



POLICY BRIEF

Gender Discrimination and Challenging Negative Gender Stereotypes in Puntland: Policy Priorities and Recommendations

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Author: Dr Adam Abdulkadir Mohamed prepared this Policy Brief summarizing a workshop on “Development of a joint CSO-wide networking and policy brief writing” hosted by the Puntland Youth Association Network in September 2024.

1. BACKGROUND

Somalia has experienced nearly three decades of political instability, exacerbated by the absence of a functional government, leading to protracted humanitarian crises. These crises have forced large numbers of Somalis to flee the country as refugees. In contrast, many others remain displaced within Somalia, living in precarious conditions in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps. Somalia has committed to eliminating child, early, and forced marriage by 2030, in line with target 5.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals. Somalia co-sponsored the 2014 UN General Assembly resolution and the 2013 Human Rights Council resolution on child, early, and forced marriage. In 2014, Somalia signed a joint statement at the Human Rights Council calling for a resolution on child marriage. Somalia ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 2015, which sets a minimum marriage age of 18. Somalia is one of few countries that has not signed or ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which obligates states to ensure free and full consent to marriage.¹

Human development and economic growth through gender equality and women's empowerment



In this paper, Gender discrimination means any exclusion or restriction made based on gender that creates barriers for girls, boys, women, and/or men in recognizing, enjoying, or exercising their full and equal human rights. Furthermore, non-gender discrimination is assumed when girls, boys, women, and men have equal rights, obligations, and opportunities to (1) security and good health, (2) a viable livelihood and dignified work, (3) participate in the care of the home and dependent family members (4) take an active part in public and political life, (5) learn and participate in

¹ Mustafa, Abdiaziz Mohamud Sh. *Examination of the legal framework for protection of females against sexual violence in Somalia*. Diss. Kampala International University, 2018.

relevant education, and (6) live a life free from violence.² The underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in Puntland underscores a significant gap in Puntland and Somalia's governance. Closing this gap is not simply about meeting gender quotas in political positions like local councils, city mayors, parliament members, or ministerial positions but about ensuring the development of equitable and inclusive policies that address the specific challenges faced by women and families in Puntland. This policy document aims to outline critical policy priorities and recommendations to challenge gender discrimination and transform negative gender stereotypes that continue to affect women and girls in Puntland.

1.1. Gender Issues in Somalia

As reported in the Somali Health and Demographic Survey 2020, table 1 below provides a snapshot of critical indicators reflecting the well-being and challenges women and girls face in Somalia. About 11.9% of ever-married women and girls aged 15 and older reported experiencing physical violence by their current or former husbands in the past 12 months, while 4.2% faced psychological abuse in the same period. Approximately 16.8% of women aged 20-24 were married before age 15, and about 35.5% were married before age 18. Somalia's total fertility rate (TFR) is 6.9 children per woman. According to the SHDS report, differences can be noted in women's TFRs by their type of residence. The TFR is highest among women residing in nomadic areas, at 7.3, and lowest among those living in urban areas, at 6.4 per woman.³

Table 1: Characteristics of Women and Girls in Somalia (Adapted from SHDS-2020)

Indicator	Categories	% (Female)
The proportion of ever-married women and girls aged 15 years and older subjected to physical, sexual, or psychological violence by a current or former husband in the previous 12 months	Physical Violence	11.9
	Psychological Violence	4.2
The proportion of women aged 20-24 years who were married before age 15 and before age 18	Before age 15	16.8
	Before age 18	35.5
The proportion of girls and women aged 15-49 years who have undergone female genital mutilation/cutting by age	All FGM/C, including Sunna type	99.2
Adolescent birth rates per 1,000 women	Women aged 15-19 years	140 per 1,000 women
Total fertility rate in Somalia	Total children per woman	6.9 per woman

² <https://onenet.savethechildren.net/whatwedo/genderequality/>

³ SHDS. The Somali Health and Demographic Survey 2020. Accessed 22/12/2024 at <https://www.nbs.gov.so/home>; 2020.

1.2. Brief Information About Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting in Somalia

- Estimated prevalence among girls and women aged 15-49 is 98%
- The estimated prevalence among girls and women aged 15-19 is 98%.
- FGM prevalence for women aged 45–49 is 99.8%.
- Type III (infibulation) is the most commonly practiced form of female genital cutting (FGC) in Somalia.
- FGM in Somalia is frequently performed on girls aged 5-9.
- 72% of women in Somalia believe that FGM is a requirement of their religion.
- Prevalence is marginally higher among nomadic populations (99.7%) but universally high in all locations.
- Most girls are cut between the ages of 10 and 14.
- Most women have undergone Type III FGM infibulation/'sewn closed'), which is also known as Pharaonic FGM.42% of adults believe that being out of education increases a girl's risk of undergoing FGM, which traditionally takes place during the school holidays.⁴



⁴ Abdulnor, Amina. *Female Genital Mutilation Cases in Somalia and the Impact on Women's Reproductive Health*. MS thesis. Hamad Bin Khalifa University (Qatar), 2024.

1.3. Brief Information About Early and Child Marriage in Somalia

- There is no law mandating a minimum age for marriage in Somalia and Puntland.
- 45% of girls are married before 18 years old.
- 8% of girls are married before they turn 15.
- Somalia is the 10th highest nation in the world for the percentage of child marriages.
- Nearly a third of girls are married before their 18th birthday - just under half of those before age 15.
- Most Somali women were married at 13 and were divorced by the time they were 20.⁵

2. A Prolonged Decades of Conflicts and Gender Discrimination in Somalia

War frequently results in the erosion of the rule of law. Gender inequality is ubiquitous in many legal systems, but gendered rights abuses are often even more pervasive during and post-conflict, with the frequent re-patriarchization of societies. Such abuses are evident regarding civil and economic rights, property and inheritance, and public and private spheres. The decades of prolonged conflict and the absence of a functional government in Somalia have deepened gender discrimination and entrenched harmful social norms, leaving women and girls disproportionately vulnerable to Inequality and violence. Because of a lack of effective governance, Somalia's social, economic, and legal systems failed to protect or advance women's rights.

The existing continued conflicts in Somalia for the last 3 decades amplified harmful norms and vulnerabilities, leaving women and girls disproportionately disadvantaged and cementing systemic gender discrimination. Prolonged conflicts in Somalia have intensified gender discrimination by dismantling legal protections, increasing gender-based violence, limiting access to education and health, limiting economic opportunities, increasing child and forced marriages, deepening patriarchal norms, and leaving women and girls disproportionately vulnerable to violence, exclusion, and Inequality. In times of conflict, traditional clan structures in Somalia gained prominence, often reinforcing conservative norms against women and girls that restrict women's roles, primarily in caregiving and domestic work. Decision-making became

⁵ Farih, Omer Adam, et al. "Prevalence and factors associated with female genital mutilation among daughters using Somalia Demographic Health Survey Data, SDHS 2020." *Atención Primaria* 57.4 (2025): 103113.

dominated by male elders, preventing girls from accessing education and sidelining women from leadership, economic opportunities, and public life.

3. Persistent Gender Inequalities in Puntland

Gender discrimination and inequalities continue to persist in Puntland. While efforts have been made to address them, significant barriers remain in various sectors, including education, employment, political participation, and family life. Today, there are still many gender stereotypes in Puntland. For instance, prevalent gender stereotypes dictate that women are expected to be nurturing homemakers, remain uneducated, stay at home to perform domestic tasks like washing clothes, avoid seeking employment, and refrain from participating in politics or public decision-making. This reflects local gender stereotypes in Puntland and societal expectations that limit women's roles in caregiving and household responsibilities. These stereotypes are rooted in cultural and traditional norms that reinforce the notion that women should not pursue education, employment, or political participation. Such beliefs perpetuate systemic gender discrimination and hinder women's empowerment, limiting their ability to contribute fully to society and the economy. The local Somali cultures, like media, traditions, and social norms, often perpetuate gender stereotypes, making them harder to dismantle.

In Puntland, girls are still less likely to attend primary school compared to boys, reflecting persistent gender disparities in education. Key obstacles to girls' education in Puntland include social and cultural practices such as early marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM), clan systems that favor boys, and financial barriers caused by the privatization of the education sector, as well as the costs of transportation and school supplies. Women and girls often face sexual harassment in public spaces, which reduces their ability to participate in school, work, and public life, limits their access to essential services, prevents them from enjoying cultural and recreational opportunities, and threatens their health and well-being. Many women today are not physically safe, either in public or private. In Puntland, women earn significantly less than men and are vastly underrepresented in senior leadership positions across both business and government sectors.

Equality does not necessarily equate to **equity** for girls and boys or men and women, as it overlooks the need for tailored support to address their different needs and circumstances.

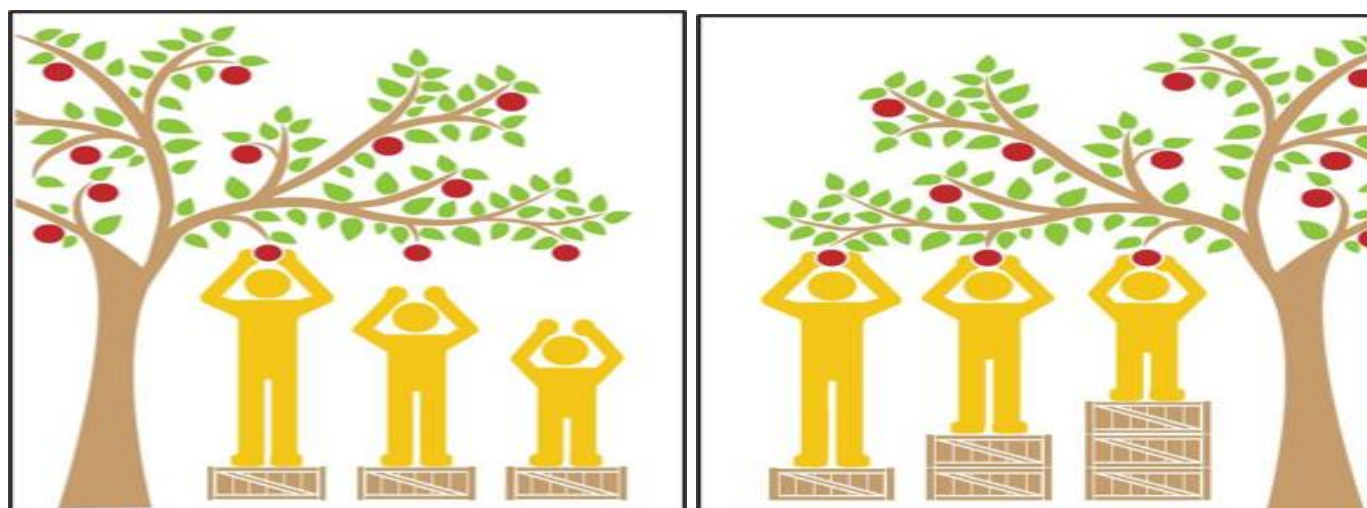


Figure 1: A diagram showing equity and equality (adapted from James's Knowledge Graph)

Some examples of persistent and emerging inequalities experienced by women and girls in Puntland which need to be tackled include the following:

- Limited girls' educational attainment at schools and universities
- Restricted work opportunities and occupational segregation in both private and public experienced by women and girls compared to their counterparts
- Gender discrimination and harassment experienced by women and younger girls in the workplace
- Higher levels of gender-based violence, including Female Genital Mutilation or Cutting (FGM/C), rape and rape-murders
- High and increasing levels of domestic abuse and harmful traditional practices, including child brides (forced child marriages) and wife inheritances, also known as levirate marriage or widow inheritance (a cultural practice where a widow is forced to marry a male relative of her deceased husband) which violates the rights, autonomy, consent, and dignity of women.
- The underrepresentation of women across all levels and significant positions of political, economic, social, and judicial powers.

4. The Benefits of Gender Non-Discrimination and Promoting Positive Social Norms

It is to everyone's benefit and interests to ensure equality for women and men in all areas and throughout the different stages of their lives so that everyone can develop their abilities and make choices unrestricted by gender roles. For instance, (1) Increasing the representation of women in political decision-making benefits society, politics, and democracy. Empowered women pay more attention to social welfare and legal protections and improve trust than their male counterparts. Gender non-discrimination supports women's active participation in political processes, promotes more inclusive decision-making and diverse leadership, and encourages the representation of marginalized people (2) It is widely acknowledged that gender equality is essential for economic growth and poverty reduction. For instance, Inequality between women and men results in the underutilization of talent and imposes a heavy toll on the economy. Women's access to education and employment opportunities boost economic outcomes for entire communities (3) Gender equality leads to dismantling harmful cultural practices and reduces GBV by addressing power imbalances. It also reduces the prevalence of gender-based violence (GBV), leading to better mental health and safety for all genders (4). Promoting positive social norms challenges traditional leadership views, encouraging women and girls to take on leadership roles across various sectors.

5. Priority Areas for Action

The policy brief outlines high-level gender non-discriminatory policy priorities and recommendations below. These priorities and recommendations have been developed following a comprehensive review of the evidence base, discussions, and engagement with key stakeholders in Puntland.

5.1. Education and Awareness

While strides have been made in improving educational access, significant gender gaps persist. Girls in Puntland are less likely than boys to complete secondary and tertiary education due to early marriage, household responsibilities, and limited financial resources. Address girls' under-attainment in secondary and university-level education and ensure gender mainstreaming via the curriculum, careers advice, teacher training, and other key policies. Action is required to tackle gender inequalities and stereotyping, including through the curriculum, teacher training, subject choice, career advice, and the

policies and practices of educational bodies; address the educational under-attainment of girls; and challenge gender-based bullying. Failing to mainstream equality ensures that gender stereotyping remains in schools and other places of education and vocational training, including further and higher education. Although the gap is narrowing, boys continue to outperform girls in terms of the number of qualifications achieved at school. In particular, girls have persistently lower levels of educational attainment than boys, beginning in primary school and continuing throughout schooling to university level. For instance, one of the curriculum changes in Puntland can be to amend the existing curriculum and target the increase of female teachers in both the informal Qur'anic or religious schools and the formal schools.

Recommendations

- The Puntland government and the international stakeholders should take steps to address the educational under-attainment of girls.
- The Ministry of Education and higher education in Puntland should amend existing curriculums. For instance, one of the curriculum changes in Puntland can be to amend the existing curriculum and target the increase of female teachers in both the informal Qur'anic or religious schools and the formal schools.

5.2. Employment and Economic Empowerment

Economic disparities between genders are stark in Puntland. Women frequently face systemic barriers such as restricted access to land, financial credit, and formal employment opportunities. Most women work in the informal sector, which is characterized by low wages and lack of legal protections. Cultural norms further reinforce these inequalities by prioritizing men's economic roles over women's. Ensure women's financial independence and advance gender equality in access to and progression within employment. For instance, the loss of jobs for girls and women is particularly significant in large private companies that intentionally favor men over women, often due to traditional norms or religious beliefs. Women in Puntland are significantly under-represented at the senior level positions in the big companies, i.e., there are almost zero numbers of women in the senior board members of the existing top 10 Puntland companies. This bias negatively impacts women's employment opportunities. Women frequently experience sex discrimination and harassment in the workplace, including discrimination due to pregnancy and maternity and as regards unequal pay.

Recommendations

- The government of Puntland should implement direct policies to ensure women have equal opportunities in large private companies where women are underrepresented across Puntland. Ensuring women's economic independence and empowerment is not only a matter of fairness and rights and a prerequisite for gender equality but also a key factor in advancing economic development.
- The government should prepare a policy that can make women part of the significant company ecosystems, including the leadership positions in those companies.
- Remove the barriers and experiences related to sex discrimination and harassment in the workplace, including discrimination due to pregnancy and maternity and as regards unequal pay.
- Encourage flexible working practices and the equal sharing of family roles/responsibilities between women and men, including through the establishment and implementation of the Work and Families Act in Puntland.
- Address particular barriers experienced in employment by women with multiple identities, such as women from minorities and marginalized communities, disabled women, and those with caring responsibilities, including lone parents.
- Investigate and address the low rates of entrepreneurship and self-employment and high rates of economic inactivity experienced by women and girls.
- Consider the economic impact of unpaid care work and address the undervaluation of unpaid care work, including the provision of childcare at homes, which is carried out predominately by women and girls.

5.3. Legal Reform and Enforcement

Puntland Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) must advocate for the effective implementation of laws protecting women's rights and gender equality. Strengthen penalties for gender-based violence (GBV) and discrimination and align Puntland's legal framework with international human rights standards related to gender equality. Women's equal participation should be central to the reform of the state. Legal system reforms should have women's legal and de facto empowerment as a primary goal. This may require putting in place affirmative action measures to promote gender equality both in society and in the state's institutional and political structures.

Recommendations

- Strengthen social protection systems that provide support to vulnerable women, including survivors of violence, single mothers, and widows.
- Implement targeted programs for women in rural areas and internally displaced persons (IDPs) to access essential services and livelihoods.
- Introduce flexible working arrangements and childcare support to enable women to balance family responsibilities with political roles.

5.4. Women's Political Participation and Public Life

Despite growing advocacy for women's political participation, their representation in political and decision-making roles remains minimal. The clan-based electoral system marginalizes women and entrenched patriarchal norms limit their access to leadership positions. Increase the participation of women and girls in political and public life and decision-making. Increasing women's participation in politics and public life is essential for achieving gender equality and fostering inclusive governance.

Recommendations

- Action is required to increase the participation of women in political and public life, the judiciary, and economic decision-making and promote the involvement of women in peacebuilding.
- **Quotas for Women in Governance:** Introduce or strengthen gender quotas at national, regional, and local levels to ensure a minimum representation of women in decision-making roles.
- **Electoral System Reform:** Design electoral systems that facilitate women's participation, such as proportional representation or reserved seats for women.
- **Anti-Discrimination Laws:** Enforce laws that prevent discrimination based on gender in political parties, public administration, and decision-making institutions.
- Launch campaigns to challenge societal stereotypes that limit women's participation in politics and public life.
- Give women equal access to campaign funding and financial resources to run for office.
- Offer technical support to women candidates, including help with campaign strategy and media engagement.
- Increase the proportion of women in senior roles in government ministries, local councils, and public service sectors.

6. Conclusion

Gender discrimination in Somalia or Puntland is deeply rooted in cultural, social, and institutional practices, with significant impacts on the lives of women and girls. In this modern world, every woman in Puntland can create the kind of life she wishes to lead, which is unconstrained by harmful social norms and discriminatory stereotypes. To make a future where women and girls in Puntland are free from harmful stereotypes and discriminatory practices, concerted efforts from all sectors, like the government, civil society, the private sector, and communities, are necessary. Local actors like the Puntland Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) are agents in this process, impacting the degree to which norms influence local practices. They have a better understanding of local cultures and religious belief systems. They are, therefore, better placed to push the process of norm adaptation at the local level, including in rural areas.

Training and norm socialization activities should be monitored and evaluated for impact. Societies need to be prepared for changes in laws relating to gender justice and gender relations, lest this result in further violations of the rights of women and girls. This might be done, for instance, through gender training of men and women representing broad cross sectors of society, media programs, law enforcement personnel, judicial actors, civil servants, and customary leaders and integrating it into school educational programs. This should include training these personnel on international human rights standards while linking them to the local context. It ought to be borne in mind that women themselves sometimes resist change, wherein pushes for gender justice and equality can be perceived as undermining traditional value systems, religious beliefs, identity erosion, and even a form of Western imperialism.