

WOMEN DO NOT BELONG UNDER THE ACACIA TREE



The conditions experienced by women street vendors in Somaliland

**A report by the Strategic Initiative for women in the
Horn of Africa - SIHA Network**

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Compiled by: Alicia Luedke



Foreword

Before the civil war, pastoral communities made up over 60% of the Somali population. Today, the majority of pastoralists reside in Northern Somalia. Their way of life continues to be threatened by many geopolitical factors as well as recurring drought, environmental degradation and livestock depletion.

The purpose of this report is to discuss Somali society's current trend towards urbanization and urban migration. This shift has had a massive impact, both negatively and positively, on women and gender relations within this society. The report will focus specifically on women street vendors in the semi-independent territory of Somaliland in the capital city of Hargeisa.

The report reflects on one of SIHA's strategic goals: to support the growing urban population of poverty stricken women residing in slums, IDP camps and the peripheries of growing cosmopolitan areas in the Horn of Africa.

Hargeisa was once a prosperous city. Although it was never a major industrial centre, Hargeisa became the British colonial administrative capital in the early 1940s as a result of its moderate climate. Over the years, the city has grown to become an important watering and trading location for the nomadic stock herders who form the majority of the population. Meat, livestock, skins, and ghee are exported through Berbera, 117 miles (188 km) northeast of Hargeisa on the Gulf of Aden.

In the 1980s, the Somali civil war destroyed this promising city. Hargeisa was bombed by aircraft and reduced to rubble. Thousands of civilians were killed in the attacks. When Somaliland declared its independence from Somalia in 1991, the capital city of northern Somalia rose above the atrocities and evolved. In his lecture titled 'Land conflicts in post-war Hargeisa' delivered in 2014 at Uppsala University, professor Tobias Hagmann described the current Hargeisa as a "*bustling political centre and economic hub*". He continues to say that:

In the case of Hargeisa, urban space has been transformed through a broad array of dynamics including forced displacement, property reconstitutions, land commoditization and, more recently, land planning. Of particular interest in all these processes are the overlapping roles of customary and state authorities in adjudicating land disputes and allocation land plots.

In his lecture, Hagmann demonstrates how evolving land and conflict management practices in post-war Hargeisa are closely intertwined with the co-production of public authority by state and non-state actors.

In this report, SIHA is looking at the masses of urban, poor, minority women and women IDPs and migrants who are vending in the streets and local markets of Hargeisa. They sell tea, *khat*, jewellery, cosmetics, used clothes, textiles, household items and food stuffs while adjusting and attempting to survive under the terms of an extremely complex setup and an evolving urban free market economy. Patriarchy and inherent inequality leave poor women vendors at the bottom of the trade chain. Women street vendors are unable to elevate their conditions and are trapped in cycles of poverty and exploitation that are driven by large male-owned companies that control trade.

On the other hand, it is important to recognize that although the free market system consumes and exploits the efforts of women in informal sectors, it also provides a space for women to interact in the public sphere. The structure of the free market contributes to the changing dynamics of gender relations, but not without hostile resistance from the patriarchal social structure and the controllers of the capital systems, both of which are intertwined and interconnected forces. Therefore, the free market allows women a space to exist and utilize their labour but also strongly holds on to conservative ideas of women. This is the case particularly in urban centres populated by people from all over the world, as opposed to rural settings where women are guarded by clan and family authority within the designated territory.

This report looks at the different factors influencing women's presence in the public sphere and their attempts to occupy a growing space while struggling with extremely limited means within a larger market that is controlled by patriarchal forces. The report also discusses Women

Street vendors' struggle with conservative backlash encountered in the streets. This struggle is compounded by the growing militant Islamic interpretations that are currently dominating Somali sociocultural settings. On the other hand, women have no significant support from a fractured civil system where laws and policies concerning the protection of women vendors and traders are mostly blurred and thus rarely enforced.

This research is part of SIHA's on-going endeavour to reach out to urban poor women working in the informal sector in the Horn of Africa, to bring them to the heart of the women's rights movements in their countries and territories, and to enable them to become instrumental actors in changing their circumstances.

The report is an outcome of field research that was conducted by Alicia Luedke, SIHA's affiliated researcher, who has expertise on women in conflict and post-conflict settings in the region. Alicia presented her findings to the SIHA team and SIHA civil society activists in Somaliland. The report is a product of an extensive discussion among SIHA members in Somaliland and the SIHA team. I would like to extend our great appreciation to SIHA members in Somaliland for their openness and collaboration with the SIHA researcher and I would like to especially thank Mr Guleid Ahmed Jama, Director of the Somaliland Human Rights Centre, for his efforts in verifying information in this report. I would also like to thank Ms Kafia Omer, a former SIHA Horn of Africa staff member, for her contributions in editing this report.

Hala Alkarib
Regional Director - SIHA Network



Introduction

Throughout the Horn of Africa (HoA), factors such as war, the cross-border movement of people, periodic drought and rapid rural to urban migration, have resulted in the growing presence of women in the informal economy. Such a change has had a positive effect on social and economic development in some parts of the world but the proliferation of female population in the informal sector in the Horn region, has not led to any significant change in terms of a woman's position in society. State collapse and the failure of nation-building projects across the HoA have generated new and in some cases, old hurdles to women's advancement. Hurdles include the reversion to traditional structures and the rise of new, more militant forms of authority that have materialized to take advantage of the space provided by the breakdown of states. Consequently, women find themselves caught between the pressures of globalization and modernization on the one hand, and conservatism and tradition on the other. They are trapped somewhere between positive forms of role change produced by their swelling numbers in the informal economy and, stagnation. As other research has pointed out, women are empowered, impoverished, lauded, and castigated all at once.

The purpose of this report is to shed light on the conditions of urban poor women and female labourers in Somaliland's capital, Hargeisa. As part of a three-country study involving Somaliland, South Sudan and Uganda, the Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA) wishes to highlight Somali women's contributions to the local economy, their communities and their families, while at the same time calling attention to the risks and challenges that they face in trying to make a living. This study also strives to focus on the strategies and coping mechanisms that women use for their own economic and physical protection. More specifically, this report attempts to grapple with the myriad ways in which Somaliland women try to navigate the incongruous landscape that has resulted from war, state collapse and globalization. This report shows how women's increasing engagement in the public spaces of the informal sector is punctuated by violence,

marginalization and censorship. In order to identify entry points for supporting Somaliland's urban poor women, specifically those working in the informal economy, this document reflects on women's day-to-day experiences in the home, with their customers and with the "state" and its authorities.

Today, women continue selling tea, *khat* (a mild amphetamine), jewellery, cosmetics, used clothes, textiles, household items and food stuffs on the street and in the market and in some instances, have established small restaurants and shops in Somaliland cities like Hargeisa. However, these women are being kept on the periphery. To meet their basic needs, women have battled their way into public spaces; markets and urban streets and towns in Somaliland only to be forced to remain there and to be denied opportunities and access to economic mobility and decision-making. The growing significance of political Islam and more conservative, radical currents of 'Wahhabism' or Salafism,'² together with a weak state and the prominence of clan structures that have had difficulty adapting to an urban context,³ have resulted in women in the informal economy in Somaliland remaining incredibly vulnerable to violence, extraction, coercion and abuse. Women are unable to influence decisions at the household, community and national level. As observed elsewhere in the HoA, although there have been profound changes to women's positions in the economy specifically in the informal sector, the gender division of labour in women's private lives remains the same, as do the patriarchal attitudes and practices that keep women on the edges of socio-economic life⁴. Rapid change has created a crisis in gender relations whereby men are trying to hold on to a glorified, defunct version of Somali masculinity in which males are the sole decision-makers and providers. This version of life is often violently imposed on women. Men are trying to retain their once elevated position and status in Somaliland society and are fighting against changes to the gender hierarchy that have taken place in the war⁵. As a result, women's gains in Somaliland have been limited at best.



Methodology

SIHA recognizes that although there is a large body of academic and policy-related literature on women in the informal economy, there is a lack of information on the extent of urban poor women's marginalisation and exclusion in Somaliland⁶ - the understanding of which, as other research has highlighted, is necessary if interventions are to actually promote inclusive growth and sustainable livelihoods for vulnerable groups⁷. Indeed, there are a number of non-governmental organisation (NGO) programs across the HoA that are not responsive to the socio-cultural and economic conditions of women on project sites⁸. In keeping with SIHA's research tradition of primarily qualitative documentation for advocacy purposes, this report focuses on chronicling the actual experiences of women and girls in the informal economy of Hargeisa. Data was collected through questionnaires, guided interviews and focus-group discussions (FGDs) involving a broad range of participants including government officials, civil society groups, grassroots women activists, international NGOs, United Nations (UN) agencies, Somali academics, customary authorities, clan elders, internally displaced persons (IDPs), minority clan members, female informal labourers, youth and men. SIHA worked with local partners in Somaliland to identify participants in different areas of the city and help facilitate contact with informal labourers, as well as those with whom they interact. This approach was the best strategy for providing a more nuanced and contextualised description of urban poor women's coping mechanisms and vulnerabilities in Somaliland.

Along these lines, the assessment concentrated on obtaining background information on informal sector women, their career aspirations, their opportunities for economic advancement, their responsibilities to the household and the community, their participation in different levels of decision-making, the circumstances that pushed them into this work, the challenges and risks they deal with on a day-to-day basis in trying to earn a living, their interaction with state authorities like the police and their protection and coping mechanisms. The researcher also made space for participants, male and female alike, to narrate and discuss their experiences and perspectives on women's participation in the economy and general socio-cultural and economic issues facing Hargeisa residents.

Context

The situation of urban poor women and female informal labourers in contemporary Somaliland cannot be understood without due consideration of the history of protracted conflict and state and economic collapse that have been cited as contributing to the cause and strengthening of the informal economy⁹. In fact, the modern Somaliland “state” was the product of the insurgency by the Issaq clan dominating the Somali National Movement (SNM) in the northwest of Somalia that battled the harsh, repressive policies of the Said Barre regime in the late 1980s before unilaterally declaring independence in 1991. The war against the Barre government led to massive displacement and casualties among Somali populations in the area that is now known as Somaliland, with the number of estimated deaths to be between 50,000 and 100,000 people in Hargeisa alone¹⁰. The war also destroyed any existing economic infrastructure, including the closure of market centres and main ports, while at the same time disrupting traditional modes of pastoral life¹¹. As men entered into war-related activities, women increasingly involved themselves in more visible forms of labour¹². As one scholar pointed out:

“The burden of labour for women shifted to tasks such as queuing up for food rations, fetching water from distant sources and engaging in petty trade to supplement their incomes”¹³

The war against Said Barre not only caused civilian destruction but it also created a space for the emergence of traditional forms of authority. Clan structures stepped in to provide citizens with security and protection; basic needs that the Mogadishu government was unwilling and unable to provide. In Somaliland specifically, clans also played a critical role in the formation and maintenance of the SNM and helped to pave the way for peace in the northwest through local initiatives aimed at creating harmony between competing clans post-1991. The vacuum established by the collapse of the Somali state under Barre also meant the end of secularism as many people turned to political Islam as a way to vent their frustrations with “the failure of secular nationalist

ideology to unite Somalis and overcome clannism”¹⁴. During the war, religious militancy gained a footing as an alternative to both the failed attempt at nation-building, as well as patronage-based clannism. As stressed in other works on the Somaliland region, however, this process also entailed the reversal of the gains that women had made legislatively under Barre in terms of bettering their structurally subordinate positions in Somali society¹⁵. Still, once the war ended and Somaliland’s main clans were able to overcome the fractious divisions that resulted in widespread internal violence between rival groups in the early 1990s, the region largely stabilized. Nevertheless, it has been well documented in other research that formal state institutions remain incredibly weak with clan-dominated patronage structures presiding over politics and the economy¹⁶. Under these circumstances, the central government has been hard-pressed to deliver services to its citizens.¹⁷

One step forward, two steps back

As indicated in the introduction, although women have struggled for their rights, their gains have been limited. While women have been able to vote in Somaliland’s elections, they are seriously underrepresented. They also have unequal access to education and other services. In 2006, for instance, only around thirty-three per cent of female children attended school, compared to around forty-six per cent of male children¹⁸. Furthermore, only half as many adult women can read and write compared to men¹⁹. Although the dramatic entrance of women into the informal economy during the war against Said Barre and the internal violence in Somaliland that followed, enabled women to attain some semblance of economic independence and leverage in household decision-making²⁰, women are still denied inheritance in customary law and are not supported nor encouraged thus creating a number of obstacles to economic mobility²¹. This traps women in petty trade and low-paying positions in the informal sector. With record setting levels of unemployment, many men are said to be unwilling or unable to engage in the sort of low-wage work that women do²². As one key informant mentioned during the field research, there is a perception amongst Somalilanders, particularly men, that, “managing small businesses is for women and the big ones are for men”²³. Due to their pride, men see these small shops as below them²⁴.

Conflict and state collapse may have effected changes in the roles of Somali men and women, but the way that people conceptualize “gender” in Somaliland still lies in the patriarchal ideals instilled in a pre-war era, where women were seen as responsible for the household and men were responsible for activities outside the home including income generation. In practice, this means that most women do not have the chance to work in the formal sector and remain “caught in a web of poverty,” with limited access to financial assistance such as micro-credit ²⁵.

One of the reasons for the continued subordination of women is the significance of the clan system and kinship in Somaliland, particularly in the context of a weak central government where people are forced to rely on clans for support and protection. While men are treated equally in the clan system, women are valued less, ²⁶ which is exhibited in customary solutions that cap compensation for women at half of men’s wages. Women are also excluded from decision-making and from clan-based forums for voicing their interests and concerns. Because a woman’s clan alliance can be easily transferred after marriage, it is presumed that a woman’s loyalty to the clan is far weaker than a man’s. This fact means that women have more difficulty utilizing the clan based social and economic networks for financial assistance ²⁷. Hence, although women have earned a new economic status in the informal economy as breadwinners for their families, this has not translated into any real political power ²⁸. The clan system was also developed in the context of pastoral rural life in the Somali region and thus not well adapted to an urban context ²⁹. Past research states that while clans have become more influential in politics nationally, their role in rectifying other issues pertaining to women’s human rights has been undermined by processes of urbanization. Clan elders can no longer draw from local knowledge to inform their influence and they lack detailed understanding of local incidences ³⁰. This is sometimes attributed to the financial incentives offered to clan elders when resolving disputes in an economically uncertain environment ³¹. As emphasized in other research on Somaliland, when it comes to the urban economy including the informal sector, the provisions and precedents that do exist are about governing access to water and grazing areas for livestock, with no consideration for private property rights integral to business relations ³².

It is not only the clan system that is responsible for women's subordination. As indicated in the introduction, there is also the growing influence of political Islam in the Somali regions as a whole and there appears to be what one author referred to as the following:

“...confrontation between emerging gender issues and the rising importance of political Islam, formerly contained under Siad Barre [where]...[t]here is a tension between progressive gender-oriented policy-makers and conservative political Islamists”³³.

Since Somaliland unilaterally declared its independence from the rest of Somalia in 1991, more radical versions of political Islam have come to the forefront, precipitating a shift to stricter interpretations of gender roles, including the role of women working outside the home in the informal economy. Influenced by trends in the Middle East, especially Saudi Arabia, there has been a rise in Wahhabism, also known as Salafism ³⁴, which as illustrated by Al Shabab's discrimination against women entering the labour market ³⁵, poses an extreme disadvantage for women in the realization of their economic rights. People in Somaliland used to observe the more moderate Shafi'i sect of Sunni Islam. Today, however, many people interviewed reported that Wahhabis control the economy and education through the funding of Madrassas/schools and has built a number of more radical mosques across Somaliland that were said to be preaching about more restricted roles for women. Participants pointed to a growing sense that women who worked outside the home were somehow “polluted,” specifically those whose jobs entailed more constant interaction with the opposite sex, such as *khat* sellers and tea sellers. These women are viewed as “sexually open,” and some of these women are apparently accused of “ruining the society and structure” ³⁶. A female civil society activist even said, “In recent years there are... cultural barriers,” with Islamic Sheiks apparently declaring that women can only “hold shop” if “under the supervision of males” ³⁷.

As has been emphasized in past commentary on Somaliland, the spread of Wahhabism could actually be quite threatening to Somaliland, which has a secular constitution and democratic institutions - “threaten[ing] not to upset the balance of power within Somaliland, but to topple its very foundations” ³⁸. As Somaliland prepares for another election in 2017, many of SIHA's informants talked about Islamic leaders directly

participating in political parties and more visibly involved in politics than ever before. As Somaliland youth become increasingly disgruntled with their situation due to unemployment and lack of international recognition for Somaliland, the factors that have kept Al Shabab and Islamic extremism in check in the past could quickly erode, causing Al Shabab to become more and more of a threat to the region. Many people said that while Al Shabab had a quiet presence in Somaliland and allegedly only recruited people from the area, at least since the last terrorist attack in 2008, Somaliland's de facto independence has provided only very limited opportunities to young people and thus, may result in a deterioration of security. It was noted by some of the respondents that what prevents people in Somaliland from engaging in the same sort of violence witnessed in south-central Somalia, in Mogadishu, is Somaliland's quest for independence and their need to maintain some kind of peace and stability when compared to the rest of Somalia. Yet, as Somaliland continues to go unrecognized internationally and the juridical components of statehood –the kind of recognition from the international community needed to become a “state” in the legal sense— youth are seeing few benefits to peace and stability and are at risk of resorting to violent resistance, especially with the upcoming elections. Additionally, as SIHA's past research has revealed, many Somaliland youth are being exposed to contradictory gender discourses. Conflict in an area often produces more progressive gender ideologies and changes in gender roles as women become the primary breadwinners in families and communities. These changes are in direct conflict with the strict Islamic conservatism associated with the spread of more radical currents of Salafism that script how men and women should behave according to extraordinarily patriarchal practices.

Along these lines, unemployment and the absence of international recognition are both considerable challenges to the sustainability of the idea of “Somaliland” that initially kept its citizens satisfied. Because Somaliland is unrecognised internationally as an independent state, there are few opportunities for international development aid which many neighbouring countries rely on as a large share of their gross domestic product (GDP) ³⁹. Most people rely instead on remittances sent by Somalilanders living abroad, which assumed great importance against the backdrop of the collapse of the formal economy during the civil war ⁴⁰. The consequence is that there

are very few jobs available and many people live in poverty. This is exacerbated by the government posture that has prioritised state recognition over the wellbeing of the population ⁴¹. The private sector is now dominated by micro, small and medium enterprises (SMEs) ⁴² and the few job opportunities that do exist tend to be with national non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international NGOs, or government positions that are usually awarded on the basis of patronage and clan connections. Of the three Somali regions, Somaliland also has the highest level of youth unemployment at eighty-four per cent, with overall unemployment at an astonishing seventy per cent – one of the highest rates of unemployment in the world ⁴³. Frustration has, therefore, been bubbling to the surface. SIHA's past research in Somaliland has shown that young people recognize the connection between their hardships and the lack of international recognition. For example, youth are not able to travel outside the country without a passport issued from Mogadishu, nor can they have an internationally acknowledged education thus preventing them from seeking jobs outside of Somaliland. Somaliland itself has no jobs and no capacity to spur job creation through external investment and the development of industry. Yet, as mentioned above, men view working in the informal sector and the SMEs that dominate the Somaliland economy, particularly in Hargeisa, as beneath them and unsuitable. This intensifies the burden on women to earn an income to support their families and meet basic needs.

Women in the Informal Economy in Hargeisa

Hargeisa is the capital city of Somaliland located near the Ethiopian border. Like other cities in the HoA, it is a place of contrast, where modernity and tradition meet, sometimes peacefully and sometimes not. There is also a sense of transience to the city whether it is in the buzzing generators that power many of the big buildings, or the makeshift shacks and structures scattered throughout the city. In many ways, Hargeisa represents the state of Somaliland itself and is a microcosm for the wider plight of the Somaliland national project. Initially, it was a successful story of peace and state building, but now it is faltering without international recognition and a government that continues to seek acceptance at the expense of its residents. As female internally displaced persons (IDPs) residing in Hargeisa told us:

“[w]e don’t care about recognition. If we have safety and peace, we don’t care about recognition. It is good to go outside and be recognised as other countries, but still our political parties are not being clear”⁴⁴.

A group of *khat* sellers state the following:

“[i]f recognition comes, then our work will be limited because we will not find a suitable job to help our kids. If recognition comes, no one will help us and we will suffer as women...we are blessed, we don’t care about recognition”⁴⁵.

Box One. Drivers of Women’s Participation in the Informal Economy

1. Poverty
2. Survival
3. Supporting children/family
4. The irresponsibility of Somali men/husbands
5. Lack of education
6. Lack of access to capital

Women are caught in the middle. Like the rest of the Somali regions, Hargeisa is dominated by micro SMEs, most of which are run by female informal labourers. They are pushed off the streets and subjected to routine evictions as part of efforts to “beautify” the streets and modernize the city, but marginalised to such an extent that they do not have an opportunity to work

in positions outside of the informal economy, which is conventionally reserved for men. Women who do work outside of the informal sector in Hargeisa tend to work in government positions in the ministries, or with national or international NGOs. In addition, government positions for women tend to be symbolic postings, a token box for the central government to check. While NGOs have given women a platform for inclusion and having their voices heard, much like the ministries that exist in Hargeisa, women are not fully incorporated in these settings.

Against this backdrop, one of the few options available for urban poor women in Somaliland is to enter the informal economy. With limited opportunities for economic mobility and no access to education and financial resources, many of them end up stuck with no prospects for economic advancement. As one respondent declared:

“[m]ost of the women never choose to do this kind of job. It is the only thing they can do. There is no investment in women to do anything bigger...whatever benefits they get go back to the family and then they don't make money to save and have larger businesses⁴⁶”

Coupled with the patriarchal norms and practices connected to traditional gender roles in Somali society and the clan structures and conservative tenants of Islam that have restricted women, most women set up so-called “micro-businesses” that are informal, irregular and have relatively small profit margins⁴⁷. In fact, on average, the women with whom we spoke reported that they made no more than 30,000 Somaliland Shillings per day (\$3.50). Due to the lack of any semblance of social welfare, or for that matter, any services for the urban poor, women end up engaging in petty trade and low-wage work in Hargeisa's marketplaces out of necessity. According to a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) study, the most common types of work/sales for women were items such as firewood, dry food rations, milk products, fruits and vegetables, small tea shop ownership, livestock, *khat*, meat and fish, second hand clothes and petroleum products⁴⁸. Listed below are the main types of work that the informal labourers to whom we spoke were involved:

Milk	Water	Livestock	Perfume/ toiletries	Used clothes/tai- loring	Food items
Small shops	Small restaurant	Money exchange	Jewellery	Khat	Vegetables/ fruits

Many of the women in the informal economy were said to be mothers between the ages of thirty-five and sixty years old. With the exception of one woman with whom we spoke who had no children, the women interviewed had between two and thirteen children. Though many urban poor women have been in the informal sector since the war, a younger generation of Somaliland women expressed having inherited their roles as informal labourers from their mothers and grandmothers, such that urban poor women have become trapped in a cycle of inter-generational impoverishment and marginalisation. Other women have migrated from drought inflicted rural areas of Somaliland in search of income-generating activities. Whether they are IDPs displaced by drought and violence in other parts of Somaliland, IDPs displaced by war in south-central Somalia, or migrants from Ethiopia trying to earn a living, most of these women are the agents of male suppliers at the end of the supply chain for goods sold in informal markets. This makes the women more vulnerable economically in terms of market shocks and more susceptible to abuse by both their customers and wholesalers.

The rationale for entering the informal economy was grounded in the need for women to, first and foremost, feed their children. Secondary considerations include the absence of educational opportunities and the “irresponsibility” of Somali men. When asked why women enter the informal economy, one group of Goboye participants, a minority clan in Somaliland, said:

“...most of the women in Somaliland when they get married [they move]...outside their natal kin...and go...to the husbands home and they have to sit and take care of the kids and some of them, yes, they work outside because their husbands are irresponsible. Most of them want to take care of their children”⁴⁹.

Another Goboye woman declares:

...we don't work in the formal economy because it is just to survive in our low economic market because we have no opportunities... Iftin is the oldest one in her family and because of the lack of money and lack of business...she chose to work outside of the family to survive and even that is a problem because of the school fees and dress of the school and transportation...is now very expensive⁵⁰.

Box one on the above page catalogues some of the main reasons for women's participation in the informal sector as discovered during the research process. Not surprisingly, given the survival imperative that informs most urban poor women's decisions to engage in the kinds of informal and irregular work mentioned above, the majority of women's earnings goes directly back into their households to pay for food, clothing, school fees and medical bills, with little left over for the women themselves.

Economic Mobility and Access

Economic advancement usually involves an individual's access to loans and assets, education, skills training, business-related information and business networks⁵¹. Yet, Somali women remain cut off from such resources. Their economic mobility and access is dependent on their interactions within the dominant patriarchal systems, including clan, religion, men themselves, and other social structures. In Somaliland, men are oriented outwards, charged with managing the politics of the clan. Outside of the home, their social life is structured around interactions with other men⁵². In Hargeisa, men's lives revolve around their relationships with fellow men, whether it be chewing *khat* together in so-called *khat* cafes or drinking tea. These interactions give Somaliland men easy access to social and economic networks⁵³. In contrast, women are oriented inwards toward the home, and as such, they do not have the same opportunities for social interaction and other forms of networking. This curbs a woman's ability to utilise connections for business opportunities and financial assistance, which are often supplied through the clan. In general, women's clan affiliations are considered to be less significant than those of men. A woman's loyalty to the clan is sometimes questioned especially since marriage is seen as a shift in loyalties. This certainly compounds a woman's economic exclusion.

This exclusion is exacerbated by the lack of education for women. As discussed previously, the adult literacy rates for women are at approximately half of that of men, and primary school enrolment rates for girls are far lower than that of boys⁵⁴. As a group of *khat* sellers remarked:

*[w]e don't know anything else that we can do because we don't have any education and it is an easy job and easy way to get money because it is a drug and everyone is eating it...we would like a different job - to be a business woman and go through business to sell clothes and other things. But because we have no education we cannot do anything*⁵⁵.

Many participants described the lack of basic skills training available to women as one of the causes of their entrapment in the informal sector.

On top of the absence of formal education and vocational instruction for female populations in Somaliland, women do not have ordinary access to micro-credit. Unlike men who are oriented outwards to the clan and society and can borrow money from friends and clan members, women are isolated from these systems of informal financial support. To the extent that there is formal banking infrastructure in Somaliland in the form of Dahabshil, women are ordinarily not offered loans, and many female participants expressed fear of not being able to pay back loans. While financial institutions may not have explicit policies that shut out urban poor women, the predominant lending institutions do not have loans that could help allay some of the anxieties of female populations,⁵⁶ such as demanding collateral for loans that women cannot access due to customary laws that limit women's inheritance rights and access to resources. Akin to Somaliland's central government, much financial assistance was apparently awarded on the basis of clan-based patronage, not only isolating women, but also isolating minority clans who have little hope of being able to obtain micro-finances not available through NGOs. As UNDP has indicated, the election process for NGO beneficiaries of micro-credit programs can also be clan-based and easily manipulated by individuals who take advantage of funding⁵⁷. Big businesses in Somaliland, including Telesom and Dahabshil, were also cited as accommodating only a small number of female employees, conventionally in the positions of secretaries and

cleaners. One government official, to whom we spoke, indicated that within the Ministry of Commerce, there was no “Gender Office,” and business licenses for women were expensive, ranging from 150 to 1000 US Dollars (USD). Though civil society has been pushing for equal participation of women in the Chamber of Commerce, women are lacking economic support that could empower them in a concrete way.

Gender in Transformation

The absence of opportunities for mobility among urban poor women is made worse by the so-called “irresponsibility of men”. Narratives about men neglecting their conventional obligations to their families were ubiquitous throughout the research. In fact, “family neglect” was cited as a major issue. There were a number of cases of women reportedly taking their husbands to the customary, and in some cases statutory, courts because of their alleged disregard for their duties in the home, specifically with respect to income generation. Female respondents appeared frustrated that they upheld and preserved their conventional roles in the household in terms of bearing and rearing children, but then had to fill in the gaps left by their husbands who were seemingly unable, or unwilling to work. As one clan elder noted:

“...a woman came to me and asked me that...her husband didn’t recognise the kids... “Whose child is this?” he said. He is very irresponsible”⁵⁸.

“Instead, most of the men are chewing khat so that all of the time they are asleep, or they are chewing”⁵⁹.

According to respondents, this “irresponsibility” originated in the history of state and economic collapse during the civil war against the Barre regime and the internal conflicts in Somaliland that followed in the early 1990s. As a Rift Valley Institute (RVI) report pointed out, there is a “belief in a God-given all-male, all-encompassing responsibility,” but many Somalis felt that since the disintegration of the Somali state including the economy, men had a hard time “being men”⁶⁰. People may still ascribe to pre-war gender roles of men as the providers of the family and women as the bastions of home life, but the ability of males to live up to these gender roles is confined within a post-war context

distinguished by widespread unemployment. As youth focus group discussion participants commented:

[t]he man is being created by god and he is the leader in the house and the household and he is the one who makes the decisions, that is how we can define a man. Men are responsible for the family and community...there is a chapter in the Quran that is talking about women and it says that she has to obey her husband.

In another report, male youth reported feeling like they were being held captive to traditional modes of masculinity without being provided the chance to perform and pursue those modes of masculinity⁶¹. Additionally, as mentioned in the above section, the collapse of the state and the space this provided for both religious militancy and clan-based forms of authority exposed male youth to contradictory gender discourses; the strict conservatism of clan structures and radical Islam versus the more progressive gender ideologies and changing gender roles generated by war. What's more, urbanization appears to have significantly undermined traditional, nomadic ways of life. These old ways of life were more conducive to upholding the idealized gender roles in Somali society where women gained access to resources through marriage and bride wealth and where men worked outside the household sustaining familial and communal camels and livestock. As a minority clan member proclaimed in a focus group discussion:

*[t]he men before the civil war...were working and...inheriting animals and camels and getting married with a number of camels, and women will gain access to these camels. But, now everyone comes to the city to get a better life, and that is what makes people to not get fair jobs...that is why men are kept in homes and irresponsible and...why us, as women we want to work*⁶².

As discussed earlier, men feel that they are above working in the informal sector in low-wage and irregular jobs because of "pride"⁶³. They continue to see themselves as part and parcel of a divine and "all-encompassing responsibility"⁶⁴ but are reluctant to compromise when it comes to taking jobs that exist at the margins of society. Supposedly, they would be chastised and stigmatized for accepting low profit margins that should only be tolerable for women. When discussing why men were

not as visible in the informal economy as women, one person described the following:

“[it is] because of the dignity of the man who works in similar informal work – the men of his family will make fun of him and call him a ‘lady,’ ‘why do you go to this informal work, it is better for you to go home and chew khat than go out and do this work’”⁶⁵.

This is not to say that all men have shirked their obligations to their families. RVI noted that there are areas where men continue to own businesses and work⁶⁶. Many men also rely on remittances sent by Somalilanders living abroad to support their children⁶⁷. But, in an effort to preserve the remaining elements of some idealized past version of Somali masculinity, a lot of males were described as chewing *khat* and sitting idly rather than maintaining their family by taking advantage of economic opportunities in the informal sector.

Accordingly, *khat* was seen as one of the central motivations, as well as a symptom of men’s “irresponsibility”. For the elders to whom SIHA spoke, the origin of men’s overreliance on *khat*, a mild amphetamine, lay in their displacement in Ethiopia during the last war. Under the Barre regime, *khat* was considered contraband and it was said that with the exception of a few military and political elite in the Somali government who chewed, it was largely prohibited. When they were displaced in Ethiopia and elsewhere in the African Horn, male populations allegedly started using *khat* as a way to cope with the trials and tribulations of life as refugees. As a result, *khat* became one of the primary ways that men dealt with the disintegration of the Somali state and of nomadic ways of life. Now, the use of *khat* is ubiquitous in Somaliland society. Both male youth and older men are said to spend the mornings deciding with whom they will chew *khat* as part of their daily social ritual. After lunch, they meet up together and chew into the night, rendering much of the urban male population unproductive by the early afternoon⁶⁸.

Though some participants connected *khat* addiction among males as the reason that men had become “irresponsible”, many participants cited unemployment as the primary cause of so-called “irresponsible manhood”. Somewhat understandably, many male youth who complete university and can’t find a job in the formal business sectors, in

government, or with NGOs would rather remain unemployed than accept petty work in the informal sector. As one youth announced:

“I went to university and don’t want to take any job. You see, a lot of women who are responsible don’t care about the proudness”⁶⁹.

Men without formal university education see the informal economy as a “small thing” and hence beneath them. Men that seek jobs in construction or larger-scale trade in the formal sector, report that these jobs are not as widely available as they were previously. This leaves women in a particularly precarious position. Urban poor women do not have access to education, basic skills training and capital in the forms of loans and micro-credit. Due to their more disenfranchised positions in the clan structure and their orientation inward towards the home, women do not benefit from the same networks of financial support as men. An IDP woman stated quite poignantly:

*[It is] because of khat and cigarettes that they [men] don’t care about anyone. It is the two children that men have – khat and cigarettes. But, because of lack of education we need men. If we had education we could be independent by them because we don’t care about them...Because of lack of education even if husband is beating her...she fears that the children are not protected from him and because of her children she is patient – they are fearing going outside*⁷⁰.

Women remain trapped somewhere between positive forms of role change produced by their increasing participation in the informal sector and, stagnation. As the aforementioned RVI report made clear, decision-making is still dominated by men⁷¹. Although women may have some leverage in deciding how their income is allocated in terms of food, school fees and other basic needs, most participants recognised the following:

*“[i]t is always the man who makes decisions as far as he is the leader. Even when he is sleeping inside the room...he is the one who... makes decisions and only consults with men”*⁷².

Another woman living in Daami B in Hargeisa noted the following:

“...with our kids, we take the decision, if they are going to the school and if the school needs the parents we are the ones to go. But, outside, he is the one who is responsible”⁷³.

Although people said that the stigma for women working outside the home had dissipated since the war and most people recognize the contributions of Somaliland women, this appears to only exist on the surface. More specifically, there is a contradictory relationship where on the one hand, women need to work in order to generate income, and on the other hand, there are conservative Islamic precepts and exclusionary clan structures that restrict women’s advancement outside of the informal economy. Women can work outside the home as long as they limit their interactions with males. As such, people are adopting largely ideologically convenient positions with respect to women’s changing roles. Indeed, many of those with whom SIHA spoke talked about the previously discussed diffusion of Wahhabism and Salafism as one of the foremost reasons why women had been able to step into public roles outside of the home in the informal sector, but had not been able to progress beyond these roles. As one INGO representative expressed:

“[t]here are a lot of things that contribute to this. One is the culture that men...[are] responsible. There is also confusion about how people understand the religion. Wahhabism is making it seem as though...men are the only ones who can participate in decision-making. But, it shouldn’t be a dictatorship”⁷⁴.

Though the stigma for women working in public spaces has been reduced considerably over the years due in part, to the recognition of women’s integral roles in familial survival and in sustaining the larger economy (though not entirely, as discussed in more detail below), women are still regarded as the custodians of the household. As has been well-documented in the literature on women’s economic participation in the developing world, these conceptions lead to a double burden, where women are responsible for both income generation, as well as the domestic duties associated with maintaining the home and bearing and rearing children. The result, however, is that these women do not have the time to expand their roles beyond subsistence level employment at

the margins of the economy⁷⁵. Insofar as women have left their homes to work in market places, they have been kept in low-wage, irregular and informal jobs that only enable them to survive and support their families. Even then, some of the women with whom we spoke indicated that the older men in their families were against them working. One woman stated that her father-in-law even offered her money to not work. This was illustrated in another study on women's rights in Somaliland where it was found that while there were "thousands" of Somali women engaged in micro and small businesses, men retained control of decision-making⁷⁶. It was said that if a man were to endow his wife with influence in the home, his masculinity would be questioned by the entire community⁷⁷ - similar to the peer-to-peer emasculation and stigma that persists for men who work in the informal economy.

Violence, Coercion and Exploitation

Gender norms in Somaliland are reiterated and reproduced through patriarchal clan structures and reactionary and radical versions of Islam. There are strict scripts about the interaction between the sexes in society such that men and women are not meant to socialize with one another prior to marriage. These gendered scripts have been rigorously interpreted in Somaliland so that unmarried young men and unmarried young women are not able to speak to each other publicly. For this reason, some urban poor women who sell *khat* and tea and whose work demands that they have dealings with men, are viewed as "sexually open". In fact, SIHA interviewed *khat* sellers who expressed "shame as a woman who is being near a man every night and selling *khat* and drugs"⁷⁸. They continued by saying:

*"Everything can happen, people can harass you and take your khat and people will just steal the khat. Because you are interacting with a man you will face a lot of challenges...if you don't give them khat, they will insult you"*⁷⁹.

Verbal harassment against those who continuously interface with men was said to be a routine part of their experience in the informal sector. In line with this, youth articulated that this is partially due to the fact that business transactions in the informal economy are one of the few spaces where males can engage with women openly. As one male youth noted:

“...my friends take...tea [and say] lets go to the beautiful lady, she is very beautiful and sexy. Men are always talking to men – take from me you are beautiful”

It is not just flirtation and sexual harassment, however. As illustrated in the statements by the *khat* sellers above, there is a significant amount of stigma and indignity for some informal labourers. One respondent even said that they were referred to derogatorily as *qaadley* – a Somali word purportedly used to describe women who sell *khat*. They also face quite a few financial risks, which can open them up to other forms of abuse. Customers who are under the influence of *khat* sometimes believe that they do not have to pay, yet, the *khat* dealers frequently collect money from the women retailers the next day. This puts women in what one scholar referred to as the “*khat* trap” - unable to pay the wholesalers who are almost exclusively men and, therefore, powerless to leave the *khat*-selling business⁸⁰.

Owing to the fact that decision-making continues to be dominated by men, even in the home, domestic violence is also deemed to be a serious issue for women. Domestic Violence is massively underreported in Somaliland society as it is commonly viewed to be an exercise of a man’s prerogative, rather than a criminal act. Some of the women with whom we spoke, reported that if they withheld their earnings from their husbands, their husbands would retaliate by beating them. As one woman in Daami B disclosed:

“[h]e takes my money by force [and] he beats me. We have to give them money because he [men] is like a kid, you have to survive to not be beat by your husband even if he is irresponsible”⁸¹.

Although they are unwilling or unable to work themselves, men still feel the previously referenced God-given responsibility over all matters, including the allocation of income earned by their wives. For women, resisting the authority of men in the household can lead to violence, as their husbands and other male relatives try to violently reinforce their power and control in the face of a collapsing sense of Somali masculinity.

Customers, wholesalers and also intimate partners inflict violence and impose control over women working in the informal sector. Informal

labourers also face considerable risk of being robbed, beaten, and sexually assaulted by strangers. Though sexual assault in the form of rape and gang rape, a huge issue in 2014/2015, was said by participants to have declined, the risk of sexual and other forms of abuse still exists for women, especially for more vulnerable segments of the urban, poor population such as IDPs, minority clans and migrants from elsewhere in the HoA, including Ethiopia. One IDP woman living in a ‘State House’ IDP camp narrates her experience with theft as follows:

“I do breakfast for my restaurant in the morning. I start sometimes at 4:30 am and put out the tea and the food and there were two thieves that come to me and say every time you are outside your door, they put a torch in my eyes and I yell the name of my son and he came hurrying and they ran away. They were around 35 years old”⁸².

Most people agreed that sexual violence perpetrated by youth had declined since 2014–2015 due to police action against some of Hargeisa’s larger gangs, specifically Arsenal and ‘Duuffaan’, the Somali word for storm. Still, respondents noted that idleness often prompted youth to engage in criminal activities against women in the informal sector. According to focus-group discussion participants, one gang called “Chabani” posed a particular threat to urban poor women’s security. Below, our respondents have detailed some of the main risks that Somaliland informal labourers face as well as the groups that are most susceptible to such risks.

Main Risks	Vulnerable Groups
Robbery	IDPs
Rape/sexual assault	Migrants from neighbouring countries, especially Ethiopia
Verbal harassment	Minority clans
Beating	
Domestic violence	

Most of the informal labourers and other participants with whom we spoke, indicated that women were most at risk in the early hours of the morning or late at night when returning from work. Women must travel long distances from their places of residence to the spaces where they “set up shop” in the marketplaces and other areas. Hargeisa’s public

transportation system is inadequate and often costly leaving women exposed to the predatory behaviour of the male population who seek to take advantage of them. There is also a problem of very poor lighting throughout the city. Knowing that women who work in the informal sector will be returning late at night with cash in hand, thieves are said to stalk women and then rob them when the opportunity arises. In one reported incident in Daami B, a woman was selling jewellery in the market. When she returned home, she was followed by two assailants who hit her in the neck when trying to steal from her and ultimately killed her. In a similar incident from June of this year, a Goboye woman was walking down a dark street when a gang attempted to rape her. When she tried to fight back, the gang members hit her with a stone and killed her.

The Somaliland “state” and its agents have done little to reduce the risks faced by female informal labourers. Through extraction and coercion, the government only perpetuates the marginalization and exclusion of female informal labourers. The central government may be too weak to efficiently tax populations, especially outside of urban centres like Hargeisa but as UNDP found, Somalis tend to comply with an “informal patchwork of taxation,” of which urban, poor women are said to be the largest contributors⁸³. In prioritizing independence and recognition over the wellbeing of its citizens, the Somaliland government is between a rock and a hard place. Without the investment of money and large streams of development aid that would accompany the recognition of Somaliland as a state, formalising the economy and revenue collection processes will continue to be a difficult undertaking. In the same vein, all of the women interviewed reported having to pay a daily tax of 1000 Somaliland Shillings. While women in more lucrative businesses such as *khat* selling may not have difficulties paying these levies, other urban poor women with whom we spoke, communicated significant financial strain when it came to having to pay a tax that would lessen their already miniscule profit margins for the day. Women thought it was unfair that a woman who sells water on the side of the road in Hargeisa had to pay the same amount of tax to municipal authorities as someone who owned a small shop. As another Goboye women stated when asked whether the government was supporting her in the informal sector:

“[n]o, we don’t like the government. They are taking taxes without caring about that you are the poor. When we are in the market and we come over to the road, the local government puts everything we have in the street, they harass and they beat us and this is not good for us”⁸⁴.

As has been well documented in other research on Somaliland, minority clan women are “doubly marginalised”⁸⁵ due to their minority clan status. This makes it difficult for minority women to demand their rights and compensation from dominant clans and elevates their vulnerability by classifying crimes and discrimination against them as a lesser offense. Like IDPs, minority women are often segregated from the rest of the population and relegated to a diminished status, which excludes them from the full benefits of citizenship and exposes them to increased harassment from local authorities. Although the 2001 Constitution technically recognizes that discrimination on the grounds of clan affiliation should be prohibited, the Somaliland government continues to ignore the victimization of groups like the Goboye, Tumal and Yibir. Law enforcement officials are already unwilling to seriously consider the claims of informal labourers and are even less likely to respond to crimes committed against minorities.

There is no legal protection or official recognition of the rights of street vendors and informal labourers, which has manifested itself in violent harassment and evictions by police and municipal authorities⁸⁶. Many Somalilanders are hesitant to speak openly about their lack of confidence in the police given that the government is overly concerned about their current image as a beacon of stability. Still, participants said that police were unlikely to deal with complaints by urban poor women. Many female respondents fear that if they go to police to deal with a disturbance by a customer, the police will tell them to pack up their things and leave since they are not legally registered and do not have business licenses. As mentioned in a preceding section, these licenses can cost between 200 - 1,000 US Dollars. Both the Hargeisa police and the municipal government were alleged to have told women that they had to rent formal shops if they wanted to continue with their micro-businesses. Yet, as is the case in other post-conflict countries, rent and land prices in general are exorbitantly high in Hargeisa and according to participants, are only increasing. It is, therefore, unlikely that urban poor

women would be able to expend the money needed to set up something other than a makeshift shelter and still be able to provide for themselves and their children. The situation is especially bad for minority clans who face a sizable amount of discrimination. Goboye women documented their frustration with police who were heard saying, “You are Goboye. What are you doing here?”

This lack of recognition for the plight of informal labourers also provides police with the liberty to evict and destroy the property of women, which has adverse consequences as it forces women to restart the cycle of building up capital they already have a hard time accessing⁸⁷. Police are said to come and flip the shelters of women, confiscate the products that they sell and sometimes beat them, allegedly in a bid to clean up the city and aid in the “beautification” of Hargeisa. In many ways, this is just a larger symptom of women’s precarious position in Somaliland society highlighted in the introduction – caught between the competing pressures of modernization and urbanization on the one hand, and conservatism and tradition on the other.

Women are the cornerstone of the Somaliland economy and the mainstay of familial and communal survival. However, as is common in other parts of the African Horn, their visibility as street vendors and shop owners in public spaces is threatening to the image of what it means to be a “modern” city in an increasingly globalized world. At the same time, whether it is domestic and intimate partner violence by male relatives, or coercion, extraction and conviction by police and the municipal government, gender roles that keep women at the margins of the socio-economic order in Somaliland are often violently reinforced.

Coping and Protection

Not surprisingly, urban poor women, like many other Somalilanders, rarely rely on the state for protection. Instead, most people rely on protection from their clans. However, clan-based protection is based on deterrent mechanisms. Because of contractual arrangements between clans, known as *xeer*, there is an obligation to resolve acts committed by or against clan members. As is the case in other pastoral societies, these contractual arrangements are intended to prevent inter-clan tensions from spiralling out of control. There is an incentive to deal with disputes

through the payment of ‘dia’ or “blood money”. Within the clan, there is also a mutual duty among members to support each other during times of economic hardship. Yet, according to customary clan law, women are only worth half the value of men, which has been historically represented through the payment of 50 camels for a violation against a woman, versus 100 camels for a violation against a man. This makes transgressions against women’s rights, including their economic rights, less of a concern than those carried out against men. The anonymity of individuals in urban areas also lessens the effectiveness of clan-based mechanisms by making it difficult to identify perpetrators. As SIHA discovered in 2014/2015, there also appears to be somewhat of a loophole for indiscriminate criminal activities. Since *xeer* holds the entire dia-paying group collectively responsible for a crime perpetrated by one or more of its members, there is no sense of individual criminal liability. The actual perpetrators of crimes against women may escape punishment because the entire collective clan unit pays compensation. For group offenses, compensation is the same irrespective of how many people are involved. Offenders can ensure that compensation is divided among clan members making gang-related violence more economically feasible than individual acts of criminal violence.

This leaves women with few means of physical security. The majority of respondents indicated that urban poor women rely on some form of “protective accompaniment” by male members of their family who chaperone them to and from the market or their shops. Owing to the absence of affordable and reliable transportation options in Hargeisa, informal labourers depend on their husbands and sons to escort them. Without accompaniment, women are forced to walk alone, thus opening them up to the risk of different kinds of violence. Female-headed households and widows are at a unique risk since they do not always have men around to protect them. Since it is viewed as culturally inappropriate and “sexually open” for women to walk alone at night, women are incredibly vulnerable; violations against them are understood in light of and justified on the basis of their alleged immorality. Some women attempt to get around this by hiring transportation services to drop them off in the morning and at night. At fifty cents per day, the transportation services are quite costly and would force a woman to spend almost half of her daily earnings just getting to and from work.

Beyond the methods that women rely on for physical protection, they have also to set up informal rotating savings funds to support one another financially. As has been well documented, rotating savings and credit associations (ROCAs) are the most common type of informal financial institutions in the developing world⁸⁸. In Kenya, for example, around fifty-seven per cent of households have at least one person who has participated in some kind of rotating savings scheme. On average, people contributed just over twenty per cent of their individual income and thirteen per cent of household income to such savings groups⁸⁹. People will usually deposit a predetermined amount, such as 1000 shillings per day into a pot, which is then shared with another member when they are in need. Though such saving associations take on a variety of forms, the most common form in Somaliland is the *hagbad*, an association that collects money from its members with the 'pot' of earnings allocated to a different member in turn⁹⁰. In an environment where formal banking infrastructure is lacking and where women have limited access to loans and micro-credit through banks like Dahabshil or fellow clan members, ROCAs serve as one of the few means of financial assistance for informal labourers and the urban poor. Ordinarily conceptualized as "self-help groups," many NGOs have tried to take advantage of these pre-existing, informal, financial institutions, "formalizing" them by providing capacity building and technical support in the form of financial literacy classes and the management of member contributions. Even so, NGO programming efforts aimed at economic empowerment through enhancing the informal systems that supply women with opportunities for economic mobility can only reach so far, and are unlikely to have an immediate impact on addressing the patriarchal structures of power that have kept women at the margins of the economy and decision-making at different levels of Somaliland society. Because of this, women across the HoA have been fighting for institutionalization and recognition of their economic contribution that would place them on an equal level with men, something that they have not otherwise experienced in society. Restricting women's advancement outside the informal sector through the maintenance of patriarchal clan structures and increasingly conservative sects of Islam is merely part of women's battle for a symbolic and physical space in politics and the economy.

Key Observations and Conclusions

State and economic collapse in the Somali region in the late 1980s and early 1990s thrust women into the public sphere selling tea, *khat*, jewellery, cosmetics, used clothes and other items on the streets and in the markets of Hargeisa. Nonetheless, as referenced throughout this report, there have been few modifications to women's structurally subordinate position in Somaliland society. Women remain trapped between positive forms of role change and stagnation, simultaneously empowered and disempowered and kept at the margins of the economy and society. Although Somalilanders acknowledge the significance of women's dramatic entrance into the informal sector during and since the war against the Barre regime, such an entrance is only acceptable so long as they remain in informal, irregular and low-wage work while also maintaining their conventional position as custodians of the household. The Somaliland state has been reluctant to extend women their full rights and unwilling to grant them legal protection, hindering their advancement in society. Despite continuous discussions about a women's quota in the government since the 1990s, for instance, a quota has yet to be granted even as south-central Somalia has increased the number of seats available to women in government. Notwithstanding the sustained advocacy of Somaliland civil society and grassroots women's rights activists, the Sexual Gender Based Violence Bill, which would provide women some form of legal protection against the kinds of physical security risks discussed in this report, has yet to be passed. Women are also markedly underrepresented in the Chamber of Commerce, further limiting their access to business networks and information. Although the Ministry of Trade and Industry has employed female lawyers to help women access trade licensing contracts and other services, the few formal banks in Somaliland do not offer women-friendly lending or micro-finance schemes. The government remains dependent on the NGO "self-help" programs and women's economic empowerment programming initiatives for the micro, small and medium enterprises mentioned above ⁹¹.

As with other conflict-affected settings in the African Horn, the minimum legal protection and government policies within the constitution that exist for female informal labourers are seldom implemented⁹². It is crucial to have legal recognition and policies for female informal labourers in order to prevent abuse, ad hoc extraction, evictions and intimidation tactics. Unfortunately, pre-war gender ideals, coupled with exclusionary clan structures and rising political Islam, continue to threaten the advancement of women in Somaliland. Until the root causes and social underpinnings of women's marginalization have been addressed, female populations in Somaliland will never be able to achieve equality in education, employment, business, health and political participation⁹³.

Ever since the 1990s, women's economic empowerment in the informal sector through micro-finance and micro-enterprises has been seen as critical to "poor-pro growth" and has increased the standard of living and self-reliance for urban poor women⁹⁴. As Sub-Saharan African countries modernize and urbanize, however, female informal labourers remain incredibly vulnerable to the pressures of globalization, pushing them further into the periphery while governments try to create conducive investment climates outside of the so-called "shadow" sector. In response to globalization and rapid change, which in Somaliland has been produced by protracted conflict and state collapse, there has also been a turn towards more conservative and strict interpretations of gender roles as part of the effort to hold onto a glorified past. In Somaliland, this is evidenced by the persistence of customary clan laws and structures, as well as the spread of political Islam and with it, more regulated and circumscribed roles for women. Of course, this reactionary dynamic against change is not exclusive to Somaliland. The past few years have seen shifts towards "traditionalism" occurring around the globe, including the allegedly liberal West. But, without due consideration to these competing pressures, programs based on the economic empowerment of women are likely to fail.

A recent UNDP report on women in the private sector revealed that although there is a lot of funding going towards vocational training, business management, capacity building and small grants to individual women and cooperatives, such "...programs are still riddled with flaws. Inappropriate beneficiary selection, lack of market research, little or

weak monitoring procedures, small grant sizes, all...have had no real economic impact ⁹⁵. Even with the realization that it is impossible to separate economic from social development,⁹⁶ it seems as though little has been done to conceptualize the links between conventional elements of economic advancement for the poor, such as access to loans and assets, education, skills training, business-related information and business networks, and the way that gender relations are structured. Part of the reason that women lack access to business networks is because of their orientation towards the home. This limits their interaction with those who could provide them with information and financial assistance. Customary laws, including the framework for property ownership and inheritance, furthermore, stop women's ability to take out loans from formal banks. Women lack access to the kinds of collateral required by such institutions and this effectively entraps them in the informal economy. Breaking down barriers to women's market access not only means providing them with small loans, but also means addressing the structural conditions that have limited their economic mobility and access. These include lack of networks, lack of information and absence of literacy training and educational opportunities.

The way Somalilanders think of gender roles for men and women lies in a pre-war era ideology, where women were responsible for the maintenance of the household and men were responsible for decision-making. The authority and control of men over women's productive and reproductive capabilities has only been amplified by the spread of political Islam, which has intensified the view that men have a divine obligation to rule. This means that when women return home with their earnings, they usually have to relinquish them to men. As specified in one of the previous sections, if women refuse, they can be beaten as men try to violently reinforce their influence over decision-making. Advancing women's economic independence can, in some instances, promote a change to societal attitudes towards women, but in the present time, it can also bolster the status quo by failing to stimulate deeper social and cultural change⁹⁷. As highlighted elsewhere, facilitation of open dialogue about the economic contributions of women in Somaliland and debates about sexual and gender-based violence can begin to challenge dominant perceptions. Since peer-to-peer emasculation is what in some cases prevents men from engaging in the same low-wage work that women do, while at the same time justifying and fortifying

their influence over decision-making in the household, having men's groups that address what appears to be a collapsing sense of masculinity for men, is critical. There are high expectations for male members of Somaliland society, but there are very few opportunities for men and boys to pursue those expectations. Engaging in discussions about what it means to be a man in Somaliland would give males an avenue outside of violence against women to voice their concerns about not being able to live up to idealized gender roles. Given the growing influence of political Islam, engendering dialogue between moderate Islamic leaders and male segments of the population can help "dismantle the image of militant interpretations"⁹⁸ of women's roles in the socio-economic order of Somaliland. Dialogue can help people "unlearn" the gender inequitable attitudes and behaviours that have precluded women from realizing their rights. This is also important in closing the space that has been created for religious militancy. Many youth turn to religious militancy when faced with limited economic opportunities and a growing sense of frustration toward a government that has been unable to deliver the hope that its declaration of independence in 1991 implied. For the reasons referenced throughout this report, women remain trapped in a cycle of inter-generational poverty with almost no opportunities to leave this web of disempowerment. While conventional micro-credit and savings programs can benefit women and encourage economic independence, fundamental changes are needed to address the underlying crisis of gender inequality and the challenges of Somaliland itself.

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Notes

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