



POLICY BRIEF

The Role of Women in Development and State-Building Despite the Challenges of Somaliland's Lack of International Recognition

March 2026

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Laasgeel Institute for Policy Studies and Research Analysis (LIPS) is an independent think tank that promotes good governance, democratic institutions, and advocates for Somaliland's recognition through research, policy analysis, and strategic advocacy aimed at informing Somaliland's decision-makers



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1. Executive Summary

Women in Somaliland have played a critical role in rebuilding the country's political stability, economic resilience, and social cohesion since the restoration of its sovereignty in 1991. Despite the constraints created by Somaliland's limited international recognition, women continue to contribute significantly to peacebuilding, entrepreneurship, governance, education, and healthcare.

Women were instrumental in reconciliation processes that helped restore peace following the collapse of Somalia's central government. They remain central actors in the informal economy and the emerging entrepreneurial sector, while also increasingly participating in public institutions and national security services.

Civil society organizations have played a crucial role in advancing gender equality and leadership opportunities. Networks such as NAFIS Network, NAGAAD Network, SIRAAD Initiative, Kaaba Network, the Network of Women Organizations (NOW), the Voice of Somaliland Minority Women Organization (VOSOMWO), WERIS Somaliland, and HUDA Women Empowerment Organization have strengthened women's advocacy, leadership, and social participation.

However, Somaliland's lack of international recognition continues to restrict access to global funding opportunities, academic exchanges, and professional development programs. Addressing these structural barriers would significantly enhance the capacity of Somaliland women to contribute to national development and global engagement.

2. Introduction

Behind every thriving society are women whose contributions to education, advocacy, and leadership are crucial to promoting social change and national progress. Women play a vital role in shaping the social, economic, and political development of societies worldwide. In Somaliland, women have made substantial contributions to state-building, peacebuilding, and economic development despite the country's lack of international recognition (Bradbury, 2008; Walls, 2009).

Since the restoration of Somaliland's sovereignty in 1991, women have actively participated in rebuilding political institutions and strengthening social cohesion. Their engagement spans multiple sectors, including governance, entrepreneurship, civil society activism, education, and healthcare. Despite limited international engagement due to Somaliland's political status, women continue to serve as important agents of social transformation.

Recognizing the importance of women in national development, the President of the Republic of Somaliland, Abdirahman Mohamed Abdullahi (Cirro), reaffirmed their central role during the official celebration of International Women's Day. He stated:

“Women are the backbone of our society, economy, and the very existence of our nation. They have played an unforgettable role in rebuilding our country from challenging times and in the re-establishment of our government” (Horn Diplomat, 2024).

The President further emphasized his vision for greater female participation in governance and economic development while maintaining respect for Somaliland's cultural and Islamic values.

3. Women in State-Building and Peacebuilding

Women played an essential role in Somaliland's peacebuilding process following the collapse of Somalia's regime government in 1991. During this period, the region experienced widespread conflict and social fragmentation that required extensive reconciliation efforts.

Women participated in numerous community-level initiatives and were involved in the 33 reconciliation conferences that helped restore stability and political dialogue (Walls, 2009).

Through community mobilization, mediation between clans, and symbolic peace initiatives such as traditional songs and gatherings, women helped rebuild trust among divided communities.

These grassroots peacebuilding efforts contributed significantly to the foundations of Somaliland's current political stability and governance system (Bradbury, 2008).

4. Women's Contribution to Economic Development

Women play a central role in Somaliland's economic development, particularly within the informal economy and small-scale entrepreneurship. Many women operate small businesses, participate in cross-border trade, and work as street vendors in urban markets.

Street vendors in cities such as Hargeisa demonstrate resilience despite facing challenges, including limited access to credit, business training, and financial services. Their economic activities contribute significantly to local markets and municipal revenue generation (SIHA Network, 2018).

Somaliland women have also demonstrated strong entrepreneurial capacity both domestically and within the diaspora. One notable example is Amina Hersi Moghe, a prominent Somaliland-born businesswoman and Chief Executive Officer of Horyaal Investments. She has invested in

major projects such as the Oasis Mall in Kampala and the Atiak Sugar Factory in Uganda, employing thousands of people across the region.

Another example is Laila Omar, founder of Jumeirah Coffee in Hargeisa. The café has become a popular social and cultural hub while also creating employment opportunities for young Somalilanders and contributing to the domestic service economy

5. Civil Society and Women's Empowerment

Civil society organizations play an important role in strengthening women's participation in development and governance. These organizations promote gender equality, leadership development, and advocacy for women's rights.

Prominent organizations include NAFIS Network, which focuses on combating gender-based violence and harmful practices through advocacy and education, and NAGAAD Network, a coalition of women's organizations that works to advance women's rights and eliminate harmful practices such as female genital mutilation.

Other initiatives include the SIRAAD Initiative, which promotes mentorship and leadership development for young women, and the Kaaba Network, which supports community engagement and capacity-building programs.

Additional organizations include the Network of Women Organizations (NOW), which promotes women's participation in governance; the Voice of Somaliland Minority Women Organization (VOSOMWO), which advocates for the rights of minority women; WERIS Somaliland, which promotes gender equality and social protection; and HUDA Women Empowerment Organization, which focuses on education, mentorship, and leadership development.

Collectively, these organizations play a pivotal role in amplifying women's voices and fostering social transformation throughout Somaliland. Their initiatives not only support individual women but also contribute to broader societal change by challenging traditional norms and promoting inclusive development

6. Women's Political Participation and Leadership

Although women have made important contributions to governance and public administration, their representation in elected institutions such as parliament and local councils remains limited (Hassan-King, 2020).

The research indicates that women's political participation in Somaliland is constrained by several structural and cultural barriers. These include deeply rooted social norms, institutional barriers within political systems, and financial constraints that make it difficult for female candidates to compete effectively in elections. Psychological factors, such as reduced political confidence and limited access to political networks, also contribute to lower levels of female participation (Bade, 2024).

However, the same research highlights that higher education, strong support networks, and strategic political planning can significantly increase women's political engagement and leadership opportunities (Bade, 2024).

Despite these challenges, women are increasingly holding leadership positions in government institutions. Under the administration of President Abdirahman Mohamed Abdullahi (Cirro), women serve as ministers, deputy ministers, and advisors on women's affairs.

Women are also gaining leadership roles in national security institutions, including the police, military, coast guard, and immigration services.

Examples include:

Colonel Hibo Salah, a senior officer in the Somaliland Police Force

Captain Deqa Mohamoud, a military officer serving in the Sanaag region

Captain Suhuur, Chief Training Officer in the Somaliland Coast Guard

These examples illustrate the gradual expansion of women's leadership roles in both civilian governance and national security institutions

6. Women in Education and Healthcare

As teachers and educators, women shape the future generation by promoting knowledge, leadership, and social development. Female teachers also serve as important role models, encouraging young girls to pursue education and professional careers (Ahmed, 2019).

Women also play a significant role in the education and healthcare sectors across Somaliland. As teachers and educators, women contribute to shaping the next generation by promoting knowledge, leadership, and social development (Ahmed, 2019). Female teachers serve as important role models who encourage young girls to pursue education and professional careers.

In healthcare, women have made major contributions to improving maternal and child health services. One of the most prominent figures is Dr. Edna Aden Ismail, founder of Edna Aden Hospital, who has trained thousands of healthcare professionals and received international recognition for her contributions to maternal health.

Another influential figure is Dr. Faadumo Osman, founder of the Burao College of Health Sciences, which has trained many women as maternal and child health educators.

Despite these achievements, many women face challenges accessing international scholarships, research collaboration, and professional training opportunities due to Somaliland's lack of international recognition

7. Policy Recommendations

To strengthen women's contributions to national development, policymakers should prioritize the following actions:

- To strengthen women's contributions to national development, policymakers should prioritize:
- Expanding women's representation in elected political institutions.
- Increasing financial and technical support for women entrepreneurs.
- Strengthening civil society organizations promoting gender equality.
- Expanding education and professional development opportunities for women.
- Enhancing international partnerships that support women's development

8. Conclusion

Despite Somaliland's lack of international recognition, women remain at the forefront of the country's state-building, economic development, education, and political leadership. Their resilience, innovation, and commitment have been essential in promoting social cohesion, advancing governance, and driving economic growth. Yet structural barriers, such as limited access to funding, professional training, and international exchange programs, continue to constrain their full potential.

Recognizing Somaliland would not only address the long-standing political marginalization of its six million people but would also empower women to contribute more effectively to national development, unlocking sustainable prosperity and reinforcing Somaliland's role as a resilient and inclusive state. Supporting women's empowerment is therefore not only a matter of equity but a strategic investment in the nation's future.



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