

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	1122
Land:	Somalia
Kilde:	Heritage Institute
Titel:	Fostering Safe and Inclusive Workspaces for Women in Somalia
Udgivet:	november 2024
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	6. februar 2025

HERITAGE
I N S T I T U T E



Fostering Safe and Inclusive Workplaces for Women in Somalia

November 2024

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1. Executive summary

Somalia is engaged in rebuilding from the bottom up all political, economic, and societal institutions that were destroyed during decades of conflict. This requires that Somalia utilize all resources at its disposal, including human resources. Yet women, who comprise 52.7% of the population, are economically and politically excluded, remaining in the margins.¹ Women also outnumber men as heads of household in urban and rural areas, making it essential to ensure and promote women's economic independence.² This research broadly examines women's participation in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors of the workplace in Somalia. It further explores the barriers women encounter and the strategies they employ to overcome these challenges.

Somalia is one of the youngest countries in the world, where two-thirds of the population is under the age of 30. This challenge is compounded by high levels of unemployment, estimated at 60%, particularly among groups such as women, youth, internally displaced people, and nomadic populations.³ As the Somali government seeks to defeat the terrorist group Al-Shabaab, one strategy can be to address the high rates of unemployment among the youth.⁴

Additionally, women's employment rates in both the formal and private sectors can further aid in stabilizing the country by expanding its workforce, increasing its GDP growth, and improving its economic recovery.⁵

This research utilizes qualitative research methods, relying on focus group discussions (FGDs) and semi-structured key informant interviews (KIIs) with key stakeholders. The FGDs were held in Galkayo (north and south) and consisted of participants from Puntland and Galmudug respectively; in Garowe, Puntland; and in Mogadishu, Benadir Regional Administration (BRA). All fieldwork was carried out between January and April 2024. The study participants represented different age groups ranging from 18 to 67 years.

The informants reflected the broader population, which is very young. In terms of marital status, the majority of the participants were single, followed by divorced women. This is reflective of the broader society where women are delaying marriage because they are shouldering responsibility for their families and using their income to take care of them. This is reflected in the high rates of women who are heads of households. Educationally, a significant majority of the informants held university degrees, in contrast with the broader population where educational and literacy rates for women are much lower than for men.

1. Mohamoud, Nimo, Abdisalan Y. Artan & Hussein Abdulahi (March 2024) "Assessment of Women's Economic Participation in Somalia" Mogadishu: National Economic Council of Somalia.

2. The population of women-headed household is highest in urban areas (56.5 percent), compared to men (43.4 percent). Similarly, in rural areas the number of female-headed household (52.6 percent) is higher than families headed by men (47.4 percent). Only within nomadic communities do men (66.6 percent) significantly outnumber women (33.4 percent); Women and Men in Somalia (2023); Mogadishu: Somalia National Bureau of Statistics.

3. The Somalia National Development Plan 2020-2024 (NDP-9 2019) (January 5, 2020); Mogadishu: The Ministry of Planning, Investment and Economic Development. Available at: <https://mop.gov.so/somali-national-development-plan-9-2020-2024/>

4. Adelaja, Adesoji and Justin George (October 2020) "Is Youth Unemployment Related to Domestic Terrorism?" Perspectives on Terrorism, Vol. 14, No. 5, pp. 41-62.

5. "Assessment of Women's Economic Participation in Somalia" (March 2024) Mogadishu: National Economic Council of Somalia.

Almost half of the informants worked for CSOs/NGOs, signaling that this sector is more welcoming to women workers, followed by the public sector with the private sector representing the smallest number of employed women.

The findings of this research revealed that despite regional differences such as population size, economic activities, and security between Galkayo, Garowe, and Mogadishu, and differences in age, education, and work experiences, the women who participated in this study faced very similar challenges. Women's experiences and treatment at work depended on a variety of factors such as age, physical appearance, educational level, clan membership, and whether they were local or from the diaspora. Women who were older, more educated, married, and from more powerful clans that could provide protection and advocacy faced less harassment than women who were young, less educated, physically appealing, and from less powerful clans.

The negative patriarchal attitudes impact women in the workplace. Many of the informants noted the clear preference for men in the workplace and the widely held beliefs that it is a man's place to work and that women should get married and stay home.⁶ Men are also seen as more diligent as well as risk-takers, characteristic valued in the private sector. Members of minority clans are disadvantaged, but minority women experience even more discrimination.

The public and private sectors have different procedures, but in some ways are very similar in the challenges that women encounter when looking for work. Men and women are treated differently when applying for work. Before looking into their educational qualifications and experience, women are judged on their age, looks, and how desperate they are to find work. This allows men to later prey on women, demanding favors in exchange for getting hired or keeping work. Many of the study participants found that women in many sectors, from members of parliament to those doing administrative work, needed men to advocate and to push their application forward. Women and men also use differing methods when it comes to the job application process. For example, men mobilize their clan networks to get interviewed and hired.

Generally, there was an agreement among the participants that the work environment is not welcoming and can be discriminatory, exclusionary and violent towards women. As one interviewee noted, "the infrastructure at work, whether in the public or private sector, is not welcoming to women who often lack adequate working space to effectively carry out their work."

6. Focus Group Discussion, Galkayo, January 30, 2024

One of the few ways that women have a fair chance at being hired is when the international community is funding the position and includes a requirement for women's inclusion. For example, the same senior civil servant reported that "if the World Bank has five positions - coordinator, procurement, finance, social safety specialist, and gender - women will only be given the gender position, whereas the other four positions will go to men."

When it comes to who is being hired, many job advertisements encourage women to apply, but there is a clear preference for men who are believed to be more competent workers. As well, men are viewed as needing the salary to take care of their families. Women, on the other hand, are believed to use their salaries for themselves, for their clothing and makeup shopping.

This paper argues that the challenges faced by women, particularly in the public, non-profit, and for-profit private sectors, explain the underrepresentation of women in the workplace. This paper sought to understand the challenges facing women in the workplace, such as hiring and promotions; and workplace environment including access to offices and prayer spaces. This research also examines the different types of harassment that women encounter and identified the strategies that women employ to overcome these adversities. This research concludes with recommendations for increasing women's presence in the workplace, in addition to reducing the harassment that they encounter.

Selected Recommendations

- There is a dearth of laws and policies to protect women in the workplace. The Draft Labour Code (Version 3) must be adopted and implemented immediately;
- It is imperative that the rights of women be safeguarded in the Federal Provisional Constitution. At the regional level, Federal Members States should adopt and implement labor laws that protect women workers;
- In the hiring process, women should be given a fair chance to compete with men including the implementation of the minimum 30% gender quota in positions within the civil service. Additionally, there should be transparency in the promotion process in all sectors;
- It is critical that the infrastructure in workplaces in all sectors should be evaluated to ensure that women and men have equal access to the services needed to perform their work. This includes adequate office space, clean and private spaces to perform their prayers as well as maternal rooms. Whether in the public or private sectors, women's access to bathrooms is limited and this is an urgent issue that needs to be addressed;

- There are significant barriers to girls' education. Boys and men significantly outnumber girls and women in educational institutions. The removal of school fees would promote educational opportunities for girls;
- Governments – federal, regional, and local – should ensure that women are given financial, technical, and social support to succeed; and
- There is a need to facilitate women's access to banking including bank accounts, providing financial literacy classes, as well as training on how to run a business and apply for grants and loans.

2. Introduction

Somalia has been recovering from the civil war that lasted for two decades which decimated all governmental institutions. The reconstruction of the state began with the Arta conference in 2000. Since then, Somalia has been rebuilding political, economic, and societal institutions from the ground up. Reconstructing Somalia requires the full use of all its resources including human resources, particularly women, who are an integral part of this recovery, particularly as they are 52.7% of the population.⁷ This research broadly examines women's participation in the workplace in the private and public sectors in Somalia and the barriers women encounter as well as the strategies they employ to overcome these challenges.

This research is critical for several reasons. First, Somalia is a remarkably young country, with 75% of its population under the age of 30. Somalia also suffers from extremely low levels of employment, with a 60% unemployment, especially among vulnerable groups such as women, youth, internally displaced people, and nomadic populations.⁸ High unemployment rates, particularly among the youth, are often associated with political instability and as Somalia seeks to defeat Al-Shabaab, increasing employment opportunities is an important way to reduce support for terrorism.⁹

Secondly, since women outnumber men in the population, their labor force participation is critical to Somalia's economic recovery and development. Research has demonstrated that women's inclusion in the economy results in a large workforce and better rates of GDP growth.¹⁰

The Somalia National Development Plan 2020-2024 (NDP-9 2019) identifies weak governance, insecurity, absence of the rule of law, natural disasters, and conflict and political instability as drivers of poverty.¹¹

7. Mohamoud et al. (March 2024)

8. The Somalia National Development Plan 2020-2024 (NDP-9 2019) (January 5, 2020); Mogadishu: The Ministry of Planning, Investment and Economic Development. Available at: <https://mop.gov.so/somali-national-development-plan-9-2020-2024/>

9. Adelaja, Adesoji and Justin George (October 2020) "Is Youth Unemployment Related to Domestic Terrorism?" Perspectives on Terrorism, Vol. 14, No. 5, pp. 41-62.

10. "Assessment of Women's Economic Participation in Somalia" (March 2024); Mogadishu: National Economic Council of Somalia.

11. The Somalia National Development Plan 2020-2024 (NDP-9 2019) (January 5, 2020).

NDP-9 found that about 70% of household income is generated by women. But women remain significantly underrepresented in the formal sector, particularly in the government and private sectors. Similar to other developing countries, Somali women are disproportionately represented in the informal sector, representing 70% of the workforce.¹² They are frequently employed by non-governmental organizations as well as in small or family-owned businesses.¹³ According to the Ministry of Women and Human Rights Development (2020), over 60% of businesses in Somalia are owned by women, with the majority being micro-enterprises.¹⁴

This paper argues that the challenges faced by women, particularly in the public, non-profit, and for-profit private sectors, explain the underrepresentation of women in the workplace. This paper sought to understand the challenges facing women in the workplace, such as hiring and promotions; and the workplace environment including access to offices and prayer spaces. This research also examines the different types of harassment that women encounter and identifies the strategies they employ to overcome these adversities. The research concludes with recommendations for increasing women's presence in the workplace, in addition to reducing the harassment that they encounter.

3. Methodology

This research utilized qualitative research methods, relying on focus groups discussions (FGDs) and semi-structured key informant interviews (KIIs) with key stakeholders. The FGDs were held in Galkayo (north and south) consisting of participants from Puntland and Galmudug respectively; in Garowe, Puntland; and in Mogadishu, Benadir Regional Administration (BRA). The FGD participants numbered 31 women. The KIIs were conducted with six individuals from the public, nonprofit and private sectors. All KIIs were carried out online due to heightened security alerts at the time of the interviews. All fieldwork was carried out between January and April 2024.

Local organizations in the selected cities including the Heritage Institute for Policy Studies (HIPS), Puntland Development and Research Centre (PDRC), Somali Gender Equity Movement (SGEM). The Asha Gelle Foundation (TAS) helped with the recruitment process to gain an in depth understanding on the issues impacting workplace safely for women in Somalia.

12. Duval, A. (2020). Sectoral Assessment of Women's Entrepreneurship Development in the Agriculture and Renewable Energy Sectors in Somalia. Conducted in the framework of: The ILO's Project "Public Private Development Partnership for Renewable Energy Skills Training and Women's Economic Empowerment".

13. Nelson-Nunez, Jami and Christopher Cyr (2019) "Women's Work in Fragile States: Evidence From a Firm-Level Dataset in Somaliland" Social Politics, Volume 26, Number 3.

14. "Somali Women Forging Alliances to Safeguard Equal Rights for All" (October 2020) Ministry of Women and Human Rights Development; Mogadishu: Federal Government of Somalia.

A questionnaire was developed in English and the Somali language. The consultant and data collectors identified the criteria for the participants before the interviews. All participants were asked the same questions in Somali and participants' responses were translated into English later. During the interviews and FGDs, respondents' voice recordings were obtained in order to fully capture their responses.

This research also drew on secondary literature, particularly that produced by the Federal Government of Somalia and international organizations such as the World Bank and United Nations agencies. Most of the research on Somalia does not specifically examine the role of women and the limited research on Somali women focuses on political and social issues rather than their participation in the workplace and their contribution to the economy and development of the country. The existing data concerning women and work focuses on the last 20 years, making it difficult to conduct a comparative framework on the opportunities and challenges that women encounter in the workplace. As Somalia continues to politically and economically stabilize, it will need to harness all the labor force available in the country, including women. To effectively engage women in the economy, it is essential to gather relevant and comprehensive data which will be useful in creating laws and policies that promote and protect women in the workplace.

Characteristics of the Study Participants

The study participants represented different age groups; 18 – 27 (14); 28 – 37 (6); 38–47 (8); 48–57 (6); and 58–67 (3). Study informants reflected the broader population, which is very young. Eight were married, 11 were divorced, 17 were single and one was widowed. Somalia's divorce rates are quite high, and often children are abandoned to be raised by mothers. Women are also delaying marriage because they are shouldering responsibility for their families and using their income to take care of them. This is reflected in the high rates of women who are heads of households.

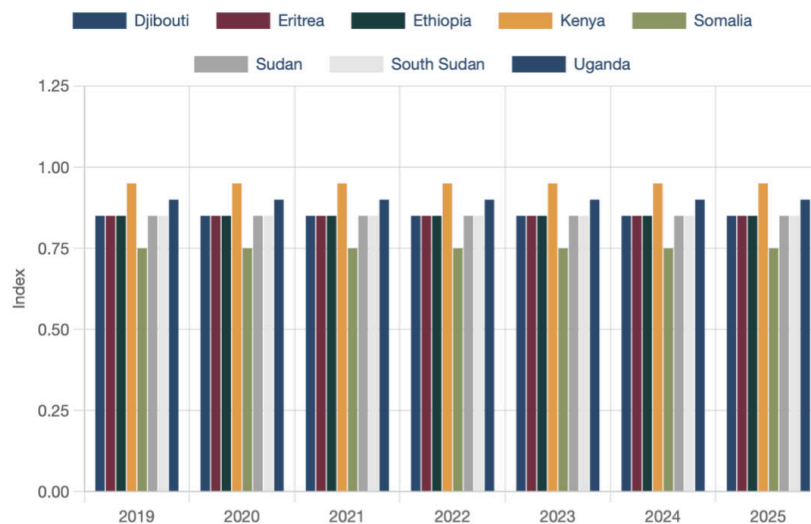
Educationally, a significant majority of the women interviewed reported holding university degrees (30); one had an associate two-year degree; four had a high school diploma and another two were in education up to middle school. The high number of university degrees is not reflective of women's educational levels within the broader population, where educational and literacy rates among women are much lower than those for men. Almost half (15) of participants worked for CSOs/NGOs, which showed that this sector is more welcoming to women as workers; 11 were employed in the public sector; six were in the private sector; two volunteered with CSOs and two were unemployed.

4. Overview of Women in the Workplace

In 2022, the International Labour Organization measured women's participation in the global labor force at 47%, while men's stood at 72%.

According to the 2022 World Bank report ‘Women, Business and the Law’, about 2.4 billion working-age women faced difficulties in obtaining economic opportunities with 178 countries enacting laws that hindered women’s full economic participation; 95 countries did not ensure equal pay for equal work; and women’s job opportunities were restricted in 86 countries.¹⁵

Figure 1: Gender Development among IGAD Countries



Source: Women’s Economic Participation in Somalia. (2024).¹⁶

Even at the regional level (Figure 1), among the eight countries in the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in East Africa, Somalia significantly underperforms, ranking last since 2019 in women’s labor force participation.

Somalia is severely affected and challenged by natural disasters, conflict, and displacement, leading to 54.4% of its population living below the poverty line - 20.9% in extreme poverty. GDP per capita was among the lowest in the world at \$643.8 for 2023.¹⁷ This is exacerbated by gender and social exclusions, weak governance, and a lack of employment laws to protect workers, especially women. Today, the concept of women working outside the home is seen as a departure from traditional Somali culture, giving rise to many challenges including physical, verbal, and sexual harassment in the workplace and society. These challenges are often justified as a response to the westernization of Somali society, where women are believed to be violating traditional norms, and encroaching on men’s space including working outside the home.

15. “Assessment of Women’s Economic Participation in Somalia” (March 2024); Mogadishu: National Economic Council of Somalia.

16. National Economic Council (NEC) of Somalia. (2024). Assessment of Women’s Economic Participation in Somalia. Mogadishu, Somalia. Pg. 8.

17. World Bank Data on Somalia (n.d.); World Bank Data on Somalia (n.d.); Available at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/search?q=Somalia>

Historically, Somali women within nomadic and agricultural communities were critical economic contributors and worked outside the home. Urbanization initially led to women’s exclusion from the economy due to colonial policies which favored men as workers. This changed in the 1970s as the Barre government sought to increase women’s participation in all economic sectors. In 1975, women’s participation in the public sector was recorded at 10%, and by the 1980s, women were employed in diverse non-traditional fields such as meat canning, fishing, sugar mills, and textile industries.¹⁸

The civil war forced many women, as heads of households, to seek any available employment, dramatically increasing women’s presence in the economy. The private sector in Somalia is largely composed of micro, small, and medium enterprises, with women dominating the micro-sector.¹⁹ A large proportion of the micro and small retail and wholesale businesses across the country are either owned by women or they are employed in these businesses.²⁰ This is largely due to the difficulties women face in securing loans and investments to expand their businesses. Micro-businesses are characterized as those engaging in economic activities that are “informal, [of an] irregular nature and of low-value [and] those that have no names and no extra staff”.²¹

These microbusinesses range from selling firewood, charcoal and dry food rations to fruits and vegetables, Qat, and second-hand clothing. Recently, some women have advanced into the more profitable sectors such as livestock, agriculture, and fishing. Women are largely excluded from ownership and investment in more lucrative banking and telecommunication businesses. These businesses only employ about 1% of women. They are dominated by conservative, traditional men, while women are largely employed as cleaners.²² The same UNDP report noted that women’s absence from the workplace can be explained by their reproductive function, low levels of education, and a clan preference for male workers.

Table 1: Women in the Public Sector

Name	Year	% Women in the Public Sector
Federal Government	2018 – 2021	37%
Galmudug State	2020 – 2021	25%
Hirshabelle State	2021	4.5%
Jubbaland State	2020 – 2021	3.8%
Puntland State	2020 – 2021	28%
Southwest State	2019 – 2020	15.5%

Source: Women’s Economic Participation in Somalia. (2024).²³

18. Forni, Elisabetta (1980) “Women’s Role in the Economic, Social and Political Development of Somalia” African Spectrum, Vol.15, No. 1, pp. 19-28.
 19. “Gender Equality Strategy 2023-2026” (June 27 2023) United Nations Development Programme; Available at: <https://www.undp.org/somalia/publications/undp-somalia-gender-equality-strategy-2023-2026>
 20. The Somalia National Development Plan 2020-2024 (January 5, 2020).
 21. Gender Equality Strategy 2023-2026 (June 27, 2023).
 22. Gender Equality Strategy 2023-2026 (June 27, 2023).
 23. Report on Women Promotion Covering the Benchmark, and the Entire Progress Achieved as per the NCSC Gender-Related Guidelines (November 2021); Prepared by the National Civil Service Commission.

Table 1 provides a comparison of the presence of women in public service at the federal and regional levels, showing wide differences in the women employed. The federal government leads with 37% of public servants being women, followed by Puntland at 28%. The two regions with the lowest percentage of women in the public sector are Hirshabelle at 4.5% and Jubbaland at 3.8%.

Women’s labor force participation was estimated at 31.2% in 2023, according to the World Bank,²⁴ compared to 33% in 1991. Unemployment rates among young women and vulnerable groups such as internally displaced people and rural populations were even higher, partly due to the economy’s reliance on traditional industries such as livestock and agriculture where men dominate.²⁵ A 2022 report by the National Bureau of Statistics on women and men in Somalia found that at least 30% of families in urban, rural, and nomadic areas were headed by women.²⁶ In contrast, a 2020 study by the Ministry of Women and Human Rights, which surveyed over 10,000 women across central and southern Somalia, estimated that 74.2% of female respondents were the main or sole breadwinners for their immediate families, including many husbands. These women also financially supported extended family members, both elderly and disabled, and continued to be the primary caregivers for children and elderly relatives, often assuming sole responsibility for them.²⁷

Table 2: Youth Not in Education, Employment or Training

Place of Residence	Female	Male
Urban	46.3	24.2
Rural	54.6	33.5
Nomadic	81.4	69.0

Source: Data taken from Women and Men in Somalia (2023).²⁸

Table 2 shows the large percentage of youth, by gender, who were not pursuing education, employment or training living in urban, rural and nomadic communities. In all three areas, women significantly outnumbered men.

24. World Bank Data on Somalia (n.d.).
25. The Somalia National Development Plan 2020-2024 (January 5, 2020).
26. “Women and Men in Somalia, Second Edition: (2023) Somalia National Bureau of Statistics, Mogadishu: Federal Government of Somalia.
27. “Somali Women Forging Alliances to Safeguard Equal Rights for All” (October 2020).
28. Women and Men in Somalia. (2023).

5. Current Trends of Women in the Workplace

The small number of women in leadership positions directly impacts on hiring and the advancement of women in the workplace. Gender disparity is well-pronounced in all sectors and levels of government including leadership positions. The current House of the People/Lower House of the Federal Parliament of Somalia was elected in 2021 and consists of 275 members. Out of these 275, 52 (19%) are women, a decrease of 24% from the 10th parliament. However, for the first time in the history of Somalia, a woman was elected as the 1st deputy speaker, Sadia Yasin H. Samatar. In 2021, the Upper House consists of 54 members, of which 14 (26%) are women, an increase from 24% in 2016/17.

Conversely, the number of women in the Federal Cabinet of Ministers consisting of ministers, deputy ministers and state ministers is even lower than in parliament. Out of 75 members, only seven (9%) are women.

In the Federal Member States' (FMS) parliaments, women's participation is lower than in the FGS. Puntland, the oldest FMS predating the FGS, has 66 members of parliament, only one of whom is a woman (1%), the lowest female representation in all the FMS and the worst in terms of providing an enabling environment for women in political leadership. Hirshabelle's parliament has 99 members, six of which (6%) are women. The parliament of Galmudug comprises 89 members including eight women (9%). However, Galmudug's second deputy speaker is a woman - Fatuma Abdi Ali. Jubbaland has 75 MPs, eight of which (11%) are women. In the parliament of the South West, out of 95 members, 20 (21%) are women, the highest number of women legislatures among the member states.

Within the governments of the member states, Puntland and Galmudug have the highest presence of women at 10%, followed by Hirshabelle at seven percent and South West at five percent. Jubbaland has the lowest at only four percent women's representation in the cabinet.

Most government ministries are led by men, with leadership positions predominantly occupied by them. The Ministry of Women and Human Rights Development (MoWHRD) of the FGS was previously the sole ministry responsible for advocating for women's rights and implementing policies concerning women and girls. Recently, the ministry's name was changed to the Ministry of Family and Human Rights Development, and a man, General Bashir Mohamed Jama (also known as Bashir Goobe), was appointed as the new minister after the passing of the late minister Khadija Mohamed Dirie in December 2023. Additionally, the Deputy Minister and Director General, who are both men, retained their positions. Of the top four leadership roles in this ministry, only the state minister is a woman.

Women in leadership positions, such as ministers, are often seen as occupying a man's seat. For example, a former federal government minister reported being undermined by her male deputy minister and director general, who wanted to show her up as incompetent and unworthy of being a minister in the hopes that she would be fired and replaced by a man. Some of our informants noted that women who hold low-level positions or who are viewed as not a threat to men do not face similar challenges.

A related issue identified in this research was the one faced by competent and ambitious women who are told to lower their expectations and capabilities, so men will not feel threatened. For example, one of the informants shared that if a project led by a woman is successful, many will stand against her, bully her, and even isolate her. If women secure funding for their projects, men are hired, and the women are sidelined. Women informants complained about being overworked and unrecognized for their hard work. They may be asked to do work that is not theirs and below them such as making tea or running errands, which is another way to visibly reinforce their lower status in the workplace. One of the informants from Galkayo noted that men are not asked if they can perform the work, but are encouraged to take up leadership roles, issuing orders to women.

Many informants said that women often minimize the indignity of performing this kind of demeaning work for men, some of whom are at the same level. Fearful of losing their jobs, many women do not refuse, or complain about, being asked to do work that is not within their job description. Some are worried that losing their jobs will result in difficulties for their families who rely on their income and will do anything to keep it. Others believe that keeping a low profile and being unnoticed will allow them to hold on to their jobs. Many of the interviewees identified this timidity and hesitancy to advocate for themselves as a reason why many women do not seek promotion.

Barriers affecting women's employment opportunities included low levels of education at all levels. In terms of secondary education enrollment by region, boys significantly outnumber girls who number 35% in Lower Jubba to 7.2% in Bakool. At the national level, 38% of female students take the high school certification exam and have comparable pass rates to male students.²⁹

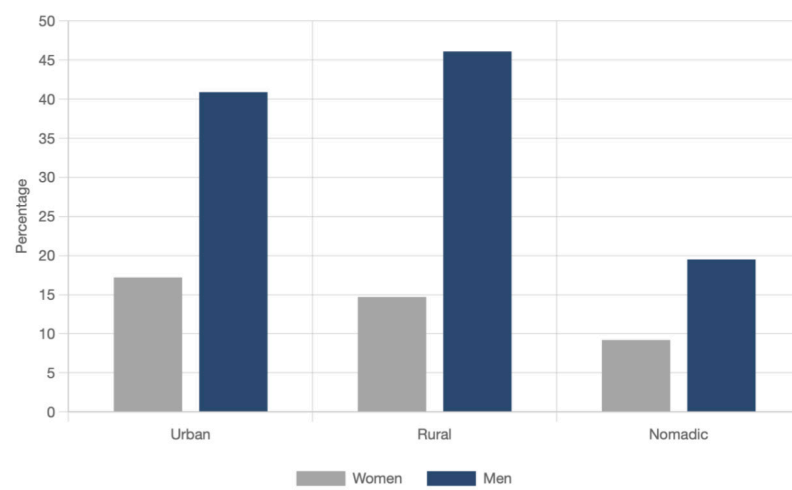
29. Somalia: Education Country Brief (January 2024); United Nations Education, Scientific, Cultural Organization (UNESCO); Available at: <https://www.iicba.unesco.org/en/node/109>

However, university-level enrollment is showing an improvement. According to the Association of Somali Universities, the rate of female students enrolling in higher education institutions was 35% of all newly enrolled students in 2021.

Men's labor force participation is significantly higher than women's across all age groups, especially from 30 to 50 years old. Even in traditionally female-dominated jobs such as teaching, women are outnumbered by men. In primary schools, men outnumber women teachers across Somalia, with women making up no more than 20% of the workforce. In secondary schools, women teachers are scarce, ranging from a low of 2.4% of the workforce in Hirshabelle to 4.9% in Galmudug.³⁰

In 1975, the proportion of women in the public sector was 10%, in 2015 it reached 26.6% before declining to 19.8 in 2016 illustrating the long-standing hurdles women face in seeking and getting employment.³¹ Currently, a significant number of women in the public sector work as cleaners (32%), compared to those with technical skills (7.96%) and higher education (27.96%). The significant disparity between men and women is also found in higher offices of the country, including in the parliament where women comprise only 19% in the lower house and 26% in the Senate, even though a woman, Sadia Samatar, was elected as the deputy speaker of the lower house of the federal parliament.³² Women are also woefully under-represented in the federal ministries, holding only 9% of cabinet positions.³³

Figure 2: Labor Force Participation Rate by Gender



Source: Women and Men in Somalia (2023).³⁴

30. Women and Men in Somalia (2023)

31. Forni (1980).

32. Affi, Ladan and Zainab Hassan (2022) "Women and Politics: Overcoming Barriers of Representation" Mogadishu: Heritage Institute for Policy Studies; Available at: <https://heritageinstitute.org/women-politics-overcoming-barriers-of-political-representation-in-somalia/>

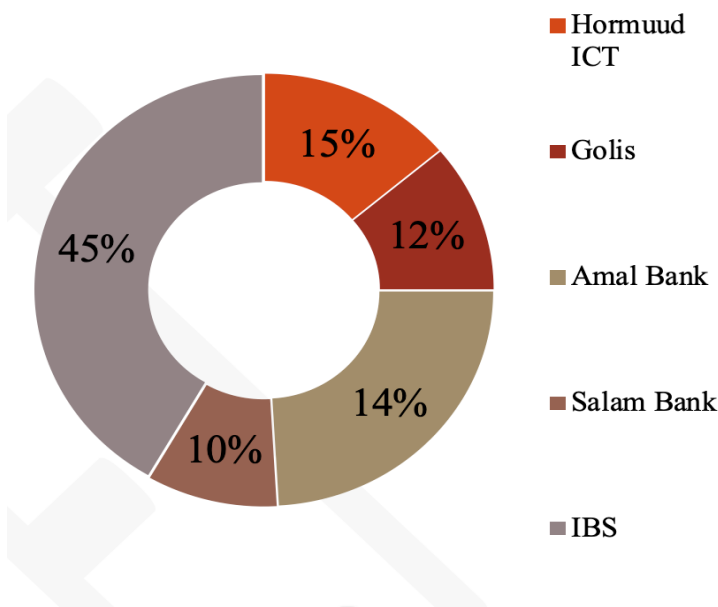
33. Gender Equality Strategy 2023-2026 (June 27, 2023).

34. Women and Men in Somalia (2023).

Figure 2 provides the labor force participation rate by gender for persons aged 15 and older by gender in urban, rural, and nomadic communities. In all three areas, women have a much lower labor force participation rate than men.

According to a 2014 UNDP report on women in the private sector noted that women make up roughly one third of the clientele of banking institutions and 60% of subscribers of large telecommunication companies, but hardly feature as employees.³⁵ Increasing women's labor force participation requires proactive government action to reduce the deep cultural and societal barriers facing women. Somalia's thriving private sector could be a solution to increasing women's labor force participation, but this requires governmental involvement and regulation, including educational and skills training for women, and appropriate legislation and enforcement to protect their rights.

Figure 3: Selected Private Sector Female Workforce Participation (%)



Source: Productive Labor and Employment Creation for Somalia (2020).³⁶

Figure 3 highlights private sector female workforce participation for five selected telecommunication and banking companies. IBS Bank ranks the highest at 45% followed by Hormuud ICT at 15%, Amal Bank at 14%, Golis at 12%, and Salam Bank ranks the lowest at 10%.

35. "The Role of Somali Women in the Private Sector" (2014). Mogadishu: UNDP.

36. Uweis Abdulahi, Abdirisak Muhumed and Ayan Mohammed Abdullahi. (2020). Productive Labor and Employment Creation for Somalia: Key Challenges and Strategies. Heritage Institute for Policy Studies (HIPS) and City University, Mogadishu. Pg 15. Available at <https://heritageinstitute.org/productive-labor-and-employment-creation-for-somalia-key-challenges-and-strategies/>

6. Obstacles to Establishing a Safe Workplace for Women

Despite regional differences between Galkayo, Garowe, and Mogadishu such as population size, economic activities, and security, as well as differences in age, education, and work experiences, the women who took part in the focus groups and individual interviews faced very similar challenges. Women's experiences and treatment at work depend on a variety of factors such as age, educational level, clan membership, whether they were local or from the diaspora and their appearance. Women who were older, more educated, married, and from more powerful clans that could provide protection and advocacy faced less harassment than women who were young, less educated, physically appealing, and from less powerful clans.

The women who took part in both the focus group discussions and the individual interviews identified the various levels of discrimination and predatory behavior facing women starting at an early age, as girls. For example, in schools, boys are treated as smarter than girls, even though young girls assume additional family responsibilities, often helping their mothers with household chores and childcare. Once girls reach puberty, "they are seen as fair game by men, including their male teachers, who promise high grades in exchange for favors." Many of the informants also noted that girls are targeted and preyed on in high school by older, wealthier men. Even within the family, "if a father is offered a job for his daughter, he would ignore her in favor of his son."³⁷

7. Cultural and Societal Barriers to Women in the Workplace

The negative, patriarchal attitudes towards women continue to permeate beliefs about women in the workplace. Many of the informants noted the clear preference for men in the workplace along with widely held beliefs that it is a man's place to work and that women should get married and stay at home. For example, members of the Galkayo focus group reported that "men comment that women should stop carrying laptops in favor of carrying children." Men are also seen as harder workers as well as risk-takers, a characteristic valued in the private sector. Members of minority clans are disadvantaged, but minority women experience more discrimination.

37. Focus group discussion, Galkayo.

Societal beliefs reflecting the importance of clans within Somali society are reflected in the 4.5 power-sharing agreement, where government positions are distributed along clan lines rather than based on the competency and capacity to do the work. This advantages men, whose loyalty to the clan remains unquestioned. Women who married outside the clan are often viewed as benefitting from the clan of their husbands and children, and their clans do not want them to occupy seats allocated to them. The Mogadishu focus group noted that women from clans with powerful politicians can often get indirect benefits such as less harassment and more job security.

8. Job Advertisements

The public and private sectors have different procedures, but in some ways the process is very similar in the challenges that women encounter when looking for work. Men and women are treated differently when applying for work. Before looking into their educational qualifications and work experience, women are judged on their age, looks, and how desperate they are to find a job. This allows men to prey on women, demanding favors in exchange for getting hired or keeping work. Many of the participants said that women across various sectors, from members of parliament to those doing administrative work, needed men to advocate for them and push their application forward. Women and men also use differing methods when it comes to the job application process.

According to a high-ranking female civil servant:

“When men are applying for work in the public sector, it is common to see them mobilizing a large number of people, including their members of parliament, pressure groups, and friends, and it is even possible that he has supporters within the institution he is applying to. On the other hand, there are not many women applicants, and those who apply will send their CVs and wait to be called for an interview. For every 100 male applicants, there are only five to 10 women applicants. To make the shortlist look good, one woman will be added as a decoration.”

One of the few ways that women have a fair chance at being hired is when the international community is funding the position and includes a requirement for women's inclusion. For example, the same senior civil servant reported that “if the World Bank has five positions - coordinator, procurement, finance, social safety specialist, and gender – women will only be given the gender position, whereas the other four positions will go to men.”

When it comes to who is being hired, many job advertisements encourage women to apply, but there is a clear preference for men. Male workers are considered to be more competent and effective workers. As well, men are viewed as needing a salary in order to take care of their families. Women, on the other hand, are believed to use their salaries for themselves, for their clothing and makeup.

In some cases, focus group participants in Galkayo noted that many women volunteer in order to gain experience and an edge in getting hired, but when funding becomes available, the women are ignored, and managers prefer to hire men. Similarly, in the private sector, companies are owned and led by men, and women's chances of being hired are slim compared to men. For example, a 2014 UNDP report on women in the private sector noted women's absence in the banking and telecommunication sectors.

Informants noted that in business men are more successful because they help each other. Many of the interviewees repeatedly highlighted that a critical problem facing women in the workplace and in business was their reluctance to cooperate and assist each other. According to an informant working in the non-profit sector, "in Somalia, men control the economy, they help each other. For example, if they are shipping products, they will share the costs, but you will not see the women doing that."

Decisions on hiring, promotions, and other work-related matters are often made outside work, in informal male gatherings from which women are absent. This means that even when women are hired, they are often not at the leadership level, and are absent from high-paying positions. When women compete fairly for jobs and are hired, they are told they are occupying men's seat. One of the informants who worked in the non-profit sector said, "I once applied for a job with the Red Crescent and came in first, and the second person was another woman. We were told that this was a man's job and 'you two women are lucky to get these jobs.'"

Women in the focus groups and individual interviews all noted that "hiring women was not prioritized because men were considered to be taking financial responsibility for their families and thus needing to work, while women were viewed to be using their salaries for shopping for their personal needs." This was surprising in light of the large number of women who are heads of households and work outside the home.

According to a university-educated woman working in the public sector, "the women who encounter the most problems in the workplace are women who are more educated, skilled, ambitious, and more active than men in carrying out their work." Women in their 40s and 50s who are highly educated, from the diaspora and can stand up for themselves are thought of as problematic and "even a feminist."

9. Promotion

In the public sector, men outnumber women in promotions. According to one of the informants in Garowe, “you will find women who have been working in the civil service for many years and who have not been even promoted once.” This is partly due to the fact that some positions are nominated by politicians and if the minister, deputy minister, and directors are all men, they will appoint men, often from outside the institution, limiting women’s opportunities for promotion and advancement.

More men are promoted because they socialize with each other at night, outside of work, and make decisions then. Women are left out unless another man speaks out and advocates for them. Women’s contributions are not acknowledged, but their mistakes are often highlighted. “Women are viewed as unreliable workers because they will get married and quit work. If they stay, they will take multiple maternity leaves,” said one respondent. Birth rates in Somalia are 6.4 children per woman.³⁸ More men than women take leave, for example for educational reasons, but this is not counted against them.

10. Policies and Laws Governing Labor Rights

Somalia’s prolonged civil war created an urgent need to update existing laws that were enacted before 1991 when women had better opportunities and were less discriminated against. There is also a critical need to raise awareness and effectively implement the laws and regulations that do exist, as many of the participants recommended. One of the most recent laws addressing workers’ rights is the 2006 Law of Civil Servants of the Government. It came into effect as the Somali government was being reconstituted and did not address the rights of workers in the private sector or those of women.

In August 2023, Somalia’s Council of Ministers approved a new draft labor code (version 3), which is intended to replace the 1975 Law 65. This new labor law follows ILO Convention 190 and other international treaties signed by Somalia and addresses issues relating to labor relations; wages and remuneration; and labor dispute mechanisms. It also addresses sexual violence and harassment in the workplace. This draft law is now awaiting passage by the federal parliament.³⁹

Somalia’s 2012 Provisional Federal Constitution (Article 3, part 5) calls for the inclusion of women in all governmental institutions, although women remain severely underrepresented in the federal and regional governments. Additionally, Article 24 (5) of the constitution states that “all workers, particularly women, have a special right of protection from sexual abuse, segregation, and discrimination in the workplace. Every labor law and practice shall comply with gender equality in the workplace.”⁴⁰

38. World Bank Data on Somalia (n.d.).

39. “Approval of the Draft Labour Code for Somalia by the Council of Ministers” (2 August 2023) Federation of Somali Trade Unions (FESTU); Available at: <https://www.festu.org/approval-of-the-draft-labour-code-for-somalia-by-the-council-of-ministers/>

40. The Federal Republic of Somalia, Provisional Constitution (August 1, 2012); Available at: https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Somalia_2012

In 2019, the Somali Women's Charter was developed by the Ministry of Women and Human Rights Development calling for the closing of gender gaps in employment and the allocation of a 50% quota across the three branches of the government and all commissions.⁴¹ Yet, as many of the informants noted, these laws are not implemented and, in reality, provide no effective protection for women against discrimination or sexual harassment.

At the regional levels, the 2009 Puntland Constitution guarantees women's equal pay for equal work as well as the right to maternity leave (Article 37: 3 & 4). The Constitution also guarantees in Article 128 (2) that civil servants shall be hired based on merit and capacity.⁴² Puntland remains the only regional state to have passed the Sexual Offences Act of 2016, which also prohibits sexual harassment.⁴³ Similarly, in the 2015 Galmudug Constitution, Article 13 gives the same rights to all workers, while Article D protects the rights and dignity of women specifically.⁴⁴

Puntland has also passed the Private Sector Employees Laws which requires that both male and female workers who do the same work receive equal pay. The same law provides that women are entitled to 16 weeks of maternity leave and nursing breaks. The law also identifies the Puntland Ministry of Labor and Employment Services as responsible for governing labor relations.⁴⁵

At the international level, Somalia has ratified and deposited with the ILO the 2019 Violence and Harassment Convention (No. 190), which went into force on March 8, 2021.⁴⁶ This law applies to both the private and public sectors, and in the formal and informal economy, protecting workers including volunteers, interns, job seekers, and applicants from all forms of violence and harassment, including gender-based. The convention calls on signatories to adopt national laws that are "inclusive, integrated, and gender-responsive approach for the prevention and elimination of violence and harassment in the world of work".

There are two laws that Somalia needs to adopt in order to protect women's rights, including the right to live free from discrimination and harassment. In 2015, spearheaded by the Somalia Ministry of Women and Human Rights Development, Somalia began technical capacity training to study the adoption and ratification process of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

41. "Somali Women's Charter" (2019). Ministry of Women and Human Rights Development; Mogadishu: Federal Government of Somalia. Available at: <https://www.mwhrd.gov.so/en/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Somali-Womens-Charter-MoWHRD-April-8-2019-1.pdf>

42. Constitution of the Puntland State of Somalia (December 2009); Available at: <https://www.ecolex.org/details/legislation/constitution-of-the-puntland-state-of-somalia-lex-faoc197962/>

43. "Puntland Passes Law Against Sexual Offences" (5 September 2016); Available at: <https://somalia.unfpa.org/en/news/puntland-passes-law-against-sexual-offences>

44. Dastuurka KMG ee Dowlad Gobaleedka Galmudug Soomaaliya (July 28, 2015); Available at: <https://galmudugoag.so/constitution-of-gss/>

45. Private Sector Employee Law (Labor Code No. 65) (2011); Puntland State of Somalia

46. C190 – Violence and Harassment Convention No.190 (2019); Available at: https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C190

This convention would strengthen the rights of women and girls, lessening the discriminatory effects of existing patriarchal and clan cultures, by ensuring that they are accorded equal protection under the law.⁴⁷

Another bill that has been languishing deals with sexual offenses against women and girls. The Sexual Offenses Bill was passed by the cabinet on 30 May 2018. However, it encountered resistance in the federal parliament and was withdrawn by the former Minister of Women and Human Rights, Hanifa Mohamed. However, the new minister, Khadija Mohamed Dirie, in collaboration with civil society women and female Islamic scholars, engaged male religious leaders. A committee consisting of male and female Ulama/religious scholars and leaders reviewed the bill in accordance with Islamic law. The committee revised the bill and renamed it the Rape and Misconduct Crimes Bill. Dirie, who died suddenly in late 2023, resubmitted it to the Cabinet of Ministers, and it was passed on 28 December 2023 after her death. It is now awaiting adoption and implementation by the federal parliament.⁴⁸

11. Absence of Care Services for Women

Generally, there was an agreement among the participants that the work environment is often not welcoming and can be discriminatory, exclusionary, and violent towards women. As one interviewee noted, the infrastructure at work, whether in the public or private sector, is not welcoming to women who often lack adequate working space. Many of the informants noted that there are significant differences in the working environments between the private, non-profit, and government sectors, suggesting that there are more problems in the private sector, such as fewer women employed.

Many participants perceived women to be “hardworking, staying longer hours at work, but they are unrecognized and are offered no bonuses for working overtime, especially in the private sector”. This sector is also less regulated and there are fewer legal protections for women. For example, the interviewees pointed out that “remittance companies and private companies are not considered culturally appropriate places for women. In excluding women, men often misquote the Hadith (sayings of the Prophet Mohamed) for rejecting women’s presence and as a justification for telling women to remain in their homes.”

If a woman is hired in the private sector, she may be placed in a hostile working environment, to push her to resign. For example, “a woman is assigned to a department where she may be the only woman and allocated an office space where she is surrounded by men and may encounter harassment and fear.”⁴⁹

47. “Somalia Moving Towards Ratifying CEDAW” (22 August 2015); UNFPA Somalia Available at: <https://somalia.unfpa.org/en/news/somalia-moving-towards-ratifying-cedaw>

48. Abdullahi, Abdiqani (December 29, 2023) “Somali Cabinet Approves Bills on Sexual Offences and Minimum Working Age” Somali National News Agency (SONNA); Available at: <https://sonna.so/en/somali-cabinet-approves-bills-on-sexual-offences-and-minimum-working-age/>

49. Galkayo focus group.

To protect themselves and keep their jobs, women often dress conservatively, including wearing the niqab, as a way to discourage unwanted attention from both co-workers and customers.

The non-profit sector, including inter-governmental organizations such as the United Nations and NGOs, was considered the most professional place for women to work. As well, the existence of clear policies governing the responsibility and rights of employees was considered by women as a protection against workplace harassment.

In contrast, working in the public sector was considered easier, with fewer hours, which one woman described as “part-time work”. But the 4.5 power-sharing agreement, where positions are divided and shared along clan lines, make it more challenging for women to be hired in the government.

This perception is supported by data from the government, which shows that from 2018 to 2021, women constituted 37% of civil service employees, often occupying lower-level positions such as clerical and janitorial jobs. According to a report prepared by the National Civil Service Commission (NCSC), out of the 75 director generals, there are two women (3%); and out of 363 department directors, women hold only 44 posts (14%). Similarly, skilled staff and diplomats account for 16%. The only sector where women outnumber men is in janitorial services, where 97% of cleaners are women.⁵⁰ This absence of women in professional positions is one of the difficulties identified by the informants who noted that decisions are often made informally by men and in many cases the laws are not followed.

The lack of prayer spaces for women in all sectors was also identified by the informants as a problem that impacted working women’s ability to balance their need to work with their religious obligations. An online discussion organized by the Somali Gender Equity Movement (SGEM) in March 2023 found that women in Mogadishu and across the country lacked access to worship spaces for their daily prayers while away from home.⁵¹ One woman employed in the private sector said that women are forced to pray in inappropriate, cramped places and public spaces such as under the stairs. Even when women are attending work-related conferences or workshops in large hotels in Mogadishu, they often have to ask for prayer spaces because a designated space is only available for men. Women are then forced to pray in private rooms or offices.

50. Report on Women Promotion Covering the Benchmark, and the Entire Progress Achieved as per the NCSC Gender-Related Guidelines (November 2021); Prepared by the National Civil Service Commission.

51. “Women and Islam: Exclusion of Women from Places of Worship & Its Consequences” (March 22, 2023); Twitter Space, Somali Gender Equity Movement (SGEM).

Another issue commonly faced by working women is a lack of clean and private restrooms in both the public and private sectors. Unsurprisingly, even women in leadership positions such as the lower house of the federal parliament do not have access to bathrooms. The situation is even more difficult for women who work long hours in markets or shops. New mothers are also not accommodated, as there are no maternity rooms at work. Legally, women who are breastfeeding should be given a few hours of leave each day to go home.

Women experience different types of harassment at work. Young, single women and those considered beautiful or coming from minority clans are especially vulnerable to sexual harassment. Sexual and gender-based violence has been increasing, doubling from 2019 to 2020. The violence was largely driven by conflict, gender inequalities, protracted humanitarian crises, and unending clan conflicts resulting in a lack of accountability for the perpetrators. This highlights the need for an urgent response and the creation of a comprehensive legal framework that protects the rights of women and girls in Somalia.

A public sector employee noted that “women who come from powerful clans or who have a clan member in a high position in the government may have indirect protection.” Women who are older than 30 and are experienced workers can often defend themselves, but many are afraid to lose their jobs if they complain about the harassment. Women working for international NGOs and inter-governmental organizations such as the United Nations have the most protection as there are clear rules on these issues. In both the public and private sectors, “it can happen that no one has faced any consequences for sexual harassment.”⁵² Women may also be discouraged from reporting any harassment because of privacy concerns. They may worry that both personal and work reputations could be affected. If the harassment becomes public, there are attempts to silence and malign the woman and protect the perpetrator. The woman, her family, and clan are often blamed and shamed.

Women employ a variety of tactics to protect themselves. For example, it is not uncommon for a much younger woman to marry an older man working in a higher position in the same workplace. The reasons vary and include economic factors. Young women may also be pressured into agreeing to marriage with older more powerful men and see it as a way to access some of their power and get relief from harassment by other men.⁵³

52. Focus group discussion, Mogadishu.

53. KII interview, woman in the public sector.

12. Conclusion

This research identified the complex and numerous challenges that women face in seeking and maintaining employment: existing employment laws; a work environment that favors men; and discrimination and harassment. A major problem consistently identified by the focus groups as well as by the individual interviews is the need for laws and policies to protect the rights of women in the workplace, ranging from hiring and promotions to safety against abuse and harassment.

As Somalia continues to recover from its conflict, the economy is an important component in promoting stability. The vibrant private sector is an opportunity to be leveraged, but it requires that all levels of government take a leadership role in establishing an enabling environment. NDP-9 (2023) suggests that protection of intellectual property rights, appropriate legislation, and enforcement are needed to encourage investment and innovation. One overlooked sector is women-owned businesses that are essential to the survival of so many households. Many Somali-owned banks discriminate against business owners who lack investment and other support to ensure that their businesses thrive and even expand. Women earning income from their work is beneficial to the whole of society, particularly to immediate and extended families.

The benefits of educating girls are positive, long-lasting and multi-faceted. Women's education leads to a higher income, the number of children they will have, and improves their health. It also reduces the incidents of child marriage.⁵⁴ This would not only lead to an increase in women in the workplace, but also in leadership. It would also reduce high unemployment rates among young adults, particularly women.

The recommendations in this paper provide concrete ways that some of the barriers facing women in the workplace can be reduced. Ensuring women's economic participation is one way that Somalia can tackle extreme poverty; benefit families which are headed by women; diversify the economy; and increase the economic and political stability of the country. As such, the full inclusion of women in all aspects of the country's development has a significant and positive impact on Somalia.

54. Somalia: Education Country Brief (January 2024); United Nations Education, Scientific, Cultural Organization (UNESCO); Available at: <https://www.iicba.unesco.org/en/node/109>

13. Recommendations

- There is a dearth of laws and policies to protect women in the workplace. The Draft Labour Code (Version 3) should be adopted and implemented immediately
- At the national level, it is critically important to implement the Somali Women's Charter, which calls for the closing of the gender gap in employment, and equal representation for both genders in all government positions including independent commissions. The charter also calls for an increase in the representation of women in the private sector, especially in top management and leadership.
- There is a need to adopt and implement laws that provide clear guidelines, including protection from harassment and retaliation when women file complaints. These are issues that can be tackled, falling under the mandates of the Ministries of Women and Human Rights Development; Labor; Religious Affairs; and Justice.
- It is imperative that the rights of women be safeguarded in the Federal Provisional Constitution. At the regional level, Federal Members States should adopt and implement labor laws that protect women workers.
- Somalia must continue to take its place on the global stage by signing and ratifying employment and gender related laws including CEDAW; the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol); and other laws protecting women's rights.
- In the hiring process, women should be given a fair chance to compete with men including the implementation of the minimum 30% gender quota in positions within the civil service. Additionally, there should be transparency in the promotion process in all sectors.
- It is critical that the infrastructure in workplaces in all sectors should be evaluated to ensure that both women and men have equal access to the services needed to perform their work. This includes adequate office space, clean and private spaces to pray as well as maternal rooms. Whether in the public or private sectors, women's access to bathrooms is limited and this is an urgent issue that needs to be addressed.

- There are significant barriers to girls' education. Boys and men significantly outnumber girls and women in educational institutions. Educational opportunities for girls such as the removal of school fees should be promoted.
- There is a need for more female teachers in all levels of education who can act as protectors and role models, encouraging girls to stay in and finish school.
- Governments – federal, regional, and local – should ensure that women are given financial, technical, and social support to succeed.
- There is a need to facilitate women's access to banking including bank accounts, providing financial literacy classes, and training on how to run a business, applying for grants and loans.
- Most women work in the informal sector, often in micro-businesses. To assist women to expand these businesses, grants and loans must be made available to them. It is also crucial to promote and institutionalize government support for women-owned businesses.

HERITAGE

I N S T I T U T E