

Women in Peace and Transition Processes

July 2017

Name of process

Grand Conference on National Reconciliation in Borama

Type of process

Peace-making and political reform

Outcome of process

- The Borama Conference resulted in an agreement, which adopted two charters: one establishing a political system which transitioned Somaliland from a military to a civilian regime and the other outlining a national security framework including local police forces and judicial institutions
- While the agreement led to the disarmament of large parts of the militias, it only managed to partially mitigate the violence

Women's inclusion

- Mass action
- Observer status

Women's influence

Limited influence due to:

- Selection criteria and procedures that excluded women from the official decision-making processes of the Borama Conference
- Patriarchal attitudes and societal expectations surrounding gender roles, which limited the scope of their action as observers

Somaliland (1993)

The Grand Conference of National Reconciliation in Borama was initiated in 1993, with the aim of ending the large-scale violence in the self-declared Republic of Somaliland. The conference did not manage to cease all hostilities between the clans; however, the process was successful in transitioning Somaliland from a military to a civilian government and institutionalizing the political system. In addition, the Conference led to the disarmament and demobilization of large parts of the militias. Women's groups were, for the first time, formally included in the peace process as observers to the conference. Despite this, their influence was curtailed by exclusionary selection criteria and procedures as well as patriarchal attitudes.

I. Background

Somaliland, an autonomous region of Somalia, has a population of approximately 3.5 to 4 million people,¹ of whom the majority adhere to Sunni Islam.² The five biggest clans are the Isaaq, Gadabuursi, Esa, Dhulbahante, and Warsangeli. Women who make up the majority of the population.³

While Somaliland's independence from Somalia remains unrecognized internationally, the region has its own currency, police force, government institutions, and a working political system.⁴ Lack of recognition of Somaliland's independence makes it difficult to access data specific

to the region. Nevertheless, in 2014 the World Bank conducted a poverty and GDP assessment, in which it was estimated that Somaliland has the world's fourth-lowest GDP per capita.⁵ The economy relies heavily on remittances from the diaspora, accounting for an estimated 50 percent of GDP,⁶ and a livestock industry, which generates exports to countries in the Middle East and accounts for 30 percent of GDP.⁷

While the constitution condemns all forms of discrimination against women, men continue to be favored in positions of authority

While the constitution guarantees equality of education, employment, and health to all citizens and condemns all forms of discrimination against women, men continue to be favored over women in positions of authority and power.⁸ Traditionally, only men are eligible to lead and represent their clan in the council of clan elders, known as the *guurti*. In Somaliland's current political system the equivalent upper house of parliament, the House of Elders, is made up of the men Guurti, meaning women are not included. Out of 82 representatives, the first and only woman was appointed a seat in 2012, following the resignation of her husband.⁹ The armed conflict and reconstruction period has nonetheless paved the way for the empowerment of women in the economic sector of Somaliland. With women engaged in new economic activities, often replacing men as breadwinners, they have acquired more power in terms of decision-making within the family and broader society.

However, violence against women remains a major problem in Somaliland¹⁰. Female genital mutilation is endemic. While there is no official data available for Somaliland, numbers are expected to be close to those in Somalia,¹¹ where an estimated 98 percent of women have undergone some form of genital mutilation.¹²

The British Somaliland Protectorate gained independence from Britain on 26 June 1960. After five days of independence, the former British territory united with the Italian Trusteeship of Somalia to form the Republic of Somalia.¹³ From 1969 to 1991, Somalia was ruled by the authoritarian government of President Siad Barre, who had seized power from the democratically elected government of the Somali Youth League.¹⁴ In keeping with its socialist governing ideology, the Barre-led military junta promoted women's rights and passed new laws on gender equality and security. Thus, women gained positions of power including in the government, although they made up only 10 percent of members of parliament.¹⁵ Education campaigns for women were also initiated and literacy among women improved. However, many of the new laws implemented to promote women's rights were disregarded by religious and clan leaders.¹⁶

In 1988, the Somali National Movement began a guerrilla war in the region of Somaliland against the government

In 1988, an anti-government front, led by the Somali National Movement and heavily supported by the Isaaq clan, began a war from Ethiopia against the government of President Barre in the towns of Hargeisa and Burao in the region of Somaliland.¹⁷ In response, the government initiated aerial bombardments in the region, destroying traditional wells and grazing grounds in rural Isaaq communities. Rape was used as a weapon of war by both the government and allegedly also the Somali National Movement.¹⁸ An estimated 50,000 to 60,000 civilians were killed during the course of 1988 and 500,000 people fled to Ethiopia and Kenya.¹⁹

Somaliland's declaration of independence from Somalia, on 18 May 1991, did not prevent the outbreak of internal fights

In 1991, President Barre was overthrown by a coalition of anti-government insurgencies. The Somali National Movement gained control of the region of Somaliland. A succession of inter-clan conferences, including the Oog Conference, Tulli and Borama Meetings, and the Berbera and Burao Conferences culminated in the declaration of Somaliland's independence from Somalia on 18 May 1991. However, this unilateral declaration of independence did not lead to peace in Somaliland.²⁰ On the contrary, internal fights to gain dominance over the region broke out in January 1992. The violence escalated to an internal war with an estimated 2,500 fatalities in 1992.²¹

To address the causes of the war, a conference was set up 23 October 1992 in the town of Sheekh. The guurti and women's groups were highly influential in the initiation and undertaking of this process, leveraging their traditional role as inter-clan mediators to push for an end to the violence. The Sheekh Conference was significant in so far as the issue of clan representation was solved when clan elders (composing the guurti) were chosen as the primary negotiators and decision-makers.²² Despite the exclusion of women from the Sheekh Conference, women's groups launched campaigns in which they sang, recited poems, held prayer meetings, and walked through the city with boards appealing for peace. They also advocated for women to be included in the peace negotiations. During this period, Somaliland Women's Organization prepared demonstrations in Hargeisa and played a key role in urging the end to the violent conflict between opposing clans.²³

In 1993, the Borama Conference was organized to address grievances earlier peace conferences had failed to manage

In 1993, the Grand Conference on National Reconciliation in Borama was organized to address grievances earlier peace conferences had failed to manage. The conference was based on the traditional setup of a guurti and had 150 voting clan representatives drawn proportionally from all groups residing in Somaliland. Each sub-clan was thus given a number of seats (and votes) in proportion to their size. It was chaired and mediated by eight clan elders with Sheekh Ibrahim Sheekh Yusuf Sheekh Madar as the overall convener. Although only 150 members were given voting rights as the primary negotiators, 2,000 people attended the conference as observers, amongst these 17 women.²⁴ These women were included out of recognition of their prominent peace-building efforts, notably their public protests prior to the conference.

In May 1993, the Borama Conference came to a close as the clans reached an agreement to cease hostilities and reconcile. The significance of the conference lay in the resulting documents, a Peace Charter and a National Charter for Somaliland. The most important outcomes of the Peace Charter were provisions on reconciliation and security, which outlined a national security framework; mechanisms for the demobilization of militia and the securing of roads; and the formation of local police forces and judicial institutions.

The National Charter recognized the traditional authority of the guurti by giving clan elders the exclusive right to serve in the upper house of a bicameral parliament, the House of Elders, also known as the Guurti.²⁵ In June 1993, the Guurti appointed Mohamed Haji Ibrahim Egal as the new President of Somaliland.²⁶ Even though the Conference in Borama reached and implemented the agreement, the self-declared

republic experienced recurrences of violence after the conference. To address the causes of the violence, several peace conferences between the clans were initiated, including in Burao in 1993 and Beer in 1996; but they were not able to end the violence. It was not until 1997, in the Hargeisa Conference, that the clans reached an agreement which brought peace to Somaliland and started a process of democratization.²⁷

In 2003, the first presidential multi-party elections were held. Since then, Somaliland has held five democratic elections for local councils, parliament, and the presidency, each with peaceful transfers of power.²⁸ However, the postponement of presidential and parliamentary elections from June 2015 to September 2017, a decision made unilaterally by the Guurti, has lowered the country's freedom rating.²⁹

The next part of this case study will focus on the role that women's groups played as official observers to the Grand Conference on National Reconciliation in Borama in 1993.

Actors Involved in the Process

Women were excluded from decision-making in the Borama Conference, as voting was reserved to male-only Guurti

The Borama Conference was, to some extent, an inclusive process, as each clan and sub-clan in Somaliland was represented by the Guurti and allocated votes in proportion to their share of the population. On the other hand, women were excluded from the decision-making processes, as voting was reserved for the men-only guurti. An estimated 2,000 people attended the conference with observer status. These were additional clan elders, leaders of the Somali National Movement, youth, women, and veterans from President Barre's regime.

Women Involved in the Process

In recognition of the effort of the organized women's groups during the peace conference in the town of Sheekh in 1992, 17 women from two organizations, the Somaliland Women's Development Association and the Somaliland Women's Organization, were invited to observe the negotiations.³⁰

Modalities of Inclusion of Women's Groups³¹

Two modalities of women's inclusion prevailed around the Borama Conference in 1993. The first was through external advocacy and pressure tactics directed at the conflicting clans, in which women's groups actively demanded peace, inclusive negotiations, and democratization. Second, and as a result of their vocal external strategies, women were included in the Borama Conference as official observers in 1993.

1 | Protests and Demonstrations

From the end of President Barre's regime, women played an active role advocating for peace through mass action

From the end of President Barre's regime to the implementation of the agreement of the Borama Conference, women played an important role in organizing and participating in demonstrations and protests. Women protested against the violence of President Barre's regime at the end of the 1980s³² and again during the Sheekh and Borama Conferences, when women's groups across clan affiliations actively pressured the clans to find a peaceful resolution. Women's groups within Somaliland cooperated with women diaspora networks to reactivate functional water systems and provide logistics and funding, including for the creation of a new police force through financing uniforms and meals.³³

During the Sheekh Conference, women's groups staged significant protests and demonstrations that involved the reading out of written demands as the women walked through the town from dawn onwards.³⁴ On the occasions when women's groups were excluded from conference venue rooms, they would install speakers and microphones to follow proceedings from the outside. They also stood outside the meeting premises and prevented delegates from leaving until all key issues had been dealt with.³⁵ In addition, they wrote a letter to the UN stating that United Nations Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM) forces should not be deployed to Somaliland.³⁶

The women's targeted advocacy for peace and reconciliation reached the attention of the guurti, who extended an invitation of observer status to 17 women in recognition of the important role women were playing in the peace process.³⁷ The participation of women as observers to the Borama Conference supported their later inclusion as observers in the Hargeisa Conference of 1997.³⁸

2 | Observers to the Borama Conference

The women observers presented their demands in the form of speeches, poems, pamphlets, and songs

As established, 17 women from the Somaliland Women's Development Association and Somaliland Women's Organization were included as official observers to the Borama Conference. Through their representatives with observer status, these organizations attended discussions in the conference, in which they presented demands to the 150 voting participants in the form of speeches, poems, pamphlets, and songs.³⁹ The women's organizations had three comprehensive demands:

- (i) Peace and coexistence among Somaliland's clans.
- (ii) Continuation of the conference until a solution and agreement was reached to address all grievances.
- (iii) An agreement providing a solid foundation for the future of Somaliland.⁴⁰

Women's groups were nonetheless sidelined in the negotiations due to their lack of official decision-making power. This said, Annab Omer Eleye from the Somaliland National Party later claimed that the women's organizations were the initial proponents of a bicameral system of Parliament. This was one of the most crucial successes of the National Charter produced during the Borama Conference.⁴¹ Despite the historic precedent of being invited as observers to the negotiations,

women's groups expressed disappointment over the lack of acknowledgement of their role in the peace process in Somaliland.⁴²

II. Analysis of Women's Influence: Enabling and Constraining Factors

The inclusion of women's groups as observers to the Borama Conference was facilitated by the presence of strong women's groups, support from the convening committee of the Borama Conference, and economic empowerment gained by women during the conflict period. However, the conference's selection criteria and procedures, as well as attitudes and expectations surrounding gender roles constrained their inclusion and influence. The following section distinguishes between a number of process and context factors that explain why women's groups had a limited influence on the negotiations.

Process Factors

1 | Exclusive Selection Practices

Women's exclusion was partly based on the cultural understanding that women can belong to two clans

The selection criteria and procedures of the Borama Conference were a major constraining factor for the women's organizations' inclusion and influence. As the Conference was based on the traditional institution of the guurti, for which women are ineligible, they were excluded from the decision-making processes. The exclusion of women was further based on the cultural understanding that married women belong to two clans: their fathers and husbands, making it difficult to determine which delegation they would represent. The women's groups expressed disappointment at only being able to participate in the discussions as observers, without voting rights, and they did not feel that their observer status adequately reflected their role in building peace in Somaliland.⁴³

2 | The Elder Recognition of Women's Role

The Elders invited 17 women as observers to the Conference out of recognition of their work

The attitude of the eight elders convening and mediating the Borama Conference was an enabling factor for women's inclusion in the conference as observers, though the women's influence remained limited. Traditionally, clan elders took a mediating role in clan conflicts and disputes in Somaliland thus the eight elders were well respected as mediators by the other included elders and observers. The eight elders influenced participants to come to a consensus on all issues discussed in the sessions of the conference. They explained to the voting delegates that:

Traditionally men served as a defensive umbrella for women and children. Today men have failed in this responsibility; and women and children are subject to all kinds of hazards, social, economic, and environmental. As a result of this, women have to fend for themselves. That is the reason for our breach of the traditional code.⁴⁴

Context Factors

1 | Patriarchal Attitudes Towards Women's Involvement

Women's increased economic activities during the conflict signaled a shift in their role in society

Both the exclusion of women from decision-making processes in the Conference and the limited role they were able to play as observers concur with traditional expectations surrounding gender roles in Somaliland. With only men included in clan councils, the inclusion of women's groups in the Borama Conference was traditionally inconceivable. Despite this, women's increased economic activities during the conflict, coupled with their rise to prominence through mass actions for peace in the period preceding the Borama Conference, signaled a shift in their role in society. This change, recognized by the Elders, led to their inclusion as observers, albeit in small numbers. However, persistent patriarchal attitudes represented an important context factor limiting the extent to which the included women were able to exert influence on the process.

2 | Strong Women's Groups

Resistance to President Barre's regime at the end of the 1980s and public mobilization around the peace process in the early 1990s led to the emergence of numerous women's groups. Their strong advocacy for peace led to the recognition of women's role in the peace process and as a result legitimized their participation as observers.

This also allowed the 17 women observers to participate in several discussions in the plenary and to arrange meetings with voting delegates to present their demands.⁴⁵ Unfortunately, there is limited information on the outcomes of these initiatives.

III. Conclusion

In spite of the reemergence of clan violence following the Conference, a bicameral parliament was successfully established

For the first time in Somaliland, women's groups were officially included in the peace negotiations. This was a result of their prominence in peace and reconciliation efforts from the end of the 1980s as well as their increasing role as breadwinners due to the armed conflict. Despite this, the selection criteria and procedure of voting participants in the Conference and gender-specific traditions and attitudes negated women's influence on the negotiations. Nevertheless, the inclusion of women's groups in the Conference gave recognition to their collective power and served as a milestone for their future political activities, specifically in terms of visibility and the creation of women's associations.

In spite of the reemergence of violence between clans following the Borama Conference, a bicameral parliament comprising an upper house (House of Elders) and lower house (the Assembly of Representatives) was successfully implemented in Somaliland, in line with the National Charter drafted during the conference. However, it was not until the Hargeisa Conference of 1997 that violence ceased

and the democratization process began. As of 2017, Somaliland, in comparison to Somalia, is primarily peaceful with a functioning political system and government. Nevertheless, democracy is under pressure due to the aforementioned postponement of Somaliland's presidential and parliamentary elections. This impasse, coupled by a lack of international recognition of Somaliland's independence, renders the future of Somaliland uncertain.

Women can work, own property, and speak up about social issues, but they are not perceived as being suited for politics

The Borama Conference was a significant turning point for Somaliland, to the extent that it facilitated the institutionalization of a democratic political system. Despite this, the bicameral parliament adopted from the National Charter did not specifically provide for the inclusion of women. Today, besides one woman in the House of Elders, only two of 86 parliamentarians in the Assembly of Representatives are women and only one of 28 ministers.⁴⁶ Women can work, own property, and speak up about social issues, but they are not perceived as being suited for politics. Women's groups continue to advocate for a 20 percent quota for women in the parliament and even though members of the parliament do not oppose a ten percent quota, a decision has been deterred as the parliament considers it the responsibility of the government, and vice versa.⁴⁷

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³⁵ In other cases including Liberia (2002) and the DRC (2001–2003) women also blocked the exit of negotiation rooms to prevent participants to leave the negotiations before an agreement had been reached. See other case study summaries on women's influence for more information.

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Women in Peace and Transition Processes

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