

## #Somaliland women discuss their view of leadership

*As presented at a recent LSE Africa seminar series, SOAS's Siham Rayale discusses what leadership means to the women of Somaliland.*

Women in Somaliland have taken on leadership positions in novel ways since the end of the civil war. They have translated their participation during the early peace process into leaders of civil society organisations, political institutions, and grassroots campaigners for women's rights such as the buying, selling and exporting of meat more specifically.



The sole female member of the 82-strong Guurti, the upper chamber of the Somaliland parliament, resigned her post in March 2013

This is important, not to say that Somali women have never occupied leadership positions before, because many are seen as traditional male roles and functions. Cultural influences on women and men's roles in society are still very powerful. Leadership in Somali society is often through clan membership and elders. Women were excluded from both, but that is changing. One example was Fadumo Jama Eleye, the only female member of the Guurti (upper house) in the Somaliland parliament, who **resigned** her post three weeks ago.

"Opening any door is a lot of work and I dealt with the challenges associated with my position," Fadumo Jame Eleye told me.

"But my presence was necessary for women to become trailblazers. Men now see that women are just as capable. Whereas before they said 'this is not our culture' now with hard work, I'm beginning to find acceptance."

Even if a woman secured a political position in Somaliland, a woman engaging in politics is still a relatively new phenomenon. It is also very demanding as one female MP remarked, "Women should work to gain positions in local councils because they could stay in their home towns and not move to the capital (Hargeisa) and still look after their children. It is difficult to maintain political positions without making sacrifices and women will not sacrifice their family." Leadership is not a quality that can be isolated from the demands of motherhood. Leadership embodied every aspect of women's decision-making about their daily lives in Somaliland.

Women are merely trying to find their own solutions to everyday problems, some through influencing political decision-making, others through civil society, and others through establishing women-owned cooperatives. Many of the women I have spoken to often regard their lack of gains in political positions as a problem; at the very least women's views and voices need to be taken into account.

When I asked for solutions to issues women face in securing leadership positions or simply gaining greater independence over their daily decision-making capabilities, many women said to me, "Women need to become more educated, especially about what rights Islam has already given women, inalienable rights. Culture is our biggest enemy and right now the Somali culture does not recognise women as leaders."

Nearly every single woman I spoke to reiterated this to me, "Islam gave them more power and culture is what men use to take it away from them."

One activist remarked that women have taken up new roles in order to survive. I saw this on many occasions. The definition of leadership for women means a lot of different things. It means taking ownership over the economic security of the family; gaining an education to improve their livelihoods; it means helping other women gain access to justice.

Among the biggest challenges facing women hoping to pursue leadership positions at the community or national level is the overall lack of security for women in public spaces. Many women said to me: "When women speak in public forums discussing their development challenges, many men will intimidate women into silence. This is true for women who want to become MPs as well. We don't feel safe enough to express our ideas without experiencing some type of harassment." In many of my interviews, women stated again and again that they want to continue to be politically active in order to take ownership over their lack of safety and security as opposed to what we might term as a women's rights agenda. Security, development and political participation are inextricably intertwined.

As Somaliland continues to build upon its democratic ambitions, there is much more that needs to be done to ensure that every member of society has equal opportunity and the capacity to reach their potential. Somaliland men and women kept saying to me that "the left arm cannot survive without the right arm, likewise men cannot survive without women." I believe it is time to put that into practice, to secure women's development goals and to strengthen Somaliland's development future.

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