial management and grant writing, advocacy and policy engagement, and digital security. Crucially, women activists emphasise the need for widespread civic education for women and their communities on their political rights and processes like the Delegated Constituency Fund to help them resist societal pressures. They also highlight creating stronger networks among women to share information, organize resources for female candidates, and collectively advocate for their rights. An important strategy identified is the need to engage elders and communities using religious justifications for women's inclusion, an approach that was effective in enhancing women's participation in the Jubaland parliament³⁵.

UNSCR 1325, National Frameworks and Women's Access to Justice

UNSCR 1325 challenges a history of exclusion and underrepresentation in governance and peacebuilding. It culminated from efforts of global coalitions of women-led civil society organisations lobbying the United Nations to enshrine women's inclusion in peace and security.

³² Saferworld. (2022). *Supporting civil society and women's rights organisations in fragile and conflict-affected contexts: Somalia report*.

³³ United Nations Development Programme. (2025). *Somali Women's Peace Network has shifted norms, cemented women's place in peacebuilding*. Medium.

³⁴ Sahan Interview with a gender expert in Somalia, September 2025

³⁵ Sahan Interview with a gender expert in Somalia, September 2025

The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda has since guided countries worldwide to develop National Action Plans (NAPs) as instruments to operationalise these commitments.

Somalia became the 99th country to adopt a NAP in 2022³⁶, embedding WPS principles within its policy frameworks. Key milestones included the 2019 Somali Women's Convention³⁷, where government, parliament, and civil society leaders pledged to implement the Somali Women's Charter and align national priorities with the WPS agenda. These initiatives articulated bold commitments on equal participation and protection of women's rights, yet the translation of frameworks into reality has been fraught with setbacks.

Years of advocacy on women's representation have yielded limited progress. Legal and institutional reforms have been introduced but often lack enforcement, leaving them symbolic. Political will has also proved inconsistent, and at times regressive. During the constitutional review process in early 2024, proposals were tabled to lower the age of maturity to 15, exposing girls to heightened risks of child marriage, and to define majority by physical rather than intellectual or emotional maturity—contravening international standards. Though rejected, these proposals underscored the fragility of women's rights in Somalia's political discourse.

On 30 March 2024, parliament approved amendments to the first four chapters of the provisional constitution. While these included a commitment to enabling legislation for a 30 percent women's quota, critical provisions were sidelined—notably women's right to pass citizenship to their children and guaranteed representation across all legislative assemblies. Sustained advocacy by the Women's Parliamentary Caucus secured a November 2024 amendment to the Electoral Law to provide for a 30 percent quota for women. Yet its exclusion from the constitutional framework leaves it vulnerable to reversal, perpetuating a cycle of temporary gains and structural setbacks that reflects a deeper absence of genuine political commitment.

The difficulties in translating women's rights frameworks into practice are starkly illustrated by the stalled Sexual Offences Bill (SOB)³⁸. First approved by the Cabinet in 2018, the bill aimed to strengthen legal protections against sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). However, fierce resistance from conservative MPs and religious leaders has trapped it in legislative limbo. In its absence, survivors are forced to navigate a fragmented and often hostile justice system.

Under Xeer, Somalia's customary system, SGBV is not treated as a crime against the individual but as a dispute between clans, with settlements often involving compensation (diya) or forced marriage of the survivor to her attacker – outcomes that perpetuate cycles of harm. The semi-formal Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) system, supported by the UN, now handles around 70 per cent of disputes in regions like Southwest State³⁹. While ADR offers some recourse—such as referring confirmed rape cases to district courts—its limited scope leaves most survivors without justice.

³⁶ UN Women. (2023). [Somalia launches National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325 for women and security](#). UN Women Africa.

³⁷ Ministry of Women and Human Rights Development, Federal Government of Somalia. (2020). [The Somali Women's Charter and the Women, Peace and Security Agenda: Synergies and next steps for implementation](#).

³⁸ SIHA Network. (2023). [Joint civil society statement: SGBV increasing while lawmakers let the SOB and SOA gather dust on the shelves](#).

³⁹ International Development Law Organization. (2021). [Accessing justice: Somalia's alternative dispute resolution centers](#).

Those who do reach the formal judiciary encounter further barriers. Convictions under Sharia law require four male witnesses, a standard that excludes most cases. Though DNA evidence is technically admissible, Somalia's only forensic laboratory, opened in Garowe in 2017, requires samples within three hours of an incident⁴⁰ – a logistical impossibility in most contexts. The result is a justice system where impunity prevails and where international commitments, constitutional amendments, and draft legislation remain disconnected from women's lived realities.

Recommendations

- **Organise women's Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and Women-Led Organizations (WLOs) into coalitions and groups rather than each acting alone.** This structure will facilitate the development of common positions on key issues and allow for unified advocacy with political leaders, significantly strengthening their influence on policy.
- **Leverage Strategic Appointments to Build a Case for Women's Leadership.** International partners should strategically advocate for and support the appointment of Somali women to key, visible leadership positions within government and security institutions. This approach moves beyond general capacity-building to create high-profile success stories that build donor confidence and generate a powerful "ripple effect" within Somali society. The appointment of women to high-stakes roles serves as a direct and compelling demonstration of their capabilities, countering entrenched patriarchal norms that question their leadership abilities. When women in these positions perform well, they not only achieve significant outcomes but also build confidence among international donors and partners.
- **Amplify and Legitimize Women's 'Behind-the-Scenes' Influence.** International partners should develop programs that intentionally make visible, resource, and legitimise the substantial "behind-the-scenes" influence Somali women already wield in the informal economic, political, and social spheres. The WPS report confirms that the informal sphere is the "true locus of their power," where they act as critical peacebuilders, fundraisers, and strategic mobilizers who navigate complex clan dynamics. Focusing on this existing influence provides a powerful, culturally-rooted pathway to advancing the WPS agenda.
- **Commission a Political Economy Analysis Focused on Women's Informal Power.** International partners should commission a targeted political economy analysis to map, document, and assess the "behind-the-scenes" contributions of Somali women. This in-depth study would focus on their roles as economic actors, political strategists, and community peacebuilders to build a clear evidence base of their actual influence, allowing for more strategic and effective programming to advance the WPS agenda.

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⁴⁰ Voice of America. (2017). [*Somalia gets first forensic lab dedicated to rape investigation.*](#)