

POSITION PAPER

BREAKING BARRIERS

Enhancing Women's Access to Gender Responsive Justice in Ethiopia, Sudan and Somalia





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It raises awareness of the barriers preventing women in Ethiopia, Sudan, and Somalia from accessing justice, and provides information to support and encourage help-seeking behaviour among these women.

It concludes with key recommendations for strengthening pathways for women's access to justice in the Horn of Africa.

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INTRODUCTION

Women’s Access to Justice in Ethiopia, Sudan & Somalia

Access to justice is a human right that encompasses the litigability, availability, accessibility, quality and accountability of justice systems, and the provision of remedies for victims (UN Women, 2021). The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) outline ambitious targets to ensure equal access to justice for all by 2030. However, women in Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan face structural and societal barriers that prevent them from seeking justice and securing accountability for harms and violations committed against them. Women in these three countries already face significant disadvantages with regard to marriage, family, property, inheritance and employment rights due to institutionalised discrimination. This discrimination is further compounded by the lack of access to justice, meaning that few women get redress for the injustices that they face.


This position paper aims to raise awareness of the barriers preventing women in Ethiopia, Sudan and Somalia from accessing justice, and

to provide information that can promote help-seeking behaviour amongst these women.

A. Legal & Policy Gaps

One of the biggest barriers to justice across the three focus countries is the complex legal landscape that forces women to navigate three distinct layers of legal systems simultaneously. In Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan, customary, religious, and statutory legal systems coexist, creating an intricate and often confusing framework that women must delicately navigate to seek justice. This legal pluralism creates confusion and uncertainty, as many women may not know which system applies for their case. In Ethiopia, for instance, the extent of legal protections varies by region. Women in the Somali and Afar regions face a fragmented legal system as these regions are yet to enact state family laws, limiting their ability to seek justice within their region (EWLA et al, 2024). In such situations, it is difficult for women to determine

Country	Triple Legal System
Ethiopia	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Statutory Legal System- Federal and State Courts2. Religious Legal System-Shariah Courts3. Customary Legal Systems (social courts)
Somalia	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Statutory Legal System-2. Religious Legal System-Shariah Courts3. Customary Legal Systems- Xeer System
Sudan	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Statutory Legal System2. Religious Legal System-Shariah Courts3. Customary Legal Systems



which courts have jurisdiction over their cases, their rights under each system, or how to proceed when one system fails them.

Legal pluralism has been beneficial because in contrast to statutory legal systems, customary and informal justice systems are linguistically, geographically and financially accessible, faster at resolving disputes, and are perceived as more legitimate within communities (IDLO, 2019). Women, in particular, benefit from these systems as they do not have to travel far or spend a lot of money to seek remediation, and often want to maintain their status in their marriages, families and communities. In countries recovering from conflict, customary and informal justice systems offer legal recourse where formal systems are still recovering. Despite the benefits of legal pluralism, customary and informal justice systems (CIJ) tend [to leave behind women and other vulnerable groups \(Swenson, 2018\)](#).

CIJ systems are often infiltrated with patriarchal norms, resulting in discriminatory and harmful outcomes for women and girls. The choice to seek justice at the CIJ level is also not free from influence, as women are often pressured and coerced to rely on these systems in order to preserve community and familial peace. This can be reflected in ruling decisions, such as the case of Somalia, where CIJs sometimes prioritise community peace over justice for survivors of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) (SIHA Network, 2023). In other cases, women may feel discouraged to solve disputes at these courts because of the public nature of the hearings which makes it hard for them to bring up topics that are shrouded in shame and stigma, such as sexual violence (IDLO, 2019).

Formal justice systems in these countries are not without fault, as they are less preferred by

women due to financial inaccessibility, complex structures and procedures, lack of language support for victims and the stigma that women have to face after court rulings. The cost of pursuing cases in formal systems has deterred women as they have to account for varied costs ranging from case processing fees, legal support fees, to bribery costs to ‘facilitate’ case progression. A 2021 UN Women study also found that formal courts tended to benefit wealthier and more politically connected women more, while poorer women often had their cases dismissed because of corruption (UN Women Africa, 2021). Lastly, formal courts are difficult to navigate without legal representation. This is in contrast to CIJs where women can represent themselves, but also tend to be aware of the legal intricacies as they are derived from local cultures and religions that they have been part of all their life.

B. Setbacks from Cultural & Religious Legal Institutions

Women and girls in the Horn of Africa are often subject to patriarchal values encoded in legal systems, ultimately making it difficult for them to get justice. Patriarchal ideologies legitimise male power and authority over women, and endorse punitive measures over women who deviate from societal norms. When patriarchy is enshrined not only in the law but also in the institutions that are supposed to protect women, it becomes difficult for them to trust or rely on these systems. Consequently, legal frameworks that should safeguard women’s rights often reinforce the same structures that oppress them.

One way we see patriarchy encoded in legal systems in the Horn of Africa is in the inadequate




Country	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)	Maputo Protocol	Legal Gaps and Weaknesses Relating to Women’s Rights
Somalia	Not Ratified . (One of the 6 UN Member states that has not ratified CEDAW)	Signed but not Ratified	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No criminalisation of marital rape • Rape defined solely by use of physical force, not the absence of consent • Inadequate sexual violence legislation, Sexual Offenses Bill not adopted since 2018 • High prevalence of FGM - Approximately 98% of Somali women have undergone FGM. • Allowance for out of court settlement of sexual violence cases like rape.
Ethiopia	Ratified	Ratified	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marital rape intentionally left out of legislation. In Ethiopia, rape is defined as a non-consensual sexual act committed outside of marriage. • Ethiopia also made reservations on marital rape as spelled out in Article 4 (2)(a) of the Maputo Protocol, which prohibits violence against women in both private and public spheres.
Sudan	Not Ratified . (One of the 6 UN Member states that has not ratified CEDAW)	Signed but not Ratified	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No criminalisation of marital rape • Rape defined solely by use of physical force, not the absence of consent • Unequal marital rights for women • Male guardianship system is active, where women require male consent for activities such as

or complete absence of criminalisation or legislation against harmful and discriminatory practices. Sudan, for instance, fails to adequately criminalise acts of rape, torture, enforced disappearance, and arbitrary detentions (SOAS Center for Human Rights Law, 2024). This gap prevents Sudanese women from seeking justice, despite having faced disproportionate impact in the decades of violence that the country has

faced. In the most recent two-year civil war, both the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and Rapid Support Forces (RSF) have used sexual violence as a weapon of war, with cases documented of the [rape, gang rape, forced marriage and sexual enslavement of women and girls \(SIHA Network, 2025\)](#). In addition, Sudan’s legal framework does not acknowledge domestic violence, leaving survivors of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)






with no avenues for redress (SIHA Network, 2021). Similarly, Ethiopia lacks adequate legal coverage for forms of SGBV. The country does not recognise marital rape as a form of SGBV, and while GBV laws exist, they fail to recognize economic and psychological violence against women within marriage and family contexts (UN Women & AFDB, 2024). Marital rape is one of the most prevalent forms of IPV in Ethiopia with a 2010 World Health Organization (WHO) study putting it that 59% of married women in the country had experienced marital rape (WHO, 2010).

Somalia remains one of the most dangerous countries for women and girls, with progressive legal gains being undermined by backlash from society and religious institutions. In 2018, the country appeared to have made significant gains by signing a Sexual Offenses Bill (SOB) that sought to hold SGBV perpetrators accountable. However, under pressure from religious leaders who referred to the bill as ‘UnIslamic’, the bill was sent back to parliament where it was repealed (SIHA Network, 2023; CSHRD, 2024). In 2020, the SOB was replaced with the Sexual Intercourse Bill (SIB), also known as the Penetration Bill, which significantly eroded protections for women and girls. This bill reduced criminal liability for acts like sexual exploitation and child marriage, removed the age of consent to sexual intercourse, assigned consent to family members instead of individuals, altered the definition of rape from an explicit description to a vague description and allowed the introduction of a survivor’s sexual history as evidence during trial (Legal Action Worldwide, 2020). As a result of international pressure, this bill was not passed. However, as of 2025, the country lacks a proper sexual offenses law that can aid survivors in seeking justice. Another bill that is yet to be passed is the 2019 Anti FGM Bill which attempts to criminalise all forms of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), whether forced or

self inflicted and provide legal protection for FGM. Even if the bill were to be passed, it still contains limitations that would facilitate FGM. The bill, for instance, has loopholes that permit FGM if found to be necessary for a woman’s mental or physical health, leaving room for Sunna FGM which is often misrepresented as medically or religiously justified (SIHA Network, 2025). Lastly, Somalia has not ratified both the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) or the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol), both of which would strengthen protections for women. These examples demonstrate legal systems, rather than serving as a tool of protection, can become an instrument of patriarchal control, reinforcing gender hierarchies and leaving survivors with little to no [recourse](#).

Another way that patriarchy manifests in legal systems across the Horn of Africa is through the formal and informal conferral of power to men over women survivors. This dynamic is clear in the composition of legal decision-makers and the procedural norms that govern access to justice. For instance, in many customary and religious legal systems, decision-making authority rests almost exclusively with male elders or religious leaders. In the Tigray region of Ethiopia, research found that the Customary Dispute Resolution (CDR) processes favoured men and powerful members of society, making the pursuit of land rights justice expensive and precarious for women and the poor (Cohen et al, 2021). Similarly, it is common practice in the kebele (social courts) to enlist the presiding of men who may be ignorant of or unable to accurately interpret the law (Cohen et al, 2021). In religious courts in all the 3 countries, women are not allowed to speak for themselves, and must appoint a male guardian to represent them in court and offer consent on



their behalf (UN Women, 2021; Cohen et al, 2021; Norwegian Refugee Council, 2016). This practice institutionalises women’s legal dependency and undermines their independence within systems that already marginalise them. Ultimately, patriarchal legal structures in the Horn of Africa actively sustain the marginalisation of women. The coexistence of discriminatory laws, male-dominated judicial processes, and the social expectation of women’s subservience forms a closed loop of exclusion. To achieve genuine access to justice, legal reform must go beyond amending statutes but should dismantle the patriarchal foundations that these systems are built on.

C. Law Enforcement Officials as a Barrier to Women’s Access to Justice


Beyond the limitations of the legal systems, the people embedded in legal institutions also act as a barrier to women’s access to justice. Police officers, judges and even prosecutors frequently perpetuate the same discrimination that legal systems are meant to protect women from.

Police officers, for instance, deter women from seeking justice as they are often reluctant to investigate and even ask survivors to investigate crimes committed against them by themselves. In Ethiopia, law enforcement personnel often suggest that survivors provoked their perpetrators into assaulting them through their manner of dressing (ACAPS, 2025). In the case of Sudan, discrimination takes on an ethnic dimension as police often turn away survivors because of their ethnicity (Redress, 2024). The fear of revictimisation and the lack of survivor-

centered justice processes further discourages women from engaging in justice-seeking processes. A UN Women study found that in Ethiopia, the police did not take cases of GBV seriously, and that survivors were more likely to be sent home without support if the police officers were male (UN Women, 2021). This attitude is rooted in the harmful belief that Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is a private matter that should be dealt with between husband and wife, or within the community. Corruption further exacerbates the problem as police sometimes request a bribe or a fee to facilitate the processing and investigation of cases, which survivors often can not afford.

A key obstacle to survivor-centered justice is the lack of female case workers who may approach SGBV cases with sensitivity and empathy . In Somalia, 92% of police are male, while only 2 judges in the country are female (UN in Somalia, 2022). This gender imbalance limits survivors’ comfort and trust in reporting sensitive crimes such as sexual assault. In some cases, the police themselves are perpetrators of violence, where when a woman goes to report, they are abused further by the police. One example of this is the case in Al Qatina in Sudan, where 54 women and girl survivors of enforced disappearance, were further retraumatised, as Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) soldiers raped some of them before taking them to medical facilities (SIHA Network & GRC, 2025) . It does not help that the country’s legal system provides criminal and civil immunity for the police, army and security forces, effectively shielding perpetrators from accountability (SOAS Center for Human Rights Law, 2024).

The judiciary, too, poses challenges for women seeking justice. Structural gender bias, lack of female representation amongst judges, and poor working conditions combine to make courts




unwelcoming spaces for survivors. In the Oromia region of Ethiopia, social courts are mandated to have female representation yet this requirement is often ignored in practice (Cohen et al, 2021). In Somalia, it has been found that when it comes to land inheritance rights, judges tend to prioritise keeping community peace and prefer to refer these cases to the clan level where elders will preside over them (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2016). This pattern promotes women's economic marginalisation, as customary rulings often deny women ownership or inheritance rights. Even within the formal judicial system, gender bias remains deeply entrenched. One study found that 48% of judges in Mogadishu, Somalia's capital, believe that women share responsibility for their own rape (Nyczak, 2023). The same study further found that this bias was reflected in rulings, as judges allowed the defense to introduce evidence of survivors' "immoral character" to undermine their claims of non-consent, interpreted the absence of bruises on victims' bodies as evidence of consent, and judged victims based on their sex even before they provided testimony. The attitudes and practices of law enforcement and judicial actors compound the structural injustices already present in legal frameworks. When survivors are met with disbelief, bias, or even violence from the very institutions meant to protect them, access to justice becomes an illusion. Legal reform should therefore move beyond legal texts and address the culture of impunity, gender bias, and systemic inequality embedded within law enforcement and the judiciary.

D. Stigma & Retraumatization

Even when legal frameworks exist, women in the Horn of Africa often avoid seeking justice due to fear of stigma, retraumatization, and

revictimisation. Already, women who are outspoken against injustices are seen as deviating from the norms of how a woman should act. This stigma is compounded when women turn to formal justice systems rather than cultural and religious legal systems that are steeped in patriarchy, as they are seen as betrayers of their community and culture. In Somalia, women avoid reporting cases as they fear being blamed for bringing dishonour and shame to their clans (UN in Somalia, 2022). Stigma serves as a reinforcing cycle that prevents justice for women. In this case, women do not report cases for fear of social exclusion, isolation and repercussions, while perpetrators continue to abuse and commit crimes against women because they know that women will not report. Stigma is such an effective deterrent against justice, that a 2023 study of rape cases in Khartoum found that out of all cases that occurred that year, only 2% were reported (Redress 2024).

Silence is also encouraged across Ethiopia, Sudan and Somalia by the presence of procedural revictimisation and criminalisation. In customary courts, the public nature of case proceedings invites shame and stigma into the process particularly when women and girls have to report sexual violence cases (IDLO, 2019). Additionally, in religious and customary legal systems, a woman may sometimes be accused of sexual immorality when they seek support after experiencing SGBV. In Sudan and Somalia, SGBV survivors can easily become the accused. In Sudan, evidence presented to prove sexual violence has been used to initiate criminal proceedings for adultery against the survivors (Redress, 2024). In Somalia, on the other hand, the country's penal code defines sexual assault as a "crime of immorality", rather than a violation of bodily integrity or liberty, opening up survivors to being criminalised for sexual promiscuity (Nyczak, 2023). Furthermore, this code criminalises same



sex relations, opening up survivors of same sex assault or rape to prosecution. Such procedural victim-blaming transforms justice-seeking into a dangerous act.

In addition, when survivors of SGBV seek justice, they are often coerced to forgive their perpetrators or even forced to marry their perpetrators. In Somalia, SGBV survivors live under the threat of being tried for adultery or abducted by Al-Shabaab, who enforce their own extreme interpretation of moral laws (SIHA Network, 2023). Other times, Somali women are forced to forgive perpetrators and their silence is exchanged for diya, a payment the perpetrator makes to the family (UN in Somalia, 2022). While such payment is often preferable to poorer women and a driving force for them seeking justice in customary courts, a lot of times accused default payments with women forced to seek ways to recover this compensation (UN Women Africa, 2021). Overall these systems are built to maintain peace within families and the community, without concern about how retraumatisation affects survivors' wellbeing. By treating sexual violence as a social inconvenience rather than a human rights violation, such systems sustain cycles of trauma and impunity.

E. Lack of Survivor Centered Processes


Justice systems across Ethiopia, Sudan and Somalia largely fail to consider the psychosocial wellbeing of the survivor. A survivor centered judicial approach prioritises the survivor's wellbeing, dignity and autonomy. However, for SGBV survivors in these countries, the process is peppered with secondary victimisation from the moment of reporting to the judicial stage. In customary courts, for instance, cases are held in

public with the lack of anonymisation for child victims and the public nature of a case regarding a taboo topic such as sex bringing shame and stigma to the survivors (IDLO, 2019). Police stations are often not well equipped to support survivors of VAW with the trope that victims provoked their perpetrators being a major point of revictimisation. The reporting process itself often reproduces trauma as survivors are often made to recount experiences multiple times without psychological support or confidentiality safeguards (UN Women, 2021). In Somalia, this retraumatisation is exacerbated by invasive medical examinations, as the law places the burden on them to prove that they were abused (Nyczak, 2023).

The justice process is also physically and logistically inaccessible for many women. In Sudan, Form 8 A is an important medical document used to document cases of physical assault such as rape, torture and assault. However, this form is only available in police stations and large hospitals in Khartoum, meaning that survivors, often in poor physical shape, have to travel far distances to access this critical form (Redress, 2024). Furthermore, there is a shortage of medical professionals who have the expertise in examining cases of sexual violence and torture, making the justice-seeking process even more arduous for survivors (Redress, 2024).

F. Seeking Justice in Post Conflict Settings

While Somalia is considered to be a transitional country in a fragile state, Ethiopia and Sudan are both currently experiencing active conflict. Ethiopia is battling with bouts of violence between government forces and the Fano, a guerilla ethnic-based militia in the Amhara region.



This conflict sprung in 2024 less than a year after signing a peace deal that ended the devastating conflict in the Tigray region that had lasted from 2020 to 2022. Sudan is undergoing a civil war that erupted in 2023 between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary group, Rapid Support Forces (RSF). The country is also facing the world's largest humanitarian crisis, with civilians bearing most of the brunt (Savage, 2025).

In active and post-conflict settings, access to justice is limited with the barriers being compounded for women. For instance, while 500 cases of rape were reported in the first year of the Tigray war, the number is an underestimation as in reality, most women were unable to access health facilities for post-SGBV services such as emergency contraceptives, abortions, and treatment for Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) including HIV (Cohen et al, 2021). The Tigray conflict disrupted clinical management of rape protocols, making the medical steps necessary for seeking justice out of reach for survivors (ACAPS, 2025). In addition, by April 2024, the Tigray region only had 8 psychologists

for the entire region, hence limiting survivor centered support for women who wanted to access justice (ACAPS, 2025). Conflicts also fuel institutional collapse. In Sudan, police, court and medical institutions were all disrupted, putting survivors at extreme risk while seeking justice (Redress, 2024).

While Somalia is transitional, a vast amount of the population is internally displaced and lives in insecure and precarious shelter. Most SGBV cases in the country occur in these settings where the rule of law is absent and survivors lack access to support services (SIHA Network, 2025). Furthermore, some areas of the country are still governed by Al Shabaab, a group that often commits GBV, primarily through forced marriages of underage girls and women to their soldiers (US DOS, 2024). The group is also a strong deterrent for women's access to justice, as they revictimise SGBV survivors by trying them of adultery (zina), and incarcerate women for offenses such as wearing brassieres or not wearing the hijab (Nyczak, 2023; US DOS, 2024).



RECOMMENDATIONS

Strengthening Pathways for Women's Access to Justice in the Horn of Africa

In view of the barriers women in these three countries face in accessing justice, several steps need to be taken across society not only to close legal gaps that lock women out of the justice system, but more importantly, to restore their trust in the justice process. To achieve this, we offer some recommendations that seek to address the pain points that women encounter throughout the judicial process.

1. Restoring Trust in the Formal Justice Process

In their current state, criminal and court systems in Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan are difficult and discouraging for women to navigate. For more women to confidently pursue justice within the formal legal systems, several steps need to be taken to make the process easier for them. First, it is important for the cost of access to justice to be lowered. This can be done through waiving fees required to file cases and having stricter enforcement against bribery and informal fees that women are often coerced to pay to expedite cases. In addition, governments in these countries can ease access to legal representation by offering free legal aid in local courts. This can be supplemented by community-based lawyers and paralegals who are able to support women in understanding the law and even in translation of key concepts. However, governments should

provide funding for these initiatives, as legal aid clinics are costly to run and sustain for long periods of time.

Second, for women to have trust in formal justice systems, they need to be assured that their cases will have fast turn around times. When cases are drawn out in court, women have to spend more money on legal aid, transportation to court for hearings and even bribes and informal fees to try to expedite the case. Having cases resolved faster would remove these pain points and restore trust in the justice seeking process.

Lastly, gender-sensitivity needs to be ingrained in judicial processes in these countries. From the reporting stage, law enforcement and medical officers should be trained to handle cases from women with sensitivity, without dismissing their concerns, and even cultural sensitivity for processes such as medical examinations. Cases files should then be treated with confidentiality, while the process should not be unnecessarily prolonged. At the judicial level, judges should be assessed for bias, while prosecutors should be trained to handle cross-examinations with sensitivity. Ultimately, trust in formal justice systems can only be restored if women see that justice does not come at the cost of their gender.



2. Integrating Gender - Responsiveness in Customary, Religious and Informal Justice Systems

Given that women already prefer to turn to customary, religious and informal justice systems, the priority is not trust-building but addressing the systemic gender bias and discrimination in these systems. Great care needs to be taken to eradicate discriminative practices and bias and build CIJ's to full capacity for restorative justice. Governments should ensure that rulings, especially on issues such as SGBV and land inheritance rights, while respectful of cultural and religious traditions, remain aligned with international human rights standards. These measures, combined with unbiased enforcement, will address the legitimate concerns that currently deter women from seeking justice through these systems

In addition, leaders in informal court systems need to be trained on gender bias and gender-sensitivity. This can be reinforced through religious and cultural teachings that uphold the equal status of women in communities. Gender sensitivity can also be ensured with the presence of women representatives in these courts, who could help ensure that judgements are not biased against women. Legal aid networks could offer support for these efforts by providing monitoring services for informal courts and identifying areas where training is needed and enforcement gaps that need to be closed. The government should also conduct periodic assessments of the leaders who sit in CIJ systems to ensure their suitability for their roles and their ability to correctly

interpret laws. Ultimately, because CIJ systems are the first resort for many women, reforming them is essential to deliver restorative justice for women.

3. Reducing Access Barriers to Justice

Justice systems need to be built to respond to the needs of the people they serve. In their current state, Ethiopia, Sudan and Somalia, are fragile states facing conflict with most populations living outside of urban areas and in precarious situations. While informal legal systems are designed for such contexts, formal legal systems also need to adapt in order to provide support for women with criminal cases.

To curb barriers such as long distances to courts and police stations, formal legal systems should adopt more accessible ways for women to report cases. This can be done through legal aid clinics that come to them instead, eliminating the need to leave their duties and travel far distances. It can also be done through digital help desks or toll free lines where women who may have access to devices may use them. In these accessible legal forums, legal advice should also be included, to aid women in navigating complex legal documentation, but also to help them understand their legal rights and the support that different legal systems offer them. This should be done in local languages and sign language for women living with disabilities, to promote accessibility. In these accessible legal aid clinics, there should also be support for women who may be undocumented or lack identification documents, to ensure that this does not become a barrier for them to access justice.



4. Closing Legal Gaps

Most importantly, for women to access justice, discriminative legal frameworks and gaps in legislation on issues that disproportionately affect women should be addressed. Currently in all three countries, issues such as sexual violence are under-legislated, creating avenues for revictimisation of survivors and deterring them from seeking justice. The governments in Ethiopia, Sudan and Somalia should not only address these legal gaps, but also initiate sensitization campaigns on why these issues

need to be addressed in partnership with civil society. In addition to this, the Sudanese and Somali governments should ratify CEDAW and Maputo protocols, as a demonstration of their commitment to increasing access to justice for women, ending discrimination against women and providing legal frameworks for issues that disproportionately affect women. It is only when discriminatory laws are reformed and international commitments are honored, that women will feel more confident in the justice-seeking process, as these systems will be there to protect them and not revictimise them.

Conclusion

For women and girls in Ethiopia, Sudan and Somalia, the path to justice is blocked by systemic barriers. While legal systems are meant to offer redress to women, in these countries they frequently perpetuate the same injustices that women are trying to get justice for. From complex legal frameworks, to the inaccessibility of available resources and perpetuation of patriarchal cultural and religious norms in rulings, the current justice system only serves to alienate women and reduce their trust in existing legal structures.

Despite the challenges present, there is an opportunity to transform these legal systems and rebuild women's trust in their capacity to offer justice. The factsheet outlines approaches towards a fairer justice system, with the most important step being legal reform. The governments of Ethiopia, Sudan and Somalia need to criminalise all forms of SGBV, close legal loopholes that allow for retrogressive and harmful practices such as FGM and marital rape, and ratify CEDAW and Maputo Protocol. Beyond policies, these governments need to empower and allocate resources for local institutions such as the police to enable the enforcement of these laws. Other steps that need to be taken include investments into legal aid, especially for displaced and rural communities, training of customary and religious leaders on gender bias and gender-sensitivity, and proper monitoring of both formal and informal justice systems for gender inequality. Ultimately, making the path to justice easier does not just benefit women, it improves legal outcomes for everyone.



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