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Introduction

Conflict is not necessarily inherently bad; conflict is a critical part of social transformation and change, restructuring the relationships not only between peoples, but also within their own groups. It is when latent conflicts escalate into violent confrontation that generalized and unnecessary suffering results. Like so many other wars worldwide, the Somali conflict contains elements of both: the Somali nation has been convulsed by seven years of bloody, internecine violence leaving hundreds of thousands of people dead and over a million uprooted and displaced. But in the process, historical constructs of culture, colonialism, socialism, and western-style democracy have also been dismantled, challenging Somali assumptions about their collective past and future. On the eve of the 21st century, Somalis have been offered the rare opportunity to redefine not only the type of government they want but also the kind of society they aspire to become.

During the closing years of this century, armed conflict has taken place less between states than within them, claiming an ever-increasing proportion of non-combatants among its victims—especially women and children. Statistically speaking, civilians are at greater risk in modern war than fighters are. This trend, combined with women's generally non-combatant status, has led to a banal portrayal of women as simple victims of organized violence. In reality, however, their role is infinitely more complex and consequently more ambiguous, as the Somali experience makes abundantly clear. Women are indeed victims, just as they are nurturers, mediators, and

activists in the cause of peace; but they also mobilize resources to fight, maintain public morale, and agitate in the service of war. A serious examination of women's contribution to the peace in Somalia must also take into account their participation in conflict as well as peace if it is not to portray them as one-dimensional beings incapable of the full range of human experience.

War has been a constant in the experience of the Somali state virtually since independence (and arguably even earlier). The civil war that ultimately deposed General Mohamed Siyaad Barre began in 1978, escalated throughout the 1980s, and continues even today in some parts of the country, more than seven years since the collapse of centralized Somali government in 1991. What began as a liberation struggle against the dictatorial rule and corruption of the military regime degenerated first into a murderous pattern of internecine aggression and reprisals, and later into a seemingly aimless stalemate between clan-based militia groups, punctuated only by irregular and unconvincing claims to supremacy by one leader or another.

While the state disintegrated, Somali society has been transformed by the ravages of conflict, and the exigencies of survival. The traditional organization of the Somali nation according to clans has encouraged some of the worst excesses of violence, but it has also offered some shelter from those excesses: the dynamic Somali system of kinship and customary law has been responsible for indiscriminate killing, ethnic cleansing, and subjugation of ethnic and occupational minorities, just as it has described the webs of solidarity that have provided protection to the weak, succour to the displaced and dispossessed, and hope in the face of despair.

Somali women have always played a crucial role as bearers of loyalties between lineage, clan, or kin, but they have to

a large extent been restricted to the private domain and domestic confines. Under Siyaad Barre, women passed from private patriarchy (or 'viriarchy'), to a 'public viriarchy' based on the tenets of 'Scientific Socialism', in which women were no longer excluded from the public arena but were incorporated—and subordinated—within it.

In the search for peace, analyses of the civil war have typically focused on the clan-based nature of Somalia's factional conflict—an almost exclusively male domain. The role of the other half of Somalia's population, both in sustaining the war and in containing it, has received only superficial examination. Somali women are typically cast in the role of mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters—victims of circumstances beyond their control. Efforts to reinvent Somali women as breadwinners, negotiators and partisans of a lasting peace have tended to reinforce a simplistic division of gender roles, without recognizing the many domains in which the roles of men and women coincide and even overlap. This publication attempts to describe Somali women in all their diversity and their complexity. It demonstrates that Somali women share responsibility for the war while possessing the potential to help forge a lasting peace.

To do so, the publication initially sketches the evolution of women's sociopolitical[1] status in recent Somali history. It reviews women's rights during these different political phases and the division of labour in traditional and modern environments. Throughout, the focus is particularly on gender relations in the public domain, to understand the mechanisms of decision-making and the role of gender in them, because these

[1] The term 'sociopolitical' is used because the nature of the Somali clan structure integrates the social system and the political organization of the country.

factors provide essential background for women's ideological and material contribution to the war as well as to the peace process.

The civil war has introduced contradictory forces on the status of Somali women. On the one hand, pre-war progress in the promotion of women's rights has been eroded as modern state structures give way to more traditional modes of social organization, in which men define the public domain and women are relegated to a submissive, and generally unrecognized, role. On the other hand, women have acquired new importance as merchants, providers, and heads of families as they take up the functions abandoned by men when they go off to war. At the same time, some aid agencies and donors have sought—although have not necessarily succeeded—to empower Somali women through their programmes. Somali women in the diaspora have been exposed to alternative gender roles and relationships into which some have integrated, and from which others have borrowed. The coexistence of these trends with newly imported fundamentalist Islamic doctrine poses a different, but equally powerful, challenge to Somali society and culture—and particularly the status of women.

The role of Islam is a critical issue, both in the peace process and in the rebuilding of the Somali state. Islam as a religious and political force has become one of the few universal points of reference for Somali society in a situation otherwise fraught with uncertainty and division. The extent to which Islamic revival is led by fundamentalists is a subject of much controversy. Some Somalis consider 'fundamentalism' a misnomer, arguing that the extremist behaviour of some of these militant groups is not consistent with the fundamentals of Islam, while others lack the religious education required to

evaluate the claims of different groups to purity of Islamic belief. Still others are persuaded more by the social services (health, education, finance) offered by these groups than by their ideological conviction. Consequently, conservative interpretations of Islam have gained some ground in Somalia since the collapse of the state and are exerting a powerful influence upon the public and private role of some Somali women while attempting to define the main elements of a gendered system for a future Somali state.

Islam, however, has not been the only influence on the individual and collective activities of women during the war and during the peace process. Their involvement in the latter has also been strongly influenced by the demands of international donors in Somalia. Aid agencies and their sponsors routinely make their support conditional upon the involvement of women according to various quantitative and qualitative criteria or have deliberately channelled their assistance through female-led organizations. In doing so, external actors have helped to create spaces for Somali women to circumvent contemporary and traditional constraints upon their public behaviour, but in some cases these spaces are too detached from the reality of Somali daily life, or too dependent on external support, to have an enduring impact.

The gradual emergence of state structure offers a potential resource for more progressive gender politics if Somali women are able to attain positions of real power and influence. If not, gender discourse is likely to evolve towards the kind of rhetoric intended only to mobilize women when they are needed in the labour force or to enlist them in a political cause, only to return them to domesticity or to subordinate roles in the public sphere when need subsides (see Kandiyoti 1994: 376):

> . . . movements [that] invite women to participate more fully in collective life by interpolating them as 'national' actors: mothers, educators, workers and even fighters. On the other hand they reaffirm the boundaries of culturally acceptable feminine conduct and exert pressure on women to articulate their gender interests within the terms of reference set by the nationalist discourse. Feminism is not autonomous, but bound to the signifying network of the national context which produces it. [Kandiyoti 1994: 380]

For Somali women to take advantage of the opportunities the civil war offers them, they need to be better organized and share a common vision about their future role. As they are generally more preoccupied with immediate and individual concerns, it is unrealistic to speak of Somali women now in a generic way. It will take time for a unified women's movement to emerge. Nevertheless, the gains that Somali women have made across the country and within the diaspora have already left a profound imprint on the fabric of Somali society. The question is whether Somali women will seize the opportunity to define the role they wish to play in the future, or whether they will return to a state in which it is defined for them.

2

Societal and historical background

The Somali people are traditionally nomadic in their economy and lifestyle—a natural response to the harsh, arid topography of the Horn of Africa in which they live. At the end of the last century, nomads were estimated by the colonial authorities to make up roughly 75% of the population, the remainder comprising agropastoralists, farmers, hunter-gathers, fishing communities, and townspeople. Today, development workers estimate the percentage at roughly half (although few reliable data exist to substantiate such calculations): a demographic shift reflecting rapid urbanization, heightened competition for pasture, and systematic efforts by the Barre regime to bring nomadic populations under state control through 'sedentarization'. Despite these changes, contemporary Somali society is still heavily influenced by nomadic traditions in culture, economy, and politics.

Such generalities notwithstanding, Somalis are far from homogeneous. The majority nomadic population is divided into a shifting composite of clans and subclans whose relations have historically been characterized by competition and sporadic conflict. A large minority of ethnic Somalis—mainly located in the southern interriverine areas—are either settled or semi-nomadic, and many speak distinct dialects. A further category of the population is the occupational castes, who are ethnic Somalis, but 'outcasts' in the sense that their artisanal tasks are considered inferior, and they are forbidden to intermarry with other groups. A number of ethnically distinct groups

also exist: residual groups of the pre-Somali Bantu inhabitants of the Horn; descendants of ex-slave groups (see Menkhaus 1996); communities believed to be offshoots of the Oromos; and coastal communities of Arab and Persian traders, whose generally harmonious integration (and intermarriage) with the Somalis was brutally terminated when they became preferred targets of marauding militia during the civil war, driving most of them into exile.

Recognizing the broad variation within this 'composite' society, it is nevertheless instructive to consider briefly the importance of kinship in Somali society. During the war, kinship ties acquired a new significance, as they helped to determine individual rights to assistance and protection (or the reverse). All Somalis can be identified, whether or not they choose to be, with a single maximal lineage, the origins of which are subject to several interpretations, each linked to an interest in proving genealogical depth and prestige. The patrilineal nature of the kinship system is central to an understanding of gender roles since it awards men the predominant role in Somali society and politics.

Genealogy gives both a collective and an individual identity to members of Somali society. It is also a societal code, serving as the collective memory. Somali genealogy is a flexible and dynamic ideological construct; it cannot be fixed within a rigid scheme, and it is subject to alteration in the interest of clan groups. Clan affiliation provides collective socioeconomic security, latent in times of peace but activated in response to an external threat or, increasingly, to serve individual political agendas. Although many Somalis now resist categorization according to clan, an individual's refusal to abide by the responsibilities and obligations of kinship can entail unwelcome personal costs and risks.

Because of the relative segregation and relative endogamy of different clans and ethnic groups, there are varied gender roles and relationships in Somalia. Although essentially similar, each group defined its own specific code of conduct regarding gender, pertaining mainly to the division of labour, ownership of material goods, and legal rights associated with marriage, divorce, and inheritance. In practice, these rights were limited and basic and rarely surpassed livestock and household goods (like the nomadic hut), to be awarded as compensation for insult, injury, death, or as a bride-price[2] for marriage.

Most decisions concerning the life of the community—whether about war, peace, migration, marriage, or divorce—were an exclusively masculine domain, usually adopted through rough consensus by lineage 'elders'. Religious authority rested equally with men. Women were assigned to tasks like child-rearing, preparation of food, maintenance of the hut, collection of water and firewood, and supervision of small stock; they were considered incompetent for more responsible roles—an attitude that persists widely to the present day.

Somali culture and colonialism

Traditional Somali culture has evolved over time, not only because of its own inherent dynamism but also through the exercise of diverse external influences extending from the early centuries of Islam through the colonial period to the Cold War, and ultimately to the 'globalizing' effects of international travel and telecommunications.

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[2] The importance and character of the bride-price are explained in chapter 3.

The origins of the Somali people are still the subject of some debate, although it is generally accepted that they share roots with other members of the Cushitic linguistic group—the Oromo, Afar, Beja, and Saho peoples. Modern-day Somali speakers are said to have first appeared around the 6th or 7th century A.D. (Ehret 1995). By roughly the 10th century, Dir Somali (believed by many to be the most ancient Somali lineage) are thought to have inhabited much of the northern coastal strip (Lewis 1965). The next few centuries saw the emergence of other major pastoral clan groups (Daarod, Isaaq, Hawiye) and their gradual expansion southwards and westwards through the riverine areas of southern Somalia as far as the Tana River in northern Kenya. The competition between the dominant pastoral groups and the more settled inhabitants of the fertile agricultural lands has remained a key feature of Somali power and resource relations up to the present day.

The most ancient and pervasive foreign influence upon the Somali people was no doubt the introduction of Islam. By the 10th century, Muslim Arabian migrants had succeeded in establishing settlements along the Somali coast (although Arab immigration to Somalia may actually predate the advent of Islam), bringing with them the religious faith that has since become a defining feature of Somali identity. Close to 100% of Somalis may today be described as Sunni Muslims of the Shafi'i rite—an essential coalescing factor within this heterogeneous society. The s*hari'a* (Islamic law) has long co-existed with *xeer*, or unwritten Somali customary law, despite apparent contradictions between the two, and the application of one or the other in a given case is often simply a matter of individual preference.

The evolution of Islam in Somalia, as everywhere, however, has not been homogeneous. Diverse Islamic brotherhoods *(tariiqa)* have long existed as centres of religious

learning, sometimes practising localized and idiosyncratic versions of the faith. Many Somalis blend their Islamic faith with indigenous beliefs in saint worship and witchcraft—variations that are vigorously rejected by the recent wave of conservative political Islamists.

The second major external factor in Somali history—imperialism—could be said to date from as early as the 10th century, when proselytizing Arabs and Persians had already settled along the coast in key places like Muqdisho and Zeyla'. But imperialism in a more recognizable form was probably first introduced in the 17th century with the extension of Omani protection to parts of the Banaadir coast—although Omani influence during this period was geographically and strategically limited and had little or no effect on the majority of Somalis (but it did begin the long process of linking Somalia to a broader international mercantile system). It was not until the 19th century, when the 'scramble for Africa' began to gather speed, that Somalis really began to feel the effects of the imperial system that would eventually divide them among five different states, with five different political systems, legal codes, currencies, educational systems, and official languages.

The fundamental effects of imperial rule were, however, similar throughout the Somali territories: imposition of central state authority; co-opting of traditional leaders to fulfil political or administrative functions; unequal access to the advantages ('distributive goods') of imperial rule, favouring some clans over others; and the evolution of a small but relatively privileged, educated, urban elite. To elaborate—

- powerful individuals won the opportunity to cooperate with the colonial government as 'middlemen' and to circumvent traditional Somali codes of solidarity by introducing western structures and concepts of hegemony

- ➢ the urban centres were empowered by creating administrative points of reference, enlarging the gap between urban and rural populations (traditional Somali culture could be defined as almost completely rural)
- ➢ the cultural gap between the northern and the southern parts of the country was widened through the different influences of the British and the Italian colonial systems
- ➢ the economic network was exploited, the cohesive ties of a subsistence economy were destroyed —and Somalia was integrated into the international mercantile system

However slow and limited the process may have been, the colonial period accelerated the emergence of profound disparities between clans and ethnic groups. Colonial economic interests in Somalia introduced the idea of a surplus-producing economy on a larger scale than ever before. The emergence of a class of Somali middlemen challenged the traditional roles of intra- and interclan solidarity. At the same time, urban infrastructures were created that no longer bore the traditional role of port of trade and cross-roads of ideas. Instead, the town became a centre of authority, controlling adjacent rural areas.

Foreign influence upon Somali society persisted beyond independence in 1960, and it enlarged as postcolonial structures took root and developed a dynamic of their own. The established urban elite continued to develop, and the postcolonial political system was extended even further into the domain of traditional Somali culture. Between 1960 and 1969, clan elders were co-opted wholesale into the parliamentary system through the disbursement of patronage and favours from party coffers. Political parties abandoned all pretence of platforms in favour of appeals to clan solidarity, underpinned with the promise of state largesse.

Siyaad Barre's coup d'etat initially exploited public disgust with the corruption of the system but in fact changed very little. After a short-lived and apparently serious experiment in Scientific Socialism, the regime abandoned any meaningful political ideology in favour of undisguised self-perpetuation, resorting to tactics only slightly different from those employed by the colonial powers and by political parties during Somalia's brief democratic period. Client networks distributed patronage to loyalists of the regime, while opponents were menaced by the formidable state security services. Traditional elders were co-opted, corrupted, or created to undermine the cohesion of major clan groups who might have opposed Barre's rule.

As government authority and legitimacy began to wane following the Ogaden war,[3] ordinary people came to depend increasingly upon private and informal social structures. The nomadic majority naturally remained most alienated from the state. Theoretically they were supposed to pay taxes for social services and access to governmental infrastructure, but since nomadic pastoralists migrated within their territory, they enjoyed no access to the government's 'support system', nor could they be reached by the taxation system. Unlike Barre's young, urbanized enthusiasts, the rural population did not embrace a nationalistic ideology, and their principal point of reference remained the clan. Their ideology, explicit or implicit, implied freedom and economic self-sufficiency.

Barre's impact on the urban population was also limited, despite his attempts to redefine traditional Somali concepts

[3] In 1977-78, Somalia and Ethiopia went to war over the Ogaden region of Ethiopia, inhabited by ethnic Somalis. Soviet and Cuban intervention on the Ethiopian side led to a massive defeat for the Somalis, from which the Barre regime never materially or morally recovered.

within the parameters of his Scientific Socialism—an idea that enjoyed little practical application beyond the deliberations of the Somali Revolutionary Socialist Party and the machinery of government. If anything, the pressure on Somali society to evolve has arguably increased since the collapse of the government, as opportunities for exposure to foreign influences have multiplied: the proliferation of satellite television dishes and telephone services and the dispersion of Somalis throughout the diaspora as refugees have combined to deliver an unprecedented cultural shock, the political and social effects of which are as yet unclear.

Dynamics of the civil war

The corruption of Siyaad Barre's government and his increasingly clan-based ruling clique initially provoked opposition from a group of mainly Mijerteen military officers, who attempted first a coup d'etat, which was followed by an Ethiopian-supported rebel movement, the Somali Salvation Democratic Front (SSDF). In 1981, a group of Isaaq-based dissidents established the Somali National Movement (SNM), which became operational from Ethiopian bases in 1982. The prelude to the civil war in Somalia began early in 1981 when Siyaad Barre's security forces arrested a group of dissidents in the northwestern town of Hargeysa, triggering an outbreak of riots.

Throughout the 1980s, the SNM waged a low-intensity guerrilla war from bases in Ethiopia against government forces in the northwest. In April 1988, Siyaad Barre signed a peace agreement with Ethiopia; both sides agreed to withdraw their forces from the disputed borders and to cease harbouring each other's dissidents. Faced with the loss of its bases in Ethiopia, the

SNM launched large-scale attacks against Burco and Hargeysa. This led to massive counterattacks by Siyaad Barre's army and the exodus of nearly half a million refugees to Ethiopia.

In 1989, the SNM was joined in the field by a succession of new, largely clan-based factions, including the Somali Patriotic Movement (SPM), the United Somali Congress (USC) and the SSNM (Southern Somali National Movement). Fighting spread piecemeal throughout the south, eventually confining the administration's effective control to Muqdisho itself. In the capital, events like the executions of 48 Isaaq intellectuals in Jezira (14 April 1989) and the massacre of civilians at Muqdisho stadium (10 August 1990) increased resistance to the government while signalling the regime's growing desperation. On December 1990, USC cells in Muqdisho launched an uprising that opened the gates of the city to the main USC forces positioned just north of the capital. In late January, forces led by General Mohamed Farah Aydiid entered Muqdisho, dislodging Siyaad Barre and his followers, while the SNM rolled to victory in the Northwest (see Milas 1992: 24-26).

Siyaad Barre's ouster was welcomed by most Somalis as an opportunity to replace a centralized, authoritarian, and corrupt regime with something better. But across Somalia, political elites from each of the major clan groups had begun to chart their own fortunes among the new leadership. Within a short period it became clear that the leadership of the major factions was preoccupied with simply replacing Barre at the top of the pyramid, not dismantling the pyramid itself.

For Somalia's emergent warlords, government meant little more than access to state resources—principally those associated with international recognition and foreign aid. Lacking both the vision and the competence to establish broad-based support, most have resorted to the cynical manipulation of

kinship ties to sustain their leadership. Increasingly, the well of clan loyalty has also been running dry, forcing militia leaders to associate themselves with sectors of the war economy and to enlist mercenary militia with a promise of loot or employment.

The scale and the scope of the violence have broken virtually every Somali norm. Indiscriminate slaughter, rape, and pillage were widespread, and virtually no group can claim complete innocence, although some have clearly transgressed more than others. The clan-based dynamic of much of the early fighting led to a kind of ethnic cleansing throughout large parts of the country as people turned to their 'traditional' clan territories as places of refuge, whether or not they had ever lived there before. But clan ties have also been a source of support to people in need. As Milas asserts:

> Clannishness as a way of life has played a key role in creating the current Somali emergency. But, together with the natural resilience of Somali society and the people's resourcefulness and self-reliance, it has also played a central role in limiting the scope of the disaster. Survival mechanisms based on networks of intraclan cooperation as mutual assistance have provided a vital safety net and saved the lives of large numbers of women and children.
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> In the North and elsewhere, hundreds of thousands of destitute returnees have been allowed to share the meager resources of their extended families and subclans. The readiness of their distant relatives to share their often inadequate food and shelter has been a crucial factor in the survival of many of the displaced. [Milas 1996]

For weaker groups, clan solidarity has been of little comfort. Entire communities like the Reer Xamar, unable to defend themselves, have suffered terribly and fled the country

en masse. The Bantu in many areas have been forced into virtual slave labour by militia overlords. And the Rahanweyn, although not a 'minority' clan, were plunged into famine by the depredations of successive militias.

Despite the absence of active conflict throughout much of the country over the past few years, factional leadership has generally failed to establish effective administration, or even to assure a dependable degree of peace and public security. Nor have they managed, despite repeated international initiatives, to broker a durable peace accord. As such shortcomings on the part of the factions move into sharper focus, it is becoming clear that they are unequal to the responsibility of leadership of the Somali people. Thankfully, alternatives have begun to emerge.

In Somaliland, where peace and stability have been largely restored and where a weak but functional government has been in place since 1991, the SNM surrendered power in 1993 to a broadly based civilian administration, in a process characterized by the leadership of traditional elders and by time-honoured Somali techniques of negotiation and compromise. The outcome—a remarkable fusion of modern constitutional principles and Somali customary xeer—did not entirely succeed in keeping the peace in Somaliland, but it represents a foundation on which future refinements and improvements can be built.

In northeast Somalia, the recently formed Puntland administration appears to have followed a similar blend of the modern and the traditional and has begun to dismantle the factional structures that have served the region so poorly in recent years.

The promising, if flawed, efforts of the Digil-Mirifle clans to establish an administration throughout Bay and Bakool

regions in 1995 were undermined by infighting, and the abrupt occupation of the area by forces loyal to General Aydiid. It seems probable that a sequel to this process will take place when peace is eventually restored.

Successive efforts to establish government in Muqdisho have long been frustrated by futile attempts to link control of the former national capital to calculations of national power-sharing. More recently, national issues have been set aside in favour of a more manageable local solution for the Banaadir area, but attempts by militia leaders to dominate the discourse have complicated the prospects for a realistic power-sharing agreement.

Elsewhere in the country, the appeal of local administration has been taken up at various levels, although so far without results. While this tendency no doubt should be understood as only an intermediate step in the restoration of a broader peace and the emergence of responsible government, it also represents a victory over the efforts of the militia to perpetuate the kinds of power structures that lie at the heart of the conflict. After nearly a century of rule from above, Somalis may finally get the kind of government they need.

The Somali diaspora

While hundreds of thousands of Somalis displaced by conflict sought refuge among their kin in traditional clan areas, hundreds of thousands more opted to flee the country as refugees in neighbouring countries or to join their relatives abroad. Although Somali migration is nothing new, the impact of this latest exodus has reached all corners of the globe. Large Somali communities have been established throughout North America and Europe, the Gulf States, Asia, and Australia.

For many of these first-generation refugees, life in the host country has been far from easy, especially for men. They may spend much of their time chewing *qaad*—the plant *Catha edulis*—which is exported mainly from Kenya and Ethiopia. Qaad chewing, employed as a social ritual among Somali men, induces a mild sense of euphoria and well-being. For the unemployed, qaad sessions help to pass the time and to relieve the frustration of inactivity. But qaad is also addictive, and welfare recipients can ill afford the high cost of this highly perishable—and in many countries, illegal—drug. Over time, habitual qaad use tends to alienate the user from his wife and children, sometimes leading to marital stress, separation and divorce.

Women have generally fared somewhat better, taking advantage of new opportunities for education and employment. The consequences for many families have been stressful, as men find their traditional dominance in the family challenged. Reports of divorce and domestic abuse are not uncommon. But in the long term, the Somalis of the diaspora will probably be a vital source of human resource potential for the reconstruction of their country.

However distant refugees may find themselves from their homeland, the war is never far away. Expatriate Somalis are under pressure to share their homes and salaries with more recent arrivals. Many (probably most) send regular cash contributions to family members remaining in Somalia, regardless of their own difficult circumstances. Western governments have been surprised to discover that even Somalis on welfare continue to send remittances to their relatives.

The politics of diversity—and conflict—have also been transplanted intact to the diaspora. In many countries, Somalis have organized themselves in clan-based groups whose views are as polarized (sometimes even more so) as within

Somalia. Many have contributed directly to the conflict by raising funds for their related factions. Over time, however, such contributions seem to be diminishing as a growing number of Somalis show their fatigue with the conflict and channel their resources to family members instead.

The situation of Somalis in refugee camps closer to home is somewhat different, since they typically find themselves in a situation in which people of various clans, subclans, and ethnic groups must live together as refugees. The camp management provides for their survival and encourages integrative activities intended to develop a common social life and communication among the refugees. Nevertheless, patterns of clan identification and ethnic discrimination have tended to persist, despite people's common experience as refugees.[4]

External efforts at peace making

External attempts to intervene as facilitators or mediators for the restoration of peace to Somalia have generally been unsuccessful, whether conducted by expatriate Somalis or international actors.

A number of initiatives have been undertaken by members of the Somali diaspora in different parts of the country. One early effort established a committee known as Ergada, which became a useful resource for international peacemaking efforts but failed to establish itself as a force for peace within Somalia. The UNESCO-sponsored Somali Peace Line has also lost momentum, depending on the energies of a few

[4] This information was collected on a visit to the Dadaab camps of Ifo, Hagadera, and Dagahaley in northern Kenya. About 120,000 Somalis live officially in the camps, although the real number may be higher.

individuals rather than taking on any meaningful corporate identity. The persistent efforts of the Somaliland Peace Committee to help bring an end to the 1994-96 conflict were widely appreciated, but it is unclear to what extent they may have really helped to bring about a ceasefire. Overall, initiatives of this nature have tended to lack either the influence or the resources to play a major role.

Influence and resources alone are no guarantee of success, either. Internationally sponsored peace initiatives have produced a string of failures, some of them spectacular. According to Menkhaus, between 1991 and September 1996, 21 national-level and 23 local-level reconciliation initiatives were launched in Somalia. Some, like the United Nations' first attempt to broker a cease-fire in early 1992, were actually criticized by informed observers as having made things worse.

A major obstacle to international peace initiatives in Somalia has been the general lack of understanding of the dynamics of the conflict and their historical and societal roots. For example, many have overlooked the powerful centrifugal forces at work, while seeking to re-establish central government; others have overestimated both the legitimacy and the authority of factional leaders. Attempts to engage non-factional leaders like elders, religious leaders, and women have often demonstrated only a superficial understanding of the complex relationship between Somali 'civil society' and the militia factions. Significantly, since the failure of the high profile 'Sodere' and 'Cairo' initiatives,[5] international actors seem inclined towards a more studied, realistic approach to peace making in Somalia.

[5] Beginning in late 1996, Ethiopia hosted a number of Somali faction leaders in the town of Sodere for talks aimed at restoring a Somali government. The 'Sodere process', as it came to be known, was superseded in late 1997 by an Egyptian peace initiative launched in Cairo. Neither process achieved meaningful results.

3
The status of women in Somali society

Despite some basic similarities, the status of Somali women differs across social groups and to a certain extent across geographic areas. Some distinctions, such as those between rural and urban or nomadic and agricultural, are important enough to merit attention here. Others fall into the domain of stereotypical preconceptions between different clans in different parts of the country and are principally subjective.

Nomadic women make a decisive contribution to the economy in the form of labour and through the products of goats and sheep, some of which they own. Women are the architects of the nomad society; they both build and own the nomadic hut—an important element of the wedding ritual and the marriage and one of the many activities that women traditionally accomplish together. In the semi-arid territories of central and northern Somalia, nomadic women also work together to collect wood and fetch water, prepare food, and feed the children. Although much of this work is heavy, it teaches endurance and self-reliance, and it forges strong ties of sisterhood and loyalty.

In the more settled, agricultural areas of the country—mainly the southern, interriverine areas and parts of Somaliland—women have farming duties, working in the fields with other members of their extended family and tending herds of cattle and small livestock. Opportunities to meet other women and to share work, time, and ideas with them are thus plentiful.

In urban areas, the women's status can vary considerably. While opportunities for economic and social mobility undoubtedly exist, many urban women find their responsibilities restricted to the domestic sphere, where the possibility for self-development and interaction with other women is limited.

Marriage and divorce are important determinants in a Somali woman's life. According to Muslim law, a man may have four wives if he is able to treat all equally. In rural areas, a Somali man needs more than one wife if his herd of animals is too large to be managed properly by a single woman. There thus exists a correlation between a man's wealth and the number of women he is likely to marry. Marriage establishes strong connections between families and clans and can therefore reflect economic and political considerations.[6]

Traditionally, marriage often takes place between parallel cousins or between members of clan groups with mutual interests. A girl is 'given' to her future husband, and the bride-price is agreed between the bride's father and the groom's male relatives. Payment of a bride-price assigns women a relative value of economic worth, considered equally to be a point of honour. Whatever this value, however, a Somali woman (or more precisely, a Muslim woman) is entitled before marriage to full support from her father, and after marriage to that from her husband. A complex system of reciprocal compensation exists to formalize marriage (Lewis 1961):

- *Gabbaati* is given to the brothers of the woman at the time she is requested for marriage.

[6] This does not mean, however, that Somali women never marry for love. Elopement of determined young lovers in defiance of their respective families' wishes is a time-honoured Somali tradition.

- Y*arad* is given to the future father-in-law. Camels, horses, goats, material goods, and recently, sums of money are given by the groom and his kin to his in-laws, as a pledge to compensate them for the loss of the daughter and her future children, who become part of the man's family.
- M*eher* is the gift a man gives to his future wife, arranged before the engagement. While payment of meher is sometimes reserved until divorce, it can be paid at any time and may simply be a symbolic token, such as a Qur'an.
- *Dibaad*, which represents roughly the equivalent of a dowry, is usually a part of the yarad, returned to the bride's family when she moves to live with her husband (although it may also be paid immediately upon receipt of the yarad). The dibaad may also include the nomadic hut and other essential elements of the nomadic household.

A woman who becomes a man's second (or third, or fourth) wife theoretically has the right to request the same amount of payment as the first wife received. The reality is that these rights are handled quite differently, depending on the economic situation of the future husband, the power and importance of the bride's family, and the 'value' of the woman.[7]

After marriage, men and women assume traditionally specific marriage roles. Women are responsible for management of the house while men are involved in collective management of the community, implying that a woman's identity lies predominantly within the social roles of daughter, wife, and mother rather than as an autonomous individual.

A woman generally may not obtain a divorce unless her husband consents. Her only course of action is to seek an

[7] Which depends on her age and social background, the ability of her father to insist on the bride-price—and the ability of the fiancÈ to meet it.

agreement for her divorce between her father or relatives and her husband, and the bride-price (yarad) must typically be reimbursed. Although divorced women may lose the social status conferred upon them by their spouses, they often enjoy more freedom than married women, not being subject to the control of a husband. They may therefore face fewer social or familial constraints in pursuing employment or education, but they may also find traditional sources of support less accessible. For example, after divorce a man is under no obligation to support his previous wife, but he is under a customary obligation to support his children, and he may sometimes keep them.

Women's status within the kinship system

Although the Somali kinship system is principally patrilineal, affinal (maternal) ties retain an important social role.[8] Many clans include the names 'habar' or 'bah', implying that they have evolved from 'uterine' alliances between brothers from a common mother (Lewis 1961). In the family, the role of the maternal uncle *(abti)* is believed to be of special significance to a child. And at the time of burial, the deceased is generally identified in reference to the mother rather than the father.

Unlike a man, a woman's kinship affiliation will usually change at least once, and sometimes more often, during her lifetime. She is part of the father's lineage until she is married,

[8] Cerulli spoke historically (1920) of a ritual by the clan group of the Mataan Cabdullah, who began their assemblies with a song: 'Grandma, we came to see you. Grandma, give us good auspices!' *('Aboota ku nimidee, abotaayo aurad na sii!'*) The assembly was held above her grave. Some scholars emphasize the predominance of matrilineal clans in historical times.

then she becomes linked to her husband's lineage by marriage and, more importantly, by the children of the union.[9] After marriage, she retains her father's name, but 'belongs' in law to her husband through the marriage contract. However, despite her loyalties to her husband and children, she is perceived throughout her life principally as a member of her father's lineage.

The eventual 'loss' of a daughter to another lineage group is one of the reasons that boy children are typically valued more highly than girls.[10] Furthermore, boys can contribute to the size and protection of the clan since they traditionally carry a weapon and share in the *mag (diya)* obligations of their group. Such prejudices are compounded by the unequal treatment received by children of different sexes at an early age, particularly with respect to education. Men consider the education of girls, even in q'uranic schools, less important than the education of boys: girls are regarded as intellectually irresponsible, while boys are educated to train their rhetorical capacity and to be economically self-sustaining. Thus a Somali proverb says—

> Knowledge cannot come to reside in a bosom that has contained milk.

If a lack of financial resources means that not all children in a family can attend school, boys will be given priority. Even if a family can afford to educate all its children, young daughters

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[9] Unmarried women over the age of 25 are to some extent social outsiders unless they are from a privileged rich family. Women are less subject to traditional social roles if they study at university level and thus get the chance to become socioeconomically independent.

[10] Newly married or expectant couples are traditionally wished 'wiil iyo caano' (a boy and milk) by well-wishers—not a girl.

are often required to provide valuable labour in the household and in rural production, which could be disrupted by schooling (see Aden 1994). A woman who gives birth to boys, therefore, earns greater prestige than mothers of girls only.

Boys are circumcised according to Qur'anic law; girls, however, are traditionally infibulated in a manner that arguably contradicts Islamic dictates. The practice of 'pharaonic' circumcision and infibulation contributes directly to the elevated incidence of maternal mortality in Somali society and to a broad range of other female health problems. In Somalia's strongly patrilineal and nomadic society, infibulation is considered an important guarantee of a woman's virginity, her honour, and her eligibility for marriage. The perpetuation of this practice is endorsed at least as widely among women as among men.

Women and Islam in Somalia

Practices like infibulation help to underline some of the contradications between Somali tradition and the tenets of Islamic faith. The Qur'an affirms the equality of men and women, while recognizing their differences:

> He [Allah] it is who did create you from a single soul and therefrom did create his mate, that he might dwell with her . . . [Qur'an 7: 189]

In practice, however, much of the Qur'an and the hadiths have been interpreted in accordance with pre-Islamic custom, exaggerating the gender-biased organization of Somali society. For example, where the Qur'an prescribes strict conditions for polygyny, Somali men often perceive a licence for

multiple marriage, whether these conditions are fulfilled or not. Arranged marriages remain relatively common, despite the affirmation in Islamic law that a woman cannot be forced to marry without her consent.

This bias also pervades public life. Only the most conservative interpretations of Islam could deny women the right to vote or the right to be nominated to political office. Examples exist in both the Qur'an and the hadiths of women who engaged the Prophet himself in debate on matters of public import (see Qur'an 58: 1-4 and 60: 10-12; Badawi 1991: 24). Nevertheless, reference is often made in Somali political discourse to one Islamic hadith[11] that says that 'A people will not prosper if they let a woman be their leader,' justifying the continuing marginalization of women in public life.

In the postwar era, it appears that Somali religious beliefs have shifted perceptively towards conservatism. After marriage—although not as unmarried girls—Somali women used to cover their hair with a scarf that was primarily decorative. Today, an increasing proportion of urban women no longer appear uncovered outside the house. Women have come under increasing pressure in many areas to completely cover the body and hair, leaving visible only the face and hands. This has not been Somali tradition, although Somalia has been a Muslim society for close to a millenium. Many Somali women today define their covering as the result of a better understanding of Islam and more sophisticated understanding of 'cultural female privacy'. Others explain that covering is simply the new Somali fashion. But in many cases the new dress code appears to represents the con-

[11] Although people do quote it, this hadith is debatable, as there is no evidence that the Prophet stated it.

struction of cultural and social differences—a process defined as 'othering' by Edward Said (1994)—implicitly denigrating uncovered women.

The conduct of Somali women has emerged as a highly symbolic issue in the emergent confrontation between the new Islamists and proponents of more traditional Somali Islam. As Leila Ahmed observes—

> Typically, women—and the reaffirmation of indigenous customs relating to women and the restoration of the customs and laws of past Islamic societies with respect to women—are the centerpiece of the Islamist agenda of political Islamists. [1992: 216]

Deniz Kandiyoti takes the argument a step further —

> In countries where the prominent form of cultural nationalism is Islamic, for instance, feminist discourse can legitimately proceed only in one of two directions: either denying that Islamic practices are necessarily oppressive or asserting that oppressive practices are not necessarily Islamic. [1994: 380]

Various efforts to address these issues have yet to produce a cohesive feminist platform in Somalia that can articulate these arguments in a socially meaningful way.

Women within the legal system

Over the years, Somalis have come to know a bewildering variety of legal systems. While some of them have been associated with specific historical periods or colonial powers, they have at times coexisted and overlapped. The implications for women are significant, and some codes have been inherently more progressive on the subject than others.

Cerulli's analysis of precolonial law attempts to establish parallels with modern legal concepts within the framework of traditional xeer. Among Cerulli's main observations are the following:[12]

- In *public law*, a woman does not take part in the assembly *(shir)*.
- In *civil law* (xeer), a woman does not exist as an independent legal person; she is always under the jurisdiction of others. Before marriage, she is the responsibility of her father. If the father of an unmarried woman dies, another relative (usually the paternal uncle, *adeer*) may substitute for the father until she is married. Once married, she falls under the jurisdiction of her husband. A woman therefore submits *de jure* to the control of men for her entire life.
- Through xeer, a woman can inherit her ancestors' property, like her brothers.
- In *criminal law*, the blood-price (mag or diya) of a woman is less than that of a man. If a woman has been killed, the clan of the killer usually pays only half the amount paid if the victim is a man.
- If a woman commits a crime, the clan of her husband or father must pay compensation on her behalf; if she is wronged, the clan of her husband or father receives compensation *(xaal)*.

These brief examples of customary law describe a situation in which women are not considered responsible members of society, and in which their lives are of unequal value to those of men. Decisions are taken on their behalf; they are controlled and protected.

[12] Cerulli's observations do not necessarily hold true for all Somalis. Laws and customs vary from place to place, and no single description is universally accurate.

During the colonial period, elements of secular western legal codes were introduced by the British and Italian governments. Application of these codes was limited, however, and much of Somalia social interaction continued to be regulated according to customary practice. In the north, the British government actually recognized the role of xeer, and colonial administrators were bound to uphold them. The transition to independence brought little real change to the practice of civil and criminal law, of which the majority of Somalis were either unaware or indifferent.

During the Siyaad Barre era, new legislation sought to accelerate the replacement of customary and religious law with secular legal practices. Clans were 'abolished' and with them the role of xeer; payment of mag or diya was outlawed. The promulgation of the Family Law of 11 January 1975 was specifically intended to upgrade the legal status of women, and it provoked vocal resistance from religious scholars and other conservative leaders. Article 5 of the law reads—

> Marriage is a contract between a man and a woman who are equal in rights and duties: its bases are mutual understanding and respect; its objective is the formation of a united family, which is the basic unit of society, and the husband is the head of the family by law.

In reality, only a minority of women, mainly urban, were directly affected by Siyaad Barre's reforms, although among these, a considerable number took advantage of the opening to pursue new economic and social opportunities. But even the limited progress represented by the Family Law has been reversed since the collapse of the government: much of the country reverted to total lawlessness, while other areas have reinstated a combination of customary and religious law.

Women and traditional modes of association

Despite the strong influence of clan ties upon both men and women, women have long maintained alternative forms of association based on solidarity and reciprocal support, which offer points of reference beyond the family or the kin group. For example, Somali women of the urban areas and villages often practise ritualized meetings known in parts of the country as *madax shub*. In some areas, this may be a regular Thursday afternoon meeting coinciding with the beginning of the weekend (Friday is the holy day in Muslim societies), while in others it may take place only to celebrate a special occasion like marriage. Usually the meeting is made up of 10 or 15 married women linked through friendship. It is commonly held in the home of a woman in the group. The women pour warm, perfumed oil on their heads and smoke their hair with *uunsi* (incense). Such meetings offer a respite from household obligations and allow women to associate beyond the immediate family circle, to share news, and to discuss matters of mutual concern.

On certain occasions, like the anniversary of the death of a beloved person or the impending birth of a child, women may come together to read the Qur'an and to recite *dighri*, which are traditions concerning the admirable actions of women close to the Prophet, like his daughter Faduuma and his wife Caasha.

Other modes of association have developed to address women's psychological and spiritual needs:

Booranme is possession by a spiritual being who speaks through the mouth of the possessed woman, sometimes with the voice of a man. She requests coffee and food with which to appease the upset spirit *(jinni)*. After the ceremony, the woman returns to normal.

Mingis is a more complex exorcism rite that requires an expensive ceremony, including slaughtering animals, eating, drinking coffee, and dancing. Sometimes a woman becomes possessed when her husband wants to marry a second wife. Then she requests such a ceremony—which may be so expensive that it becomes difficult for the husband to afford the second wedding.

In the coastal area, the Reer Xamar and the Arabs call such possession *barkin*. The ritual is highly regarded by women, as it is a chance for them to vent their psychological tensions or a strategic way to acquire little 'necessities'. Men are pressured to respect the rite, but many conservative Muslim groups detest these ceremonies, which they consider 'un-Islamic'.

Islamic fraternities (tariiqa) offer another way for women to develop ties across kinship groups. A number of brotherhoods have been established in Somalia for centuries and imply adherence to the teachings of a revered Islamic scholar rather than any inclination to fundamentalism. In fact, the more established brotherhoods have become gradually acclimatized to Somali custom, combining religious teachings with social and cultural traditions. Women may live in a brotherhood, working in the fields, taking part in the rituals in honour of Muslim saints, and sharing the social life with the other members of the brotherhood, who are not necessarily from the same clan or even from associated clans.

Also, women join in traditional credit schemes called *hagbad, ayuuto,* or *shalongo:*

> Loans directly from one individual to another are not the only way in which money is lent in Somalia. As in many other parts of Africa, women come together to form rotating credit groups. These

> groups are based on friendship and reciprocal trust. The name of the group is different depending on the area in which it has been formed. Typically a group of women arrange to each contribute a specified sum of money each day (or week or month) to a common fund. Each day one of the members takes a turn collecting the total amount for her personal use. Each day a different member takes a turn collecting the total amount, until all members have had a turn. In some groups, the money is only collected by members when there is an emergency for exceptionally large expenditures. To the extent that members have access to the lump sum before they have made their full contribution, the system is a form of credit. For those who have access to the lump sum after they have made their full contribution, the system operates as a saving mechanism.[13]

Women from the rural areas find fewer opportunities to associate. Often they are working the whole day in the settlement or with the herds, watching their children, cooking, and selling their products. Meetings at the wells, in the marketplace, or on their way to collect wood are among the few chances to intermingle with other women.

The *buraanbur,* a type of poem or song, is an important and powerful medium used by women throughout Somalia to express themselves and to share their experiences with other women. Although their political position is informal and and they are excluded from official decision-making, women have created their own way to participate by influencing men's decisions through buraanburs.

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[13] This explanation of credit schemes is excerpted from the Somalia Country Report for the Fourth World Conference on Women (1995: 21).

Gender roles and the division of labour

The gender-based division of labour helps to explain the subdivision of men's and women's roles in both public and private life. Despite their politically and legally subordinate status, women have traditionally played a vital role in the economic well-being of their households and communities. While this has historically allowed women to exert considerable private, informal influence within their families, recently it has led increasingly towards an expanding role for women in the public sphere.

New opportunities for women have not been universally welcomed. Many Somalis are accustomed to a division of labour and responsibilities based on gender with respect to livestock and agricultural and household tasks but in which women have traditionally been excluded from public life. Women have typically been forbidden to participate directly in important gatherings, to hold positions of community responsibility, or to testify as a legal witness; institutions like marriage and divorce are legalized only by men; and women have until recently been considered to possess generally inferior intellectual capabilities. As Abdulaziz Sharif Aden (1994: 31) writes—

> Young daughters were seen as manpower in the household and in agricultural production, which could be disturbed by schooling . . . Men in these villages[14] also considered education of the girls, even in the Qur'an school, as empowerment and a potential danger to male dominance. [1994: 29-30]

Women of the precolonial, urban middle class may have inhabited an ostensibly more sophisticated social environment,

[14] A. S. Aden (University of Umea, Sweden) did his field research in Lamadoonka and Buulalow, neighbouring villages in southern Somalia.

but in practice they enjoyed few real opportunities or freedoms. Relative to rural women their economic contribution was . . .

> . . . not crucial to the central economic pursuit of the city state, that of buying and selling. Because women's labour was relegated to the domestic domain and was not compensated monetarily, middle class women were economically dependent on their husbands and fathers. This dependence was symbolized by their seclusion inside the house and behind large body veils. [Kapteijns 1994: 17]

During the colonial period urbanization increased, especially after 1922, when an administrative structure was created that involved more and more Somalis. But there were few employment opportunities for women. If they were hired for low-level jobs, it was usually because they were less expensive than men—although some also began to earn the reputation of being more reliable in their work.

During the Italian trusteeship and under civilian government, the traditional pattern of sexual division of labour remained largely intact; the liberation of the Somali people had little immediate impact on the status of Somali women. Over the next few decades, however, women gradually became more integrated into the public viriarchy, which enabled them to receive an education and to gain in technical knowledge and professionalism.

Under the Barre regime, women increasingly took part in public life: within the administration, in the army (if they had a secondary school diploma), and to some extent in the government. The introduction of Barre's political philosophy of scientific socialism generated some effort to build up women's identity as national citizens. Particularly in the capital Muqdisho, women were recognized as a potential labour force and as ideological supporters of the new political system. Ar-

ticle 55 of the new Worker's Statute provided the right of equal salary for equal work to women, although this was only partially implemented within the labour force. Women acquired access to technical or professional education.

The Barre government's efforts to promote the advancement of women were led by the Somali Women's Democratic Organization (SWDO). At the Nairobi World Conference on Women in 1985, SWDO reported that Somali women's participation in the political sphere during that period 'manifested heightened political consciousness, social awareness, and assertion of women's rights' (SWDO 1985 as quoted in Somalia Report for the Fourth Women's Conference Beijing 1995). The same report gives an overview on women's involvement in politics:

> Significant changes relating to women's participation in governance began during the 1970s. With the establishment of a party system in 1976, women had the opportunity to participate by holding some positions of leadership and civil administration. An outstanding achievement to eliminate discriminatory provisions in the legal system and to secure the legal status of women was the promulgation of the Family Law in 1975. This law gave equal rights to women and men in matters of marriage, divorce and inheritance. Another achievement was the establishment of the Labour Code in 1972 that promoted the equality of women in the work place. Under Law No. 173 of 1975, which made all land state property, women could obtain land leases or inherit leaseholds. The promulgation of the 1978 Constitution established equal rights and duties for women and men alike.

But high-minded idealism and rhetoric was not matched by the reality of a majority of Somali women. Government efforts were highly centralized and were soon overtaken by the same maladies that seized much of the state apparatus:

patronage, corruption, and inefficiency. Progressive ideals became little more than a vehicle for individual and group interests, with little relevance to Somali society at large.

> Women continued to be marginal or ambiguous members of their clans . . . Siyaad Barre's state feminism . . . became the source of much clan-based and class-based clientage extended to a selected group of women. [Kapteijns 1994: 229]

Most of principal beneficiaries—educated women in the urban areas—were forced to flee during the civil war or sought continued opportunities for employment and education abroad. In the rural areas, women lived much as they always had, engaged in their traditional roles, tied to a subsistence life-style.

> The very problem of the difficulty of contacting and involving the nomadic population which lives far away from the villages has been felt by the political militants of the Somali Revolutionary Socialist Party and by the Democratic Organization of Somali Women, which now consists of more than 10,000 members. This organization was created in 1971 as the feminine section of the Political Office of the Presidency, established itself as an autonomous organization on 8 March 1977 and it is allied to the Party. The Party was formed in 1976 with a female presence of 20,000 members, i.e., 66% of the total. This organization in cooperation with the Party takes many initiatives of the cultural and social type, which tend to involve more and more popular strata of the society, and also for the solution of problems such as health education, child care and the creation of nurseries. [Forni 1981: 23]

Any conclusions one might be tempted to draw from the description should probably await a fuller understanding of the accuracy of these numbers, the role of female party members, and the social strata from which these women were

drawn. And the predominance of women among the party membership was not matched by corresponding gains in the regime's power structure: women like Faduuma Cumar Xaashi, Minister of Public Instruction, and Rakiya Haashi Duale, Vice-Minister of Health, were rare exceptions among the more than 70 ministers of the Barre era. Forni notes:

> . . . a closer examination of participation in the political structures of the government reveals that the male:female ratios in the legislative, juridical and executive branches were as follows:
>
> - all five members of the Politburo were male
> - of the 76 members of the Central Committee, only one was female
> - in the 51 member Council of Ministers, there were only two female deputy ministers
> - in the 176 member People's Assembly (parliament), only ten were female
> - in the foreign service, only two of the 49 appointed ambassadors were female

Such figures suggest that the government's commitment to the advancement of women was represented less by legal articles like the Worker's Statute and the Family Law than by the kinds of concerns expressed by Siyaad Barre in 1975 when he wrote —

> Do not make men—in a so-called sex war—the target of your struggle. We are talking about building strong, healthy families based on the principles of freedom, equality and justice; we are talking about protecting our families from the exploitation of imperialism and capitalism. This is no time for petty-exhibitionist, sexist quarrels and confrontations. Such divisions wreck family,

> class and national unity and expose all of us to the power and greed of imperialism.

Barre's 21 years of rule represented an unprecedented upheaval in the discourse, if not the practice, of feminism in Somalia, but what little real progress may have been made was quickly reversed when the civil war erupted. The disintegration of state returned Somali women to the confines of family and tradition, from which they had begun to emerge barely a generation earlier.

But the war has also provided opportunities for progress. The war economy has in some ways favoured women. It has obliged them to replace men as the principal wage-earners in their families and has thus empowered them in important—if private—ways. Women's ambiguous kinship ties and their non-combatant status have allowed them to engage in intercommunal trade activities too risky for men. Some women have developed broad commercial alliances with other women across the country. Modest as they may be, such gains in women's influence and autonomy represent important post-war alternatives to the traditional roles women might otherwise have expected.

Buraanbur from Bari Region

Xumaan magocdaane samahay u gogol dhigaan
Goor iyo ayaan midnimadey u geyfanyihiin
Somaliya gebi ahaanteed makala guraan
Inay qaran goba ahaateey gorfaynayaan
Inay xaqa garab galaan waa u guntanahayaan
Hadiise gobanimadi oydee geyigu burburay
Gabdhaha Soomaaliyeed raaxo uma gamaan
Gufurka haray iyo agoontay gardaadsadeen
Suuqyaday gaaf warregaan sidii galaydh
Ganacsiga iyo hawsha gurigay u gaaryihiin
Wixii gaf dhacaayay hal go'aana kuma lahayn
Ammaan gaariyo bilada goldanay muteen
Gooban joognaba ducaan faraqa ugu guntaa
Fariin gaar aan raggeena u gudbinahayaa
Idinka oo aan gurub gurub u kala go'anyn
Gees u wada jeeda beelina gadaasha u harin
Guurtidiina iyo Aqoonyahannnadow gurmada
Walaala is gowracana Alaa qadiray
Gumaadka ilaawa tirayaridu waa gablame
Gacaliyaalow Hadii aad is gowracdaan
Gaal iyo Islaamka labadaba maxaa ka galay
Barooriba waxay gashaa guriga ay lahayd
Inaynu gobal gobal u kala yaacno waa gaf weyn
Guulehay waxaan ka sugayaa
Hashiis la galo
Laguna guulaysto Soomaali gebi ahaan

—Fadumo Maxamuud Cusmaan

Buraanbur from Bari Region

We, the womenfolk in Bari region, are not vindictive
and are ready for peace making;
As always, we are in readiness fostering the unity of
the Somali society.
To us, Somalis are one, and we never engage in acts
dividing the nation.
It is our aspiration to safeguard the independence and
dignity of the Somali nation.
To achieve justice for all is a principle vehemently
supported by womenfolk.
In the face of fallen and crying statehood and
devastation of the country,
Somali womenfolk do not sleep at ease.
They shoulder the immense task of supporting the
remnants of war-ravaged society and the orphaned;
They hawk in the streets like a vulture to eke out a
precarious living for their families in distress;
They engage in petty trade beyond their domestic
responsibilities;
They were never engaged in the Somali crisis;
Their neutrality and mitigation of the impact of war
earn them admiration and the highest award
(golden medal).
Wherever I am, I offer profuse prayers to womenfolk.
Now, I would like to convey a particular message to
men:
Without getting splintered into rival factions,
Without leaving behind any faction, together unite in
a common purpose and direction;

Rally the peace forces, the guurti and the political
leaders for the cause of peacemaking.
Slaughtering of the brethren in Somalia happened
due to God's providence.
Abstain from mass slaughter; limited population
denies us the strength to defend our interest.
If maternal kinsmen continue to massacre each other,
What business is there for the infidel and the Islamic
world?
Every society has its home in this world;
To divide Somali society along clan and regional lines
is mortal sin.
I am in an eager anticipation from Allah, the
victorious,
For a negotiated settlement to come—
A comprehensive peace accord and resurrection of
the sovereignty of the Somali state.

4
Somali women in war and peace

Women at war

After two decades of despotic and ruinous rule, many Somalis looked forward to the prospect of change and a better future. Men and women across the country prayed, struggled and in some cases even fought side by side to unseat the military regime and start afresh. But as violence escalated and propaganda multiplied, any initial coherence in the rebellion was superseded by cynical power struggles between competing militia commanders and the intensification of clan-based chauvinism. Women and men alike were caught up by the momentum as the conflict lurched from liberation struggle to the aimless civil war that claimed among its victims roughly half a million Somalis—mainly civilians—the Barre government, and ultimately the Somali state itself.

As in most contemporary conflicts, Somali women bore the brunt of the war. Untold numbers of them were killed, looted, raped, displaced, abandoned, and sexually abused. But many women also succumbed to the logic of fear and hatred that fuelled the violence. Women have lent spiritual and material support to the militia, cooked food for fighting men, and taken care of the wounded. Women have sold their jewellery[15] or collected funds to contribute to the war effort. Women have helped to mobilize militia forces through public rallies, buraanburs, and more subtle pressures.

[15] It has been suggested that Somali history be studied through a history of jewellery, gaining information from a woman's perspective.

As Fadumo Jibril emphasized at a Somali Peace Conference in February 1997—

> Let us not pretend innocence. Women must accept their share of violating the Allah-given rights of others. Since 1991, women have been igniting fires that burn lives still. Women have empowered and encouraged their husbands, their leaders and their militia to victimize their fellow countrymen. . . . Women cry, they grieve, they remain weary—but do not learn the lesson—a lesson that has cost them more than they will ever know.

A small minority of women physically took part in the fighting—often as a reaction to dramatic experiences like the deaths of their loved ones. The following interview is just one example:

Interview with a gunwoman, August 1996, Marka

Age: 23 years
School level: college licence
Profession: banker
Location: Muqdisho
Marital status: widow

How long have you been a member of the militia?

In 1990 I was a cashier in the bank. Our senior manager [from another clan] was responsible for the cash. It was proven that he was a cheat, but instead of arresting him, they put me in jail along with eight others [from my clan].

We were in jail for six months without any trial. After that time we were freed through an amnesty, as Barre usually gave one around the 21st of October. I was very upset when I came out of jail. I heard that the militia for the USC was being recruited. I went to Belet-Weyne, and since that time I have been part of the USC. At the beginning I cooked for the militia, then I learned to use

guns, and so I became a gunwoman.

At the beginning, we were five girls, including myself [all from different clans]. I was the only one to become a gunwoman.
I liked how I was living. I was very happy. We fought and defeated Barre.

If you are far away you are scared by the arms and the fighting, but if you are in the middle of it you aren't any more. When the fighting [in Muqdisho] began, I didn't want any more to take part, because it had not been for those reasons that I started to fight. I did not like a battle among [my clan group].

During those days I was wounded, but I was not fighting at that time. I have been wounded seven times in my life.
In the year 1993 I married a gunman. We knew each other during the war. I got pregnant. I began to fight again when UNOSOM tried to catch Aidiid and his clan.

I was pregnant but I continued to fight until the end. We travelled during the night to bring the bullets to our troops. We passed the UNOSOM checkpoints looking as if we had children on our shoulders. We brought even food and information.

When the Americans decided to leave Aidiid, he himself came to the tribute to talk to us. I was there to have a party with my friends when I got labour pains. They brought me to the hospital where my daughter was born.

What motivated you to become a member of the militia?

I was looking for justice and freedom. I freed myself from the dictatorship, but I am not free yet. There are still the old personalities from Barre's area and since they are around there is no hope.
What are your activities within the militia?

I am very important within the militia. They recognize me as a very important member, because even during the fighting I was able to do whatever they do. If they did not see me for a couple of days they came to look for me. If they make themselves ready for a battle, they call me to come with them.

Which groups of your society do you identify yourself with?

I identify myself as a mother, a youth, and a gunwoman.
What are your future plans?

I want to stop fighting and to think about the future of my daughter, who has already lost her father during the war. I even want to study, I want to learn how to use the computer.

Describe your activities in a typical day.

The life of a militia woman is one of continuously being on the defensive. You have to be on guard, you have to take care all the time. If there is someone wounded you have to take care of them, and during the war anything can happen to you.

What do you think about solidarity and peace?

I believe in justice and peace, but until I get them I will continue to search for them.

How do you imagine the future of Somalia?

Peace is not near, since there are those elders, *afar-jeeble*,[16] who took their children to the foreign countries and then they kill those of the poor people. Those are the ones who destroyed us. They destroyed the country with their ideas. We fought, but they took advantage of us. We hadn't the money to buy the bullets and they bought them for us.

If I could commend the youths, then the elders would have to retire because they already worked too much. It is time for them to leave the place for others with new ideas. There are people who are busy with politics since the 60s. It seems not acceptable to me.

I have a half-paralysed hand, even I go lame. I have had TB and nobody helped me. You are good only if you are healthy and

[16] Literally, 'four-pocketed', meaning many pockets in which to put money, referring to those whose only interest was in gaining wealth.

if you can fight for them. If one of us is wounded and in the hospital we take care of him, we are his or her family.

During [one] battle against [another group] I was at home, because my daughter had recently been born. Gunmen came and tried to kill me. At that time I was not fighting, I was at home, but they wanted to kill me only because [of my clan]. The destiny is bizarre. I had never participated at the fighting among [my clan], but all three times I was wounded as a civilian and not as a militia member.

I would be able to fight again only if I could see situations worse than the ones I saw that made me start fighting.

My husband was killed during a fight against the American rangers.

I think I could have a role during the search for peace, because I could bridge with my militia friends, because if it is one of them to talk with, the dialogue would be easier.

But you have to propose an alternative to the gun to those guys. You need to establish some possibilities to study and work. That is what the international agencies don't want to understand. Some of them refuse to pay the armed watchmen. I find them ridiculous if they think they can work in an armed country without armed watchmen.

They don't understand that if they would give a job to a gunwoman or man with regular payment, they would get them out of the control of the elders. If they give them skills, they get them away from the street. Since there will not be found a solution for us armed people there will not be peace.

For some of us who had not the opportunity to study, the gun is all they have and without a gun they feel lost. There is a need to teach them, to show them that they do have other potentials. Some of us are poets, some are war strategists, some of us are able to fix guns of any type, others are athletes, others are singers, and some have a very strong mind that can remember everything that really happened during these years. All those are potentials that have to be discovered.

War's impact on women

From 1991 onwards, following the collapse of the government, many women found their situations increasingly ambiguous. Many women shared family ties with two groups in conflict with one another. In such cases, when male relatives fought against one other, women might suffer bereavement on both sides. Although a woman's solidarity typically lies with her husband[17] and his clan, the stress for such a woman was not inconsequential.

The direct impact of war upon Somali women has been dramatic. Tens of thousands of men have been killed, leaving widows and orphans behind. Bereavement and separation have forced thousands of women to live displaced within Somalia or as refugees in foreign countries. Thousands more women face a similar fate simply because the pressures of war—displacement, poverty, and despair—have destroyed their marriages. Today, many women live alone or without relatives to support them, and a significant number of the women in Somalia are the only breadwinners in the family. As war erodes the opportunities for such women to fall back upon traditional forms of support, many must now assume the sole responsibility for their children, receiving little or no aid from their husbands, parents, or relatives. The feminization of poverty is thus on the increase.

Customary Somali norms of human dignity have also been violated. Rape has become regular practice, evolving from an occasional criminal transgression to a systematic instrument of intergroup violence and humiliation:

[17] This finding is derived from answers to a questionnaire administered by Martina Steiner as background to this study.

> Although sexual assault was not unknown in traditional, pastoralist Somali society, mechanisms existed that served to deter and redress sexual assault. Within traditional Somali society it is the duty of a woman's family to protect and honour her status within the community. Thus in cases of sexual assault or abuse it is her family or clansmen who are charged with seeking redress of the situation and by the same token receive compensation from the offending parties. [Beijing Report 1995: 35]

Like more conventional forms of violence, the incidence of rape has overwhelmed traditional forms of protection and redress—a problem compounded by the disproportionate targeting of militarily weak minority groups. The result is inevitably a combination of intense physical and psychological stress for rape victims, provoking reactions that range from general aggression towards men to mental sickness.[18]

Traditional means for resolving conflict

The scope and dynamic of the current civil war has overwhelmed traditional Somali methods of conflict management and resolution. Modern military technology combined with the employment of indiscriminate weapons like famine, ethnic cleansing, and rape has thrust casualty figures beyond the point that mag or diya payments and the provisions of xeer have any force. On the other hand, the coincidence of political and clan identities among the combatants, the manipulation of kinship ties as political and military resources, and the lack of cohesion within the principal factions have conspired to defeat more conventional attempts to restore peace.

[18] As most Somali women are infibulated, the physical and psychological consequences of rape are drastic.

Traditionally, Somali elders and religious specialists were called upon to resolve conflicts on the basis of mutually agreed principles involving existing xeer and legal precedent. Successful outcomes depended on the consent of all parties to the conflict as well as their capacity to enforce compliance upon their followers. Attempts by successive Somali governments to broker and enforce agreements between clans have been discredited by the failure of government to remain impartial and to respect outcomes. In general, however, conflict resolution efforts were flexible and specific, varying from one situation to the next.

In the traditional setting, women are not considered for formal positions of power in society and are typically excluded from formal meetings, regardless of whether these are focused on conflict resolution or other community concerns.[19] Their contribution to public life is restricted to the private influence they wield over their husbands, fathers, sons, brothers, and uncles as they sit together under a tree or in another shady place and talk until the conflicting parties come to an agreement.

Traditional settlements generally involve various kinds of compensation for the offended party: usually the payment of mag (diya) or xaal in the form of camels, horses or other livestock. G*odobtir*—the offer of a woman (or women) as spouse to the offended party—was practised chiefly to strengthen inter-communal ties in the wake of a dispute.

However effective such practices may have been in the past, they have proven inadequate to address violence on the scale in which it has occurred during the civil war. Where casualties mount into the hundreds or thousands, calculations of livestock as compensation become virtually meaningless; the wholesale dispossession of communities from their lands

[19] This information is based on the field research of Abdulaziz Sharif Aden, who kindly permitted its use in this paper.

and assets has no formula for redress and in any case can usually be mitigated only by the return of lands and property to their owners. (In some areas, large cash payments or ex post facto rental agreements between the parties have been successfully negotiated.)

At the same time, the credibility of clan 'elders' as peace brokers has suffered dramatically over the past few decades, diminishing their moral authority in the present conflict. Past governments routinely purchased the loyalty of elders with titles or cash, a practice that some clearly hope to revive. In many cases, clan elders are the same urban businessmen and politicians who manage the conflict (or even profit from it) and who lack the will or commitment to seek a negotiated solution. Younger men (below the age of 40) may join the elders, whether or not they possess a reputation for wisdom and justice. Not surprisingly, many Somalis have become cynical about the motives and authority of their elders and argue that corrupt elders need to be removed. A 26-year-old woman from the Togdheer region with a secondary school education argued the point this way —

> To achieve concrete peace it is absolutely necessary to stop these corrupt afar-jeeble elders, who are all the same whether they are in Muqdisho, Kismaayo, or the north of Somalia. They are those who create problems among the youth and who exploit them. They don't give them anything except the *qaad,* which they never miss.[20] They are destructive for the youth, and the only possibility

[20] The mention of *qaad* refers to an important social issue: the widespread consumption by Somali males of the mild stimulant *Catha edulis.* Although chewing qaad is considered in many places to be an important part of social ritual, the practice is addictive, and many men spend much of their household income on their daily habit. Women are generally excluded from qaad sessions, and few use it (although there are indications that qaad chewing among women has become more common since the civil war). However, as the qaad trade is lucrative, many women earn income as qaad retailers.

of defeating those elders is to keep the youth away by giving them jobs and schooling.

The importance of Islam in the peace process

As so often in times of distress, religion has emerged as a source of comfort and reassurance for many Somalis, as well as a valued point of reference that transcends parochial, political, and clan-based interests. The importance of shared Islamic values and principles in reuniting this bitterly divided people cannot be overestimated.

In those parts of Somalia and Somaliland to which peace has been restored, Islam and the shari'a have typically been cited as pillars of the new society and its government. In parts of the south, Islamic courts represent first attempts by communities to restore public institutions, law and order. Throughout the country, mosques have played an important role in preaching restraint and tolerance (although some have occasionally played the opposite role).

Despite the depth of Somali belief in Islam and the central place the religion occupies in their perception of themselves, Somalis differ widely in their interpretations and practices. Traditional Somali Islamic beliefs must now coexist with more conservative, politicized versions of the faith. The prolonged period of civil strife and distress has opened the door to a new breed of militant Islamists, often sponsored by foreign organizations. Al Ittihad, Al Islah, and numerous other sects have emerged as important new forces on the Somali social and political map. Some have successfully recruited militiamen to serve as fundamentalist missionaries with the same enthusiasm they applied in their careers as gunmen. Al

Ittihad has shown itself capable of mobilizing an important military force from a cross-clan base of support.

Unlike the conventional Somali factions, the Islamists pursue clear-cut social agenda, winning support through their outreach to a war-weary people. Underpinned by extensive holdings in the private sector, including hotels, *xawalaad* (money transfer services), and import-export concerns, the most sophisticated offer medical care, schooling, and training, as well as support to struggling entrepreneurs. Practices vary, but in many cases these social services come with strings attached: membership in the group, regular attendance at certain mosques, and complying with a dress code and behaviour—particularly for women. Many women do not distinguish between the dictates of ordinary religious behaviour and the narrow interpretations of foreign fundamentalist ideologies.

Tension between the fundamentalists and the proponents of 'Somali Islam'[21] is already sharp. Many Somalis resent the foreign roots of the Islamists and the suggestion that their own Islamic beliefs are somehow inadequate. Others resist what they perceive as a clear political agenda to establish a conservative Islamic Somali state. A number of more traditional tariiqas pride themselves on defending their Islamic beliefs from any kind of encroachment.[22]

Islam's potential to overcome Somalia's divisions and to nurture a lasting peace is thus at odds with the divisiveness and violence represented by competing fundamentalist ideologies. Most disturbing, perhaps, is the overt ambition of the

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[21] The specific traditional interpretation of Islam according to the Cushitic pre-Islamic religion, which fits very much into the social and cultural needs of Somali society.

[22] This situation recalls the resistance by more traditional Somali religious orders, such as the Qaadiriiyya, to the new creed introduced at the beginning of the century by Sayid Maxamed Cabdille Xassan.

most vigorous movements to reintroduce the kind of centralized, authoritarian leadership Somalis have fought so hard to overthrow. Finally, none of the major Islamist organizations has awarded a public role to their female membership. Their leadership, like their ideology, is overwhelmingly masculine, leaving Somali women no voice in the peace process, nor in the society that would follow.

Women's contributions towards peace

The overall reduction in hostilities across Somalia over the past few years has been accompanied by a growing disengagement of women from the dynamic of conflict and a growing emphasis on their responsibilities as breadwinners with children and other dependants to support. But women have not only disengaged from violence; in many cases they have taken an active role in peace processes, both locally and nationally. Scholarly reports and articles have generally overlooked the contribution of women to key conferences and meetings,[23] an example of which involves the efforts of women in Bari region to defuse a potentially dangerous political dispute within the SSDF faction. The background—

> The Mudug accord was signed on June 4 [1993]. It established a tentative understanding [between two faction leaders] which fell short of an open alliance but which strengthened the political position of both leaders considerably. More importantly, however, the accord produced a lasting ceasefire between the Habr-Gedir and the Mijerteen in Gaalkacyo. This beneficial effect was due less

[23] This is further indication that women's contributions are still not considered worthy of mention in current mainstream literature on Somalia.

> to the goodwill of the two militia leaders than to local businessmen and pastoralists who, according to some reports, were desperate to revive commercial activities in Gaalkacyo and end a conflict which disrupted trade. Despite the positive impact of the Mudug accord on the Gaalkacyo area, the accord also increased intra-Mijerteen tensions considerably, thus displacing the conflict rather than resolving it. [Menkhaus 1996: 12]

In June 1994, relations within the SSDF, one of the parties to the Mudug peace accord, deteriorated. The formation of two rival 'wings' within the faction threatened the stability of the area. Local women were aware of the situation and organized themselves to prevent any armed conflict. Members of local women's NGOs mobilized to demonstrate publicly and obliged the two wings of the SSDF to settle their differences at a meeting. The outcome was successful and may have helped the SSDF to remain intact, if divided. The SSDF would eventually reunite, but tension returned to the Mudug area in January 1997 following violations of the 1993 agreement.

In a separate development, Boosaaso women organized themselves to provide security in the town to quietly run their own businesses. The chairperson of the Women's Association for Social Advancement wrote on 31 May 1996—

> Our women's association was established in Boosaaso on 24 February 1993. Humanitarian aid was badly needed for women, since there has been no government and there was a complete destruction of the country at that time. In Boosaaso there were difficult problems such as killing, taking other persons' properties by force, rape, and harassment. Since the women were not able to defend themselves from this violence, we did a very big demonstration with the main aim to promote stable peace in Boosaaso District.
>
> We won our struggle and arranged a police programme of 300 policemen armed to go around in the different parts of the district,

to take care of peace. We also arranged 12 vehicles for this purpose. In this way we stabilized security in Boosaaso District.

We women in the association constructed two rooms for the police. For the time being they will work in this building.

During the 1994-96 conflict in Somaliland, the Women's Peace Group of the Committee of Concerned Somalis in Hargeysa organized 'walks of life' and a prayer meeting on 28 March 1996 in New Hargeysa at the Beerta Sayidka. At the same time, a group of 22 women submitted an official letter to the government in Hargeysa to protest the outbreak of civil strife. Its text read as follows:

Since 1991, we have been hoping to have a stable life and to taste the fruits of our freedom, but unfortunately our destiny is dictated by senseless wars.

Therefore the women of Somaliland need a lasting peace since your intention seems to be the following:

- that you kill vulnerable people
- that you have forgotten your long-fought-for freedom
- that you have increased the number of orphans and disabled
- that you kill indiscriminately both humans and non-humans

Therefore we, as mothers, ask ourselves, who among you is going to take care of your wives and sisters?

In particular, the answer to this question is for those who have their families inside the country, not for others who moved their families to other countries.

Based on the above analysis we call upon you:

- to cease all forms of hostility
- to sit together and negotiate

The interest of the people and the country lies in permanent peace.

The press in Somaliland published women's articles on peace. They hired authors and paid them per article to develop a broader discussion on peace among the community.

In the Kismaayo area, women have become involved in the peace process in both direct and indirect ways. According to one observer at reconciliation meetings, women—

- mobilized, organized, and encouraged men to reconcile
- recited buraanbur, the traditional Somali poems that are composed and recited especially by women
- used gentle terms like brothers or cousins while talking to the members of opposition delegations
- prepared meals for delegates during the negotiating period
- consulted informally with prominent delegates
- provided them with financial support, and persuaded them to reach agreement with other groups [Ruqiya Xirsi Jaama, Kismaayo]

The testimony of a 60-year-old woman from Haraardere (Mudug), who lives in Marka, is further evidence of the direct involvement of women in decision-making—

> My clan and particularly my subclan consider me a very important element. If there is an assembly where they are going to take decisions, they come to call me. If they don't do so, I go there by myself if I get informed. I'm not someone who doesn't say her own opinion. I say everything in front of all, whatever I think. If there is something to organize, I am the person who does it. I took part actively in any activity of the women in Marka. It is surely not the idea, the determination, nor the enthusiasm that I lack.

In addition to their political involvement in the peace process, women have the potential to promote peace at a social level; they can act as mediators in conflicts between the men of their family, clans, and communities. Some promote the importance of peace among their husbands, sons, fathers, brothers, uncles, cousins, as well as to their mothers, sisters, daughters, aunts, and other women relatives.

The influence of women in the public domain varies considerably according to social status; women who are economically independent, culturally aware, and formally educated command more respect. Naturally, this bias tends to the contribution of women abroad in organizing conferences and seminars although the women involved are not always representative, as many have been educated outside Somalia and are somewhat culturally estranged from their sisters back home. Nevertheless, they create opportunities in which to confront Somali male scholars and politicians with female perspectives, acting outside their well-defined roles within Somalia. Expatriate Somali women thus have a better chance of being recognized as intellectuals, and they may often offer alternative solutions to long-standing problems. Some, however, have come to focus predominantly upon external interventions in support of peace rather than take the opportunity to introduce new perspectives and dynamics from within Somali society—a choice that can lessen their acceptance and impact.

Local women's NGOs

The existence and activities of non-governmental organizations were sharply circumscribed in the Siyaad Barre era. They have mushroomed since the collapse of the government. The eagerness of many international partners to promote women's issues encouraged a blossoming of women's NGOs. While many of these remain dependent upon external support for their ideological cues and funding, others represent the authentic efforts of Somali women to organize themselves and to assert themselves in meaningful social and political ways. A few more established NGOs—predating the collapse of gov-

ernment—have used the opportunity to establish themselves as important forces within their communities, challenging the hegemony of the military factions and of traditional, male—dominated structures.

Younger, weaker women's organizations are susceptible not only to resource dependency upon international partners but also to the foreign agenda such partners often represent. Thus, many local NGOs tend to mirror the approaches of their external partners, implementing their activities with a top-down approach and overlooking more community-based alternatives. Insistence by international agencies that women's NGOs form umbrella organizations can lead individual groups to neglect their own particular area of interest, obliging them to group together, even if they have legitimately different concepts and methods of implementing their programmes. Intra-NGO activities are disturbed by the need to find a consensus with other NGOs with whom they may otherwise have little or nothing in common.

Membership in formal NGO structures can also widen the gap in understanding and tolerance, rather than promoting such values. Some women's NGOs apply exclusive criteria for their members, while others require a membership fee. Rural, illiterate, and poor women may not have the time to take part in NGO assemblies and activities, because they are too busy providing for their families. These competitive preconditions can increase the gap between rich and poor, educated and illiterate, urban and rural women: despite their 'grassroots' credos, most women's NGOs remain essentially elitist organizations.

Rivalry between women's NGOs of different backgrounds, interests, or communities can actually undermine peace. In one extreme case in northeast Somalia, competition for a con-

tract with an international NGO led rival women's groups from the same community to mobilize militia forces against one another, although real violence was averted.

In general, however, women's NGOs represent a constructive new force in postwar Somalia, and many do promote peace indirectly, through activities involving mixed groups. Women's groups may be encouraged to interact with internally displaced women from other clans, ethnic groups, or social 'castes', thereby promoting tolerance and understanding. Some of them focus on female economic independence. A few NGOs design their activities for both sexes together, attempting to combat the separate and often marginal role of women. The challenge will be not only for such NGOs to develop themselves further as a meaningful force in the reconstruction of Somali society but also to promote a public role for Somali women beyond the modest realm of NGO activity into the domains of culture, economy, and politics.

Women in administration and government

In the aftermath of the collapse of the Barre regime, improvements in the status of women have been reversed as traditional patterns of sociopolitical organization have been revitalized—generally at women's expense. The gradual emergence of new administrative and governmental structures in many parts of Somalia now offers women an opportunity to recover some of the lost ground.

In Somaliland, where most progress has been made towards the restoration of governmental structures, women are engaged in the administration as employees but not yet at a

decision-making level. Only one woman has served as minister, and she was expelled before her term of office was completed. Today there are no female ministers or directors general. In the northeastern regions, administrations at the regional level have not existed in much more than name since 1991. Real authority—principally the maintenance of security and stability—has resided with *isimo,* or the traditional type of leadership, which is an exclusively male function. In the Bari regional parliament, only one of 51 members is a woman: Marian Ali Yama, representing her clan. (As chairperson of the Bari regional branch of SWDO during the time of Siyaad Barre, her political experience recommended her as representative of her clan.) In general, women's participation in the official politics of the northeast corresponds neither with their actual level of political influence nor with their percentage of the population. The establishment of an interregional 'Puntland' administration for the northeast envisions a slight improvement in reserving 5 seats of the 69-member parliament for women, but it still falls short of proportional representation.

In the administrations established by the Muqdisho-based factions, women have continued to hold posts at a decision-making level (for example, as the vice-director of the presidency), although such cases remain the exception rather than the rule, and it is not clear to what extent such titular recognition implies either real power or a relative improvement in the status of women in general. Outside Muqdisho, a clear bias still exists against women's involvement in the rural areas, with female participation being clearly greater in the area of the former capital than its environs.

Elsewhere in Somalia, women are universally under-represented in the upper political levels of their factions. Unfor-

tunately, it would be simplistic to infer from this fact that women avoided such participation by choice; more likely, it demonstrates simply the continuation of male-dominated patterns of public political leadership. Nevertheless, the absence of women from positions of factional leadership underlines their lack of official responsibility for the political apparatus of the civil war, offering convenient grounds for the moral authority of women in the promotion of peace. Furthermore, their de facto exclusion from the political factions has led many women to seek alternative avenues of political recognition, such as through economic influence, civic associations, or the peace conferences they organize and support. This trend is likely to have more impact in the postconflict reconstruction of civic and political structures—and thus the consolidation of peace—than on the process of reconciliation itself.

Buraanbur from Hiiraan Region

Ee dulkeenii dahabka iyo deeqda noogu jiray
In la daneyn waayo looga tago daleel
Ee dawarsi wada aadno Somali ma u danbaa?
Qabiil qaran maaha qabrigana laguma tago
Ee qaranka Somali rabbiyow mid qura ka yeel
Qoriga hala dhaafo qabiil meel ha lagu qariyo
Ee Qalinka ku dhameey qaladaaka meesha yaal
Ee Somaaleey ha is qalina nabad qowlka hore ku dara
Nabadda kii diidanoo aan diyaar ahayn
Ragga aan soo dunaa baan u nahay diyaar
Ee haweenow dalkastoo jirtiin taa dareensanaw
Haweenka Soomaliyeedey Ragaada hano
Ee nabadda ku hanuuni midkaad hoyga wada gashaan
Aweeya barfasooradii buugag maala qora
Oo nabadda maad baahisiin beel kastoo tihiin
Oo bulshada Soomali maa loogu baaqo nabad
Ee hooyada geed harweeynoo lawada harsado
Hiiran hadaan nahayna xeer baah ka taaganahay
Nabada saan u heli lahayn baan u heegan nahay
Hay'adaha samafalkoow howsha nala hirgeli
Webiga duraayo badaheena dulucda weyn
Dalkeena duurjoogto iyo duunyadaba camiran
Soomaalaay is daaya carradeena cadowyuusan cunin
Oo saatirkaan tuugay rabigaa sajuuda mudan,
Somali samaheeda rabiyow samada ka keen
Suud iyo Somaliland saacad wada kulmaan
Nabadda la saxiixo ayadoon lays sireyn
Ee ummadda Somali allahaan u tuugayaa
Islaamkoo idilna Allahaan u tuugayaa
Adduunka intii ku nool Allahan u tuugayaa
Iney isku uur ahaadaan ooy is Aaminah
Aamiin
Adar Abdi Fiidow

Buraanbur from Hiiraan Region

Our blessed land rich with precious gold and vast
natural wealth;
To be unheeded, neglected and abandoned in limbo;
All of us flee abroad and appeal for welfare support;
I wonder if that is the national interest of the Somalis!
'Clannism' can neither replace state and nationhood
nor succour somebody in the other world.
May God help the resurrection of past glory and unity
of Somali nation under one state.
Disarm now, discard and bury divisive 'clannism' for
the sake of peace;
Seek to resolve existing differences peacefully and
intelligently with the pen and not the sword.
Somalis, bury the hatchet, let there be no more slaughtering,
and ordain peace as a priority issue for deliberation.
Anti-peace elements and belligerent men who are yet
unprepared for it—
We are ready to challenge them and convince them to
join the peace process.
Somali women, whichever your country of abode, be
reminded of action on this obligation;
Somali womenfolk, strive to keep your
war-mongering men in the bounds of morality.
Wives should preach peace and reconciliation to their
partners at home.
Where are the writers and university professors, and
why don't they produce peace literature?
Why don't you propagate and consolidate peace
regardless of your clan origin?

Why don't you call a comprehensive peace and reconciliation for the entire Somali society?
The mother as the symbol of a peace forum under the cool soothing shade of a large tree
Is an old tradition, which the people in still honour and value.
We are determined and all set in restoring peace and stability.
Humanitarian organizations, please join us in this local peacemaking venture.
Perennial rivers and vast oceans,
Our land is also endowed with abundant wild game and domestic animals.
You Somalis, stop internal strife lest our blessed land fall prey to the external enemy to devour its wealth.
I beg Saatir and Rabi, the ultimate target of human supplication,
May God bring down from heaven a tailored solution to the Somali crisis;
May independent Somaliland and southern Somalia miraculously reunite within an hour;
May lasting peace settlement be agreed upon and signed by all actors without one party deceiving the other.
I pray to God for the Somali people;
I pray to God for the world Muslim community;
I pray to the entire human race on the surface of the earth,
So that they develop relations of mutual feeling of trust and understanding.

5
Conclusions

When the Somali state disintegrated in 1991, the structures that had underpinned the advancement of women during the previous two decades were also destroyed. Denied access to the educational and employment opportunities offered by the state, Somali women reverted principally to the traditional roles of wife and mother—a context in which their potential for individual and collective fulfilment is strictly confined. As traditional male-dominated culture and religion move to fill the normative vacuum left by civil war and intracommunal violence, women's development beyond the domestic sphere is not only limited—it is actively discouraged.

Nevertheless, as Somalia's crisis begins to recede there are signs that the deterioration of the status of women over the past few years may be reversed and that new opportunities for the advancement of women have indeed been created. From the efforts of women across the country to deal with their current predicament, it is possible to distinguish the main features of a future regime that would combine the growing influence of women with Somali tradition and Islamic belief.

Economic necessity is helping to characterize the new regime. Women's increasing share of trade and commerce since the war represents an important shift in gender relations. Although women's participation in other aspects of public life has generally declined since the collapse of government, their growing importance in the economic sphere is of relatively greater significance. Whereas women's political influence in the Barre period was largely dependent on the regime, and

therefore restricted in depth and scope, their expanding economic role offers a foundation for a heightened degree of influence in both the private and the public domain.

Another key development since the civil war has been that independent forms of association for women have proliferated. Traditionally, women were limited to social circles like madax shub and shalongo, which were of little impact beyond the membership of the group and had little influence in wider political and economic spheres. During the Barre era, licensing of NGOs was tightly controlled and their activities were subject to scrutiny, and only a handful managed to thrive. The Somali Women's Democratic Organization (SWDO) offered an outlet for political expression, but only within the framework of strict party discipline. And despite SWDO's considerable success at mobilizing women in support of its cause, the advancement of women was always secondary to the advancement of the regime.

Since Barre's overthrow, Somalis have been free to experiment with various forms of civic association. NGOs have mushroomed, including many led by women and dedicated to women's causes. Across the country, women's groups have propelled themselves into positions of influence in civic and political leadership, although many owe their apparent progress to external legitimization and support. A few notable exceptions have succeeded in developing autonomous financial and organizational capacity, asserting a valued leadership role in their communities. Although scarce, successful women's organizations represent an important new category in the reconstruction of Somali society.

Another key factor in the redefinition of gender relations is the experience of women in the Somali diaspora. Several countries of asylum offer unprecedented education and work

opportunities for Somali women. While some women resist change, many have no choice but to change: unemployment and welfare dependency among Somali men has driven wives and daughters into the workforce, and girl children may be obliged by law to attend school. As the first generation of former asylum seekers begins to return to Somalia, a growing number of skilled and educated women have begun to assume leadership roles in various aspects of the reconstruction of the country—often as representatives of international organizations. Such women bring not only alternative professional perspectives but also unfamiliar family values. Life in the diaspora has placed many families under intolerable stress. The trauma of asylum has taken a terrible toll in divorce, suicide, alienation, and religious fundamentalism, but it has also altered—probably irrevocably—the way many Somali women perceive themselves, their families, and their communities.

These forces for change in Somali society coexist with forces of conservatism and reaction, many of which measure their influence through exercising control over women. The traditional and cultural norms that have helped Somalis everywhere to cope with the upheavals of the war have circumscribed a narrow space for acceptable female conduct. And that space may shrink even further as men seek to restore the previous status quo—replacing women in the workforce, resuming leadership of trade and commerce networks, and once again defining women's niche as within the home.

Fundamentalist Islam is also a potent force for reaction. Islamist organizations are, comparatively speaking, among the best-financed, best-organized, and operationally most effective structures in postwar Somalia. Although their objectives and methods vary widely, they typically combine coherent and attractive agenda with efficient networks of economic and

social services. Some also possess high-level political influence and military force, intervening with equal effectiveness in both the family unit and the body politic. That the practices of the more militant of these organizations may have little, if any, basis in Islam has not impeded their expansion or influence.

The appeal to Somali women of fundamentalist teachings is in part a reflection of the absence of an alternative vision of women in Islam. The formulation of such a vision is just one of the many urgent challenges to the leaders among Somali women. But leadership is precisely where the women's movement has been weakest. Fragmentation of the society, restrictions on travel and communication, and the mass exodus of so many capable Somalis—both women and men—have all conspired to prevent effective leadership from emerging. But some of the barriers to leadership are more manageable in scale, and steps could be taken immediately to address them.

Despite shared values and objectives, Somalia's many women's groups have so far failed to organize themselves effectively around a common agenda. Workshops and seminars for women's groups have taken place with fair regularity over the past few years, but they have failed to produce evidence of real cooperation or solidarity. Only in a few areas have meaningful 'umbrella' organizations been formed with clear objectives and programmes of action. The many courageous efforts of Somali women to rise above parochialism have generally been isolated and short lived, and they have yet to achieve the critical mass required to effect wider change.

The richness and diversity of opinion among Somali women remains a largely untapped resource. For the most part, women's groups tend to mirror the social and political divisions of the broader Somali society. A process of interac-

tion and exchange is crucial if women's organizations are to move beyond rhetoric and present forceful and coherent platforms. Efforts to promote the status of Somali women thus need to begin not simply within women's organizations, but among them as well.

External assistance can and should play only a limited role in the strengthening of women's organizations—indeed, it can be counterproductive. Outside agencies have in the past contributed to gender stereotypes of women as victims, nurturers, and sole breadwinners. They have encouraged awkward, women-only programmes, tokenism, and the association of women with economically marginal activities. However, a growing number of aid agencies are now insisting that women take part in formulating reconstruction and development strategies, rather than isolating them in a separate and peripheral category.

Similarly, the attention given women's roles as wives, mothers, and homemakers has helped to obscure their equally important involvement as politicians, financiers, activists, and ideologues. Unpleasant as it may be for Somali women to acknowledge the role that many have played in the excesses of the military regime and the subsequent civil war, coming to terms with the past is an essential element for facing the future. Avoiding such contentious issues may help Somali women to deny any responsibility for the ruin of their country, but it also denies them full participation in building a new society.

At this critical time, as the Somali people hesitate between this century and the next, between peace and war, between past and future, the role of the Somali woman has never been so important. The choice is hers.

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Areas where research was carried out

Aqaboy
Beer
Beled Weyne
Berbera
Boco
Boosaaso
Burco
Gaalkacyo
Gardo
Garoowe
Gobweyn
Halgan
Hargeysa
Helo Bacaad
Iskushuban
Jalalaqsi
Khamkham
Kismaayo
Marka
Muqdisho North
Yiroowe

Acronyms

AFWIC	African Women in Crisis Umbrella Programme
ERGADA	an association of Somali intellectuals in Canada and the USA
EU	European Union
NGO	non-governmental organization
SNF	Somali National Front
SNM	Somali National Movement
SSDF	Somali Salvation Democratic Front
SWDO	Somali Women's Democratic Organization
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Education, Science and Culture Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNIFEM	United Nations Development Fund for Women
UNOSOM	United Nations Operation in Somalia
USC	United Somali Congress

Glossary

afar-jeeble	someone greedy, corrupt (literally, someone with four pockets)
buraanbur	traditional poem or song, performed by women only
hadith	a collection of the sayings of the Prophet Mohammed, recorded from oral histories after his death
madax shub	a women's meeting held on Thursday afternoons
pharaonic infibulation	a severe form of female genital mutilation
qaad	*Catha edulis,* a stimulant, usually chewed
shari'a	Islamic law
shir (pl. *shirar*)	assembly or meeting
tariiqa	Islamic brotherhood or sect
viriarchal	pertaining to a viriarchy
viriarchy	male-dominated society
xeer	unwritten Somali customary law
yarad	bride-price, paid to the future father-in-law