

African Multidisciplinary Journal of Development (AMJD)

Page: 199 – 217

<https://amjd.kiu.ac.ug>

GENDER ROLES IN SOMALILAND: A NARRATIVE REVIEW OF TRADITIONS, TRANSITIONS, AND TRANSFORMATIONS

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Abstract

This narrative review synthesized multidisciplinary research on gender roles in Somaliland (1991–2023), employing systematic qualitative methods aligned with RAMESES guidelines. Data were drawn from academic literature, rigorously screened gray literature (NGO/UN/government documents), and 12 ethnographic studies, analyzed through critical discourse analysis. Historically, gender norms were shaped by patrilineal clan structures, customary law (xeer), and Islamic principles, assigning men dominant political/economic roles and women domestic/caregiving duties. Post-conflict transformations—including rising female-headed households- catalyzed significant shifts: Female primary school enrollment surged from 22% (2000) to 67% (2023), urban women dominated cross-border trade (bacdo) and founded 14% of startups, and activism secured a 10% quota for women in local councils (2021). Women's Peace Committees (WPCs) achieved a 79% land dispute resolution rate using hybrid xeer-international frameworks. Despite progress, entrenched contradictions persisted. Customary and religious systems perpetuated inequalities: women received half-inheritance shares or were excluded from land ownership (only 2% of titles included female co-owners), FGM/C prevalence remained at 98%, and clan mediation (maslaxa) often prioritized reconciliation over GBV justice. Educated women faced stigmatization as "qaaxaysi" (rebellious) and reported higher divorce rates when challenging spousal authority. Cultural resistance, framed as a defense of "Somalinimo" (Somali identity) and conservative Islam, impeded legal reforms and political inclusion, evidenced by parliament's rejection of a 20% parliamentary quota in 2024. The study concluded that while education, urbanization, and activism drove incremental change, transformative gender equity required addressing structural barriers through culturally nuanced approaches that reconciled statutory reforms with Somaliland's socio-legal hybridity.

Keywords: Gender roles, Somaliland, Traditions, Transitions and transformations

Introduction

Gender roles in Somaliland are deeply embedded in the complex interplay of cultural traditions, Islamic teachings, and socio-economic structures. The Somali society has historically been organized around a patrilineal clan system that places men in dominant positions within public decision-making, political leadership, and economic spheres. Women, on the other hand, have traditionally been assigned domestic responsibilities, including child-rearing and maintaining familial honor. These roles are further reinforced by Islamic principles.

The post-conflict environment in Somaliland, which emerged following the collapse of Somalia's central government in 1991, has significantly reshaped gender dynamics. The war led to the disruption of traditional family structures, resulting in a notable increase in female-headed households as many men were killed, displaced, or migrated for work. This shift forced women to

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take on greater economic responsibilities, challenging long-standing gender norms. However, despite these changes, women continue to face systemic barriers in education, political participation, and legal rights, highlighting the persistent tension between tradition and modernization.

This narrative review seeks to achieve three key objectives. First, it synthesizes existing research on gender roles in Somaliland, examining how cultural, religious, and socio-political factors shape expectations for men and women. Second, it analyzes how urbanization, education, and globalization are either reshaping or reinforcing traditional gender norms. Finally, it highlights key transformations brought about by women's activism, policy reforms, and international development initiatives. By exploring these dynamics, the review aims to identify gaps in the literature and suggest areas for future research on gender equity in Somaliland.

The scope of this review is limited to the period from 1991 to the present, covering Somaliland's post-independence era. It draws on a variety of sources, including academic studies on gender and clan structures, NGO and UN reports documenting advancements and challenges in women's rights, government policies and legal reforms related to gender equality, and oral histories and ethnographic studies that capture the lived experiences of Somali men and women. This comprehensive approach ensures a nuanced understanding of how gender roles in Somaliland have evolved.

Research Methods

This narrative review employed a systematic qualitative synthesis of multidisciplinary sources on Somaliland's gender dynamics (1991–present), adhering to RAMESES guidelines. Primary data were drawn from academic literature (using databases like Scopus and controlled vocabulary), rigorously screened gray literature (NGO reports, UN datasets, government documents via AACODS), and 12 ethically compliant ethnographic studies. The study applied a critical discourse analysis framework to identify patterns across three domains: legal-textual analysis of statutory laws versus customary practices (xeer/Sharia), statistical trend mapping of education/employment indicators (2000–2023), and narrative coding of women's agency expressions. To mitigate bias, the methodology enforced triangulation through cross-verification of claims across at least three source types, collaborative interpretation with Somaliland-based researchers, and reflexive journaling. Limitations included uneven geographic coverage (urban bias) and reliance on translated Somali-language texts, prioritizing contextual depth and Somaliland's socio-legal hybridity over generalizability.

Historical and Cultural Foundations of Gender Roles

Pre-Colonial and Colonial Influences:

Gender roles in Somaliland have been shaped by a combination of indigenous traditions and external influences. In pre-colonial Somali society, gender norms were closely tied to the pastoralist lifestyle and clan-based social organization. Men were primarily responsible for livestock herding, trade, and defense, roles that reinforced their dominance in public and economic spheres. Women, meanwhile, managed domestic affairs, including childcare, food preparation, and the maintenance of familial and clan honor (Lewis, 1961). The clan system, with its emphasis on patrilineal descent, further entrenched male authority, as leadership and inheritance were passed down through male lineages (Abdullahi, 2001).

The arrival of British colonialism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries introduced new dynamics to gender relations in Somaliland. While colonial administrators largely maintained indirect rule through existing clan structures, they also imposed Western legal and administrative systems that occasionally intersected with, and sometimes disrupted, traditional gender norms. For instance,

colonial education policies initially excluded girls, reinforcing existing gender disparities in literacy and formal employment (Haji, 2017). However, limited missionary schools and later colonial reforms provided some Somali women with access to education, creating a small but influential class of literate women who began challenging traditional roles (Mohamed, 2015).

Despite these changes, colonial rule did not fundamentally dismantle patriarchal structures. Instead, it often co-opted them to maintain control, leaving Somali gender norms largely intact. The colonial economy's focus on male-dominated sectors, such as port labor and cash crop production, further marginalized women from formal economic participation (Gardner, 2012). Thus, while colonialism introduced new institutions, its impact on gender roles was more reinforcing than transformative, setting the stage for later tensions between tradition and modernization in post-independence Somaliland.

Religion and Gender:

Islam has played a central role in shaping gender norms in Somaliland, with religious teachings deeply influencing family structures, legal systems, and social expectations. Traditional Islamic interpretations in Somaliland have emphasized distinct gender roles, particularly in matters of family law, modesty codes, and economic participation. Sharia-based family laws have historically reinforced patriarchal structures, granting men authority in marriage, divorce, and inheritance while assigning women primary domestic and caregiving responsibilities (Abdullahi, 2008). Modesty codes, gender segregation in public spaces, further reflect the influence of conservative Islamic values on women's mobility and social participation (Ali, 2015).

However, Islamic interpretations of gender roles are not monolithic and vary across urban and rural contexts, as well as between conservative and reformist perspectives. In urban centers such as Hargeisa and Berbera, increased access to education and exposure to global Islamic discourses have led to more diverse interpretations of women's rights within an Islamic framework. Some religious scholars and women's rights activists have advocated for gender-equitable readings of Islamic texts, emphasizing Quranic principles of justice and equality to support women's education and economic empowerment (Hersi, 2020). In contrast, rural areas often adhere to more traditionalist views, where customary practices (xeer) limit women's autonomy (Farah, 2019).

The tension between conservative and reformist interpretations of Islam has become increasingly visible in contemporary Somaliland. While conservative religious leaders often resist changes to traditional gender roles, reformist voices, particularly among educated urban women and youth, are challenging patriarchal norms through Islamic feminism and rights-based advocacy (Mohamoud, 2021). This dynamic interplay between religion and gender continues to evolve, reflecting broader debates about modernity, tradition, and women's rights in Somaliland's socio-religious landscape.

Traditional Gender Roles in Somaliland

Men's Roles

In traditional Somaliland society, men's roles have been clearly defined within the patriarchal clan system, where they serve as primary breadwinners, clan leaders, and decision-makers. As heads of households, men bear the responsibility of providing financial stability through livestock herding, trade, or other income-generating activities (Abdirahman, 2017). Their role extends beyond the economic sphere into political leadership, where clan elders (male-dominated institutions) make crucial community decisions regarding conflict resolution, resource allocation, and inter-clan relations (Hussein, 2019).

Expectations of masculinity in Somaliland are closely tied to concepts of honor (sharaf), protection, and authority. A man's social standing depends on his ability to safeguard his family's reputation, provide for dependents, and demonstrate leadership within his clan (Ali, 2020). These expectations manifest in various cultural practices, such as the tradition of diya (blood money) payments, where men assume responsibility for compensating victims in cases of conflict or harm (Farah, 2018). The pressure to fulfill these roles reinforces strict gender norms, discouraging deviations from traditional masculine ideals.

However, these rigid expectations also create burdens for men, particularly in post-conflict Somaliland, where economic instability and displacement have challenged their ability to fulfill traditional provider roles (Mohamed, 2021). Younger generations in urban areas are gradually redefining masculinity, balancing traditional expectations with modern realities, though resistance to change remains strong in rural and conservative communities (Barre, 2022).

Women's Roles

In Somaliland's traditional society, women have primarily fulfilled roles as caregivers, homemakers, and moral custodians of the family and community. Their domain has centered on domestic responsibilities, including child-rearing, food preparation, household management, and maintaining family honor (Hassan, 2018). As moral custodians, women bear the important cultural responsibility of upholding societal values and transmitting traditions to younger generations (Ali, 2020).

Beyond household duties, women have historically engaged in vital economic activities that sustain their families and communities. These include:

- 1) Small-scale trade (baqala shops and informal markets)
- 2) Handicraft production (weaving, basket-making)
- 3) Agricultural work in farming communities
- 4) Livestock management (particularly milking and dairy processing)
- 5) Herbal medicine and traditional healing practices (Mohamoud, 2019)

The informal sector has particularly been a domain of female economic participation, with women establishing complex trade networks for goods such as qat, clothing, and household items (Ahmed, 2021). In rural areas, women's agricultural labor is crucial to food security, though often undervalued in formal economic assessments (Farah, 2020).

These economic roles have provided women with some degree of financial autonomy while operating within the constraints of patriarchal norms. Post-conflict transformations have seen an expansion of women's economic participation, particularly in urban centers, though traditional expectations of primary domestic responsibility persist (Abdullahi, 2022).

Gender and the Clan System

Patriarchal Architecture of Clan Loyalty: The clan (qabiil) system constitutes Somaliland's foundational socio-political structure, enforcing rigid gender hierarchies through patrilineal loyalty. Mohamed (2022) identifies three mechanisms sustaining this "clan patriarchy": lineage control (where identity and inheritance flow exclusively through male lines, erasing women's clan affiliation post-marriage), collective policing (tying clan honor (sharaf) to women's sexuality and mobility), and resource monopoly (male control of land, livestock, and water via xeer customary law). Urbanization has introduced fissures in this system, with 42% of female university graduates in Hargeisa and Berbera delaying marriage past age 25 (Nagaad Network, 2023). Yet rural zones maintain strict enforcement, evidenced by male-only shir adjudicating 91% of land disputes in the Sanaag region (UNDP, 2023).

References

Table 1: Gendered Division of Clan Authority

Domain	Male Roles	Female Roles
Political	Shir assembly leadership	Informal advisory roles
Judicial	Xeer arbitration	Witnesses in domestic cases
Economic	Livestock/cash crop control	Small trade (<\$100 capital)
Social	Honor enforcement	Marriage brokerage (<i>guddoomiso</i>)

Women’s Mediation: Subverting the Patriarchal Framework: Despite formal exclusion, women deploy sophisticated peacebuilding strategies through culturally embedded channels. Kinship leverage allows women to exploit matrilateral ties (*habar*), with Farah (2023) documenting how the *eddo* (paternal aunt) role enables intervention in 68% of *mag* (blood money) negotiations. Poetic resistance through *buraanbur* serves as a "weapon of the weak," exemplified by women’s verses during the 2018 Gabiley clashes: "*Where are the men who camels led? / Now children’s blood stains their hands red*" (Mohamoud, 2021, p. 112). Spiritual authority further empowers female *wadaaddo* (religious figures), as seen in the 2022 Borama conflict, where women halted violence by wrapping disputants’ arms in Quranic scrolls while invoking "*nabad iyo naxariis*" (peace and mercy) (Ahmed, 2022).

Hybridization: Formalizing the Informal: Post-1991 initiatives have systematically institutionalized women’s mediation. Women’s Peace Committees (WPCs) now operate in 32 districts, training 460 mediators (2020–2023) in hybrid *xeer*-international law frameworks. These WPCs achieve a 79% success rate in land disputes, surpassing male-only *shir* by 16% (Somaliland Gender Ministry, 2022). Legal syncretism milestones include the 2021 Family Law reform, recognizing women’s testimony in *diya* cases (Hersi, 2023). Economic peacebuilding manifests through cross-clan cooperatives like Berbera’s *Fish Sellers Union*, which reduced local conflicts by 41% by creating mutual resource dependency (UNDP, 2023).

Table: Impact of Women’s Formalized Mediation (2018–2023)

Indicator	Pre-Formalization	Post-Formalization	Change
Land dispute resolution	54%	79%	+25%
Female testimony acceptance	12%	48%	+36%
Inter-clan violence	37 incidents/yr	19 incidents/yr	-49%

Source: Somaliland Gender Ministry Annual Reports (2018–2023)

Persistent Contradictions: Resistance to women’s inclusion remains entrenched. Elders frequently dismiss formal mediation roles as "*Westernized*" intrusions (Bodetti, 2021), while resource exclusion persists only 2% of clan-controlled land titles include female co-owners (Hargeisa Land Registry, 2023). Backlash intensifies through threats against mediators, with 14 women reporting intimidation in 2022 (Nagaad Network, 2023). These tensions underscore the fragile balance between Somaliland’s clan traditions and transformative gender justice.

Changing Gender Dynamics in Contemporary Somaliland

Education and Empowerment:

Rising Female Enrollment and Societal Impact: Post-1991 Somaliland has witnessed a transformative surge in female education, with primary school enrollment for girls increasing by 200% between 2000–2023 (UNDP, 2023). This shift, driven by government policies (e.g., *Free Primary Education Initiative*), NGO advocacy (e.g., Nagaad Network’s *Girls’ Education Campaign*), and parental recognition of education’s economic value, has catalyzed profound societal changes. Educated women are delaying marriage 72% of females with secondary education marry after 18 versus 31% with no formal schooling (Somaliland Ministry of Education, 2022)—and entering diverse professions, with women now constituting 28% of healthcare workers, 19% of university lecturers, and 14% of entrepreneurial startups (World Bank, 2023). Critically, education fosters political agency: women with secondary education are 5x more likely to join women’s rights organizations and challenge discriminatory clan practices (Hersi, 2022).

Table: Female Education Gains (2000 vs. 2023)

Indicator	2000	2023	Change
Primary enrollment	22%	67%	+45%
Secondary enrollment	8%	41%	+33%
University enrollment	3%	33%	+30%
Female teachers	12%	38%	+26%

Source: Somaliland Education Ministry Statistical Yearbooks (2000, 2023)

Persistent Challenges: Despite progress, structural barriers persist:

- 1) **Early Marriage:** Poverty drives child marriage, with 34% of girls in rural areas marrying before 18 (UNICEF, 2023). School fees force families to prioritize sons’ education, trading daughters for dowries (*yarad*).
- 2) **Dropout Rates:** 58% of girls leave school by age 15 (Nagaad Network, 2022), citing:
 - Distance to schools (over 10km in rural regions)
 - Lack of menstrual hygiene facilities
 - Gender-based violence during commutes
- 3) **Quality Disparities:** Urban-rural divides remain stark. In the Maroodi-Jeeh region, pupil-teacher ratios average 30:1; in Sanaag, they exceed 80:1, with female teachers comprising only 11% of staff (Education Ministry, 2023).

Transformative Interventions: Successful initiatives counter these challenges:

- 1) **Community Schools:** Village-led schools in remote areas reduced female dropouts by 40% (Save the Children, 2022).
- 2) **Cash Transfers:** *Girls’ Education Stipends* (\$15/month) lowered child marriage rates by 22% in pilot districts (UN Women, 2023).
- 3) **Gender-Responsive Infrastructure:** Building separate latrines and boarding facilities increased girls’ retention by 31% (IRC, 2022).

Contradictory Outcomes: Education’s empowerment potential clashes with tradition:

- 1) Educated women report higher divorce rates when challenging spousal authority (Hargeisa University, 2021)
- 2) "Overqualified" stigma limits job opportunities for female graduates (World Bank, 2023)

- 3) Clan elders increasingly label educated women as "*qaaxaysi*" (rebellious), restricting their marriage prospects (Ali, 2022)

Economic Shifts:

Contemporary Somaliland is experiencing significant shifts in gender dynamics, particularly within the economic sphere. While deeply rooted patriarchal structures and customary law (Xeer) persist, women are increasingly visible as economic actors, navigating both opportunities and entrenched barriers. This transformation is most evident in the realm of entrepreneurship and informal trade, yet significant obstacles hinder women's full participation in the formal economy and property rights.

Women's Rise in Business and Entrepreneurship: A prominent feature of Somaliland's changing economic landscape is the increasing participation of women in business, particularly within the vibrant informal sector. The "*bacdo*" trade, referring to women-dominated cross-border trade often involving goods like foodstuffs, clothing, and household items imported from neighbouring countries (especially Djibouti and Ethiopia), is a cornerstone of this activity (Gardner & El-Bushra, 2016). These women traders leverage social networks and demonstrate considerable resilience, contributing substantially to household incomes and local market economies. Beyond cross-border trade, women are increasingly engaging in urban entrepreneurship, establishing small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) ranging from tailoring and catering services to technology hubs and retail shops (World Bank, 2017). This entrepreneurial drive is often fueled by necessity but also reflects growing aspirations and access to microfinance initiatives and women's business associations, which provide crucial capital, training, and networking opportunities (PIC et al., 2020). Their economic activities are not only vital for household survival but also gradually challenging traditional gender roles by increasing women's visibility in public economic spaces and their decision-making power within households.

Persistent Barriers: Formal Employment and Land Ownership: Despite their growing presence in the informal entrepreneurial sector, women in Somaliland continue to face substantial barriers in accessing formal employment and securing land ownership. Formal sector opportunities remain limited for women, characterized by significant gender gaps in participation rates, wages, and representation in higher-level positions (ILO, 2019). Discrimination, lack of requisite education and skills training tailored for formal jobs, socio-cultural norms prioritizing domestic roles, and workplace environments perceived as unwelcoming contribute to this disparity. Furthermore, access to and control over land – a critical economic asset – remains heavily skewed against women. While Somaliland's constitution nominally guarantees equality, land ownership is predominantly governed by customary law (Xeer) and Islamic law (Sharia), which traditionally favour male heirs and male control over clan or family land (Touati, 2019). Women face immense social and legal hurdles in claiming inheritance, purchasing land independently, or having their names on land titles. This lack of secure land tenure severely limits women's ability to use land as collateral for business loans, invest in agriculture, or build long-term wealth, perpetuating their economic vulnerability and dependence (UN Women, 2021). Efforts to reform land laws face challenges in reconciling statutory guarantees of equality with deeply entrenched customary practices and interpretations of religious law.

In conclusion, Somaliland's economic gender dynamics are in flux. Women are demonstrating remarkable agency and becoming pivotal economic players, particularly through informal trade and entrepreneurship like the *bacdo* system and urban SMEs. However, this progress occurs alongside

persistent, structural barriers that restrict their access to formal employment opportunities and, critically, secure land ownership. Addressing these barriers through legal reforms, targeted skills development, challenging discriminatory social norms, and ensuring women's rights under both statutory and customary systems are essential steps towards realizing more equitable economic participation and harnessing the full potential of Somaliland's women for national development.

Political Participation

Political participation represents a critical frontier in the shifting gender dynamics of contemporary Somaliland. While significant barriers rooted in clan structures, conservative interpretations of culture and religion, and institutional inertia persist, there have been notable – albeit contested – advances in women's representation and leadership aspirations, particularly following the landmark introduction of electoral quotas in 2021. This progress reflects persistent advocacy but also underscores the deep-seated resistance that continues to impede full political equality.

Advancements in Representation: The 2021 Quota and Beyond: A pivotal moment occurred in 2021 when Somaliland implemented a mandatory 10% quota for women's representation in local council elections (NAGAAD, 2021). This was the result of years of relentless campaigning by women's rights organizations, such as the NAGAAD network, which argued that women's substantial contributions to society and the economy must be reflected in governance structures. The quota, though modest compared to global standards, led to a tangible increase in women holding elected office at the local level. Following the May 2021 elections, the number of women councillors rose significantly, providing a crucial foothold in formal political institutions (UNDP, 2022). Beyond the quota, there have been symbolic breakthroughs, such as the election of women as mayors in major towns like Gabiley and the appointment of women to ministerial positions (e.g., Minister of Environment and Rural Development, Minister of Employment, Social Affairs and Family), demonstrating a gradual, if slow, acceptance of women in high-profile leadership roles (APD, 2022). These developments signify a growing, albeit fragile, recognition that women have a legitimate and necessary voice in shaping Somaliland's political future.

Resistance, Challenges, and the Limits of Progress:

Despite the gains spurred by the 2021 quota, progress remains fiercely contested and fundamentally limited. Deep-seated resistance manifests in multiple ways:

- 1) **Institutional Opposition:** The quota applies *only* to local councils, not to the House of Representatives (lower house) or the Guurti (upper house of elders). Attempts to legislate a 20% quota for parliamentary seats were decisively rejected by parliament in early 2024, highlighting the powerful resistance within the male-dominated legislature and traditional structures (Somaliland Chronicle, 2024). The Guurti, based on clan lineage and inherently patriarchal, remains entirely male.
- 2) **Socio-Cultural and Religious Barriers:** Conservative interpretations of Islam and deeply ingrained clan-based patriarchal norms are frequently invoked to justify excluding women from "public" leadership roles deemed suitable only for men. Women candidates and politicians often face intense social scrutiny, harassment, and smear campaigns questioning their morality or suitability (Hoehne, 2021). Traditional leaders (Sultans, Akils) wield significant influence and often hold conservative views on women's political roles.
- 3) **Structural and Practical Obstacles:** Women face significant hurdles in accessing campaign financing, navigating complex clan-based political networks often controlled by men, and balancing political careers with entrenched domestic responsibilities. Security concerns and

limited access to quality education further restrict the pipeline of potential female leaders (Rift Valley Institute, 2023). The perception of politics as a "dirty" or unsafe space also deters participation.

The Impact and Future Trajectory: The increased, though still minimal, presence of women in local councils and a few ministerial posts is beginning to have an impact. Women councillors are often reported to prioritize issues like healthcare, education, water access, and social services, reflecting concerns central to their communities (NAGAAD, 2023). Their presence challenges stereotypes and provides role models, slowly normalizing the idea of women in leadership. However, the rejection of the parliamentary quota and the glacial pace of change at the national level underscore that quota gains are vulnerable and insufficient alone. Meaningful progress requires sustained pressure from women's movements, shifts in societal attitudes (particularly among younger generations and religious leaders), constitutional and legal reforms guaranteeing equality beyond local councils, and robust support mechanisms for women candidates facing financial, social, and security barriers. The struggle for equitable political participation in Somaliland remains a dynamic process marked by hard-won gains and persistent, formidable resistance.

Challenges and Controversies

Persistent Inequalities

Despite observable shifts in economic participation and hard-won gains in political representation, profound and persistent gender inequalities remain deeply embedded in Somaliland's social, cultural, and legal fabric. These inequalities represent the core challenges and controversies surrounding gender dynamics, often generating significant tension between progressive reforms and entrenched traditional norms. While women demonstrate remarkable agency, systemic barriers continue to limit their full rights, safety, and autonomy, revealing the complex and often contradictory nature of change.

- 1) **Legal Contradictions and the Power of Customary Law (Xeer):** A fundamental challenge lies in the contradiction between statutory law and customary/religious practices. Somaliland's constitution guarantees equality (Article 8(2)), and it has ratified international conventions like CEDAW (with reservations). However, in practice, matters of family law, inheritance, marriage, divorce, and personal status are overwhelmingly governed by a combination of Xeer (customary law) and interpretations of Sharia (Islamic law). These traditional systems often explicitly favour men (Hoehne, 2016). For instance:

- **Discriminatory Family Codes:** Laws or customary practices often allow polygamy without equal rights for women to refuse, impose stricter requirements on women for divorce, and grant men greater guardianship rights over children.
- **Inheritance Disparities:** As highlighted in the economic section, inheritance laws and practices under Xeer and prevalent interpretations of Sharia typically allocate shares to female heirs that are half of those given to male heirs, or exclude them entirely from inheriting land or significant assets (Touati, 2019). Statutory guarantees of equal inheritance rights are rarely enforced against clan and familial pressure.
- **Limited Protection Laws:** While laws against practices like Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C) exist, enforcement is weak, and prevalence remains extremely high (estimated over 98% among women aged 15-49, UNICEF, 2023). Similarly, laws aimed at protecting women from domestic violence or rape are often poorly implemented or circumvented.

- 2) **Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and Inadequate Justice:** Gender-based violence remains a pervasive and devastating reality, constituting a major human rights violation and a significant barrier to gender equality. This includes domestic violence, sexual violence (including rape and assault), forced/early marriage, and FGM/C. Key controversies and challenges include:
- **High Prevalence and Underreporting:** Due to stigma, fear of retaliation, lack of trust in authorities, and economic dependence, the vast majority of GBV cases go unreported (RAJO, 2020).
 - **Weak Law Enforcement and Judicial Response:** When cases *are* reported, victims often face inadequate police response, lack of specialized services (medical, psychosocial), and delays or biases within the formal court system. Police and judicial officials may lack training or hold discriminatory attitudes themselves (UNFPA, 2022).
 - **The Dominance of "Maslaxa" (Clan Mediation):** Serious crimes, including rape and murder, are frequently diverted from the formal justice system to clan-based mediation (Maslaxa). These processes prioritize clan reconciliation and compensation (diya) over individual victim justice and punishment of perpetrators. Compensation often goes to the victim's male relatives, not the victim herself, and perpetrators rarely face criminal sanction, perpetuating impunity (HRW, 2020). This system fundamentally undermines statutory laws and women's rights to justice and protection.
- 3) **Restrictive Social Norms and the Control of Female Autonomy:** Deeply ingrained patriarchal social norms continue to exert powerful control over women's lives, bodies, and choices, often justified through interpretations of culture and religion:
- **Mobility and Dress Codes:** Women's freedom of movement, especially unaccompanied or at night, is often restricted. While Hijab/Niqab is common and often a personal choice, social pressure to conform to specific conservative dress codes can be significant, limiting personal expression.
 - **Honour and Social Control:** Concepts of family "honour" (sharaf) are frequently tied to controlling female sexuality and behaviour. This can lead to severe restrictions on interactions with unrelated men, limitations on education or work choices deemed inappropriate, and severe consequences (including violence) for perceived transgressions (Farah, 2018).
 - **Marriage and Bodily Autonomy:** High rates of early marriage persist, driven by poverty, clan alliances, and notions of protecting girls' "honour." Women often have limited agency in choosing a spouse or negotiating terms within marriage. Bodily autonomy, particularly regarding reproductive health and decisions, is severely constrained.
 - **Widowhood and Vulnerability:** Widows often face immense pressure to remarry within the deceased husband's clan ("guddi" practice) or risk losing custody of their children and access to property, leaving them economically and socially vulnerable (NAGAAD, 2022).

Controversy and Resistance: Efforts to address these persistent inequalities are frequently met with controversy and resistance. Advocacy for reforms in family law, inheritance rights, or GBV legislation is often framed by opponents as:

- **"Un-Islamic" or "Western":** Challenging traditional interpretations of Sharia or Xeer is portrayed as undermining religious and cultural identity.

- Destabilizing Social Order: Critics argue that changing gender roles disrupts the "natural" order of the family and clan structure, which is seen as the bedrock of Somaliland's stability.
- Divisive: Framing gender equality as a "women's issue" rather than a societal imperative can limit broader support.

Persistent gender inequalities in Somaliland are not simply remnants of the past but actively sustained by powerful interlocking systems: discriminatory legal frameworks (both statutory gaps and the dominance of Xeer/Sharia in practice), pervasive GBV enabled by weak justice and clan mediation, and deeply entrenched patriarchal social norms controlling women's autonomy. These challenges represent the most significant and controversial battleground for gender equality. Progress requires not only legal reforms and stronger enforcement mechanisms but also sustained, culturally sensitive efforts to shift social attitudes, challenge harmful interpretations of religion and tradition, empower women to claim their rights, and engage men and boys as allies. The struggle involves navigating complex controversies, balancing respect for cultural identity with the universal imperative of human rights and equality.

Cultural Resistance to Change

While Somaliland witnesses incremental shifts in gender roles, profound cultural resistance remains a powerful counterforce, actively contesting and often impeding efforts toward greater gender equality. This resistance is not monolithic but manifests through deeply entrenched patriarchal norms, conservative interpretations of religious and clan identity, and a defense of traditional social structures that privilege male authority. Understanding this resistance is crucial to navigating the complex and often contentious path of gender transformation.

1. The Defense of "Tradition" and Patriarchal Clan Structures:

- Clan as the Bedrock: Somaliland society is fundamentally organized around clan (qabiil) lineages, where identity, social standing, resource access, and dispute resolution are traditionally mediated through male elders (Guurti, Akils). This system inherently centralizes power and decision-making authority in the hands of men. Any perceived challenge to established gender hierarchies within the family or clan is often framed as a threat to the entire "dhaqan" (culture/custom) and the social cohesion it provides, especially given Somaliland's context of self-determined statehood built partly on clan consensus (Hoehne, 2016).
- Invoking "Somalinimo" (Somaliness): Resistance to changes in gender roles, particularly those seen as influenced by international norms or "Western feminism," frequently invokes the defense of authentic "Somalinimo." Traditional gender roles – men as protectors/providers/public figures, women as mothers/homemakers/within the private sphere – are portrayed as intrinsic to Somali cultural identity and stability. Efforts promoting women's public leadership, challenging control over marriage, or advocating for bodily autonomy are thus stigmatized as foreign impositions undermining national or cultural authenticity (Farah, 2018; APD, 2021).
- Control over Kinship and Marriage: Cultural resistance is particularly fierce regarding issues central to clan reproduction and alliance: marriage and female sexuality. Practices like arranged marriages (especially for cementing clan ties), opposition to inter-clan marriages without male guardian approval, severe restrictions on pre-marital relationships, and the policing of female "honour" (sharaf) are fiercely guarded as core cultural values. Reforms seeking to raise the minimum marriage age, grant women greater choice in spouses, or

criminalize forced marriage face significant backlash framed as protecting morality and social order (NAGAAD, 2022; SONSAF, 2023).

2. Social Sanctions and the Policing of Women:

- **Gossip, Stigma, and Social Exclusion:** Cultural resistance operates powerfully through informal social control. Women (and their families) who defy norms – by pursuing non-traditional careers, engaging in public activism, delaying marriage, or challenging male authority within the household – risk intense gossip ("aargud"), social stigma, and exclusion. This fear of community judgment is a major deterrent to deviating from expected roles (RAJO, 2020).
- **Policing Mobility and Behavior:** Norms governing women's physical mobility (e.g., restrictions on travelling alone, especially at night) and social interactions (particularly with unrelated men) are strictly enforced through social pressure. Dress codes, while often a personal expression of faith, can also be subject to conservative community policing, limiting women's autonomy in public spaces (APD, 2021).
- **Violence as Enforcement:** In extreme cases, resistance manifests as threats or acts of violence, including domestic violence or so-called "honour-based" violence, used to punish perceived transgressions and enforce compliance with traditional gender norms (HRW, 2020). The persistence of FGM/C, despite legal prohibitions, is perhaps the starkest example of cultural resistance prioritizing control over female bodies and sexuality above health, rights, and individual autonomy (UNICEF, 2023).

3. Impact on Reform and the Contested Nature of Change: This cultural resistance has tangible consequences:

- **Stalling Legal Reforms:** Efforts to enact progressive family laws, strengthen GBV legislation, or implement constitutional guarantees of equality face significant delays or dilution due to opposition framed in cultural/religious terms (e.g., the repeated failure to pass a comprehensive Sexual Offences Bill).
- **Limiting Political Gains:** As seen with the rejected parliamentary quota, arguments invoking "tradition" and "religious appropriateness" are used to block women's access to national-level political power.
- **Creating a Chilling Effect:** Fear of social backlash deters many women from claiming their rights, pursuing education or careers beyond accepted norms, or speaking out against injustice.
- **Generating Controversy within Society:** Debates around gender roles are highly divisive, creating friction not only between activists and traditionalists but also within families and communities, reflecting a society grappling with profound social change.

Cultural resistance in Somaliland is not a passive adherence to the past but an active, dynamic force mobilized to defend patriarchal power structures and a specific vision of social order. It leverages deeply held attachments to clan identity, conservative interpretations of Islam, and potent social sanctions. While change is undeniably occurring, driven by women's agency, economic necessity, education, and activism, progress remains fiercely contested. Overcoming this resistance requires long-term, culturally embedded strategies: supporting progressive religious scholarship, engaging clan leaders and elders as potential allies, amplifying the voices of women and men challenging harmful norms within their communities, and demonstrating how gender equality aligns with core

Islamic and Somali values of justice, dignity, and collective well-being. The path forward necessitates navigating these cultural controversies with sensitivity and persistence.

Key debates in the literature on gender dynamics in contemporary Somaliland

The scholarly and policy discourse surrounding gender dynamics in Somaliland is marked by several key, often interrelated, debates. These debates reflect the complexity of the context and differing analytical perspectives on the nature of change, the drivers of inequality, and the pathways to progress.

1. Agency vs. Victimhood: Navigating Structure and Resistance

- The Core Debate: A central tension exists in how women's roles and experiences are conceptualized. Are women primarily portrayed as passive victims of deeply patriarchal clan structures, discriminatory laws (formal and customary), and pervasive gender-based violence? Or is the focus on their agency – their active resistance, strategic navigation of constraints, and creation of spaces for empowerment despite formidable obstacles?
- Arguments for Emphasizing Victimhood: Literature highlighting the severity of structural barriers often underscores women's vulnerability. This includes:
 - Analyses of legal pluralism showing how statutory guarantees are overridden by Xeer and conservative Sharia interpretations, systematically disadvantaging women in inheritance, marriage, divorce, and justice (Hoehne, 2016; Touati, 2019).
 - Reports documenting the alarming prevalence of GBV (FGM/C, domestic violence, rape) and the near-total impunity enjoyed by perpetrators due to clan mediation (Maslaxa) and state failure, framing women as victims of systemic violence (HRW, 2020; UNICEF, 2023).
 - Examinations of social control mechanisms (honour codes, mobility restrictions) that severely limit women's autonomy and choices (Farah, 2018; APD, 2021).
- Arguments for Emphasizing Agency: A growing body of scholarship counters simplistic victim narratives, showcasing women's active roles:
 - Studies of economic resilience, like the bacdo trade and urban entrepreneurship, demonstrating women's ingenuity in creating livelihoods, building networks, and contributing significantly to household and local economies (Gardner & El-Bushra, 2016; World Bank, 2017).
 - Analyses of political activism, highlighting the decades-long struggle by organizations like NAGAAD to secure quotas and challenge exclusion, portraying women as determined agents of political change (NAGAAD, 2021; UNDP, 2022).
 - Research on everyday resistance, documenting how women negotiate within marriages, utilize religious discourse to claim rights ("Islamic feminism"), access education, and support each other through informal networks, challenging patriarchal norms from within (PIC, 2021; Tiilikainen, 2018).
- Synthesis: The most nuanced literature rejects this binary. It recognizes the profound structural victimization women face while simultaneously highlighting their resilience and strategic agency in navigating and contesting these structures. The debate centers on *emphasis* and the risk of either overlooking systemic oppression or underestimating women's capacity for action and change (Hussein, 2020).

2. Urban vs. Rural Divides: Contrasting Landscapes of Gender Norms

- The Core Debate: To what extent do gender dynamics and opportunities differ significantly between urban centers (notably Hargeisa) and rural (often pastoralist) communities? Is the

narrative of progressive urban centers versus conservative hinterlands accurate, or overly simplistic?

- Arguments for a Stark Divide:
 - Urban Centers (Hargeisa, Berbera, Burao): Literature often depicts these as sites of relative change and opportunity. Factors include: greater exposure to diverse ideas (media, diaspora, NGOs); higher female education and workforce participation; presence of women's organizations and activism; more visible women in business and local politics; slightly more anonymity potentially weakening clan surveillance; and access to services (health, legal aid). The 2021 quota impact was most visible in urban councils (APD, 2022; World Bank, 2017).
 - Rural Pastoralist Communities: Often portrayed as strongholds of tradition. Factors include: the paramount importance of clan structures and male elders (Guurti/Akils); greater economic reliance on livestock herding (traditionally male-dominated); limited access to education, especially for girls; fewer health/social services; stronger enforcement of restrictive social norms (mobility, marriage, honour codes); and greater influence of conservative religious leaders. Land access disputes and GBV justice are often more firmly controlled by customary systems here (RVI, 2023; Hoehne, 2016).
- Arguments for Nuance and Interconnection:
 - Variation Within Categories: Significant diversity exists *within* both urban and rural settings. Not all urban women are empowered; poverty and conservatism persist in city enclaves. Conversely, some rural areas near towns or with NGO presence show greater dynamism. Pastoralist women often hold crucial (though undervalued) economic knowledge and responsibilities.
 - Fluid Boundaries: Migration (rural-urban, displacement), trade, communication technology, and clan ties blur the lines. Rural norms influence urban dwellers, and urban experiences/changes feedback to rural areas. Clan authority often extends into urban settings.
 - Shared Structural Barriers: Core challenges – legal pluralism favouring men, GBV, FGM/C prevalence, barriers to land ownership – persist across the urban-rural spectrum, albeit manifested differently (SONSAF, 2023).
- Synthesis: While significant differences exist, the urban-rural divide is a spectrum rather than a binary. The literature debates the degree of difference and cautions against generalizations. Both settings present unique challenges and opportunities for women, shaped by the interplay of local economy, clan dynamics, state/international presence, and infrastructure (Hussein, 2020; Gardner & El-Bushra, 2016).

3. Local vs. International Frameworks: Negotiating Rights and Culture

- The Core Debate: How do internationally promoted gender equality norms and frameworks (e.g., CEDAW, SDGs, mainstream human rights discourse) interact with local Somali cultural and Islamic values? Are they complementary, conflicting, or something more complex? How do local actors engage with and adapt these global discourses?
- Arguments for Clash and Imposition:
 - Critiques of "NGO Feminism": Some literature argues that international agendas can be culturally insensitive, imposing Western liberal feminist models that ignore local

- realities, values, and priorities (e.g., prioritizing individual rights over family/clan cohesion). This can fuel backlash, framed as defending culture and religion against foreign interference (Farah, 2018).
- Instrumentalization Concerns: International funding can sometimes distort local agendas, pushing organizations towards donor priorities rather than community-identified needs, or creating competition rather than collaboration.
 - Resistance Framing: As discussed under cultural resistance, international frameworks are frequently invoked by opponents as "un-Islamic" or "un-Somali", used to discredit local activists and justify maintaining the status quo (RVI, 2023; APD, 2021).
- Arguments for Synergy and Localization:
 - Strategic Framing by Local Actors: Somaliland women's rights organizations adeptly "vernacularize" global norms. They anchor demands for equality and justice in Islamic principles (Quranic concepts of justice, dignity, equality before God) and Somali cultural values (women's historical roles, contributions to peace and economy), making them more palatable and legitimate locally (PIC, 2021; Hussein, 2020).
 - Leveraging International Leverage: International frameworks (CEDAW ratification, even with reservations) and pressure provide crucial leverage points and legitimacy for local activists pushing legal and policy reforms, holding the government accountable, and accessing resources.
 - Shared Goals, Different Pathways: Literature highlights areas where local values and international norms *can* align, such as condemning FGM/C based on health and Islamic principles against bodily harm, promoting girls' education as beneficial for families and society, or seeking justice for GBV victims.
 - Synthesis: The interaction is characterized by dynamic negotiation and adaptation ("hybridization"), not simple adoption or rejection. The key debate focuses on the *effectiveness and ethics* of how international frameworks are deployed. Successful strategies involve local ownership, culturally and religiously resonant framing, and addressing the specific structural barriers identified within the Somaliland context, rather than applying external blueprints (Gardner & El-Bushra, 2016; Tiilikainen, 2018).

Conclusively, these key debates – Agency vs. Victimhood, Urban vs. Rural, Local vs. International – are not merely academic. They shape research priorities, policy interventions, and funding flows. Understanding these tensions is essential for developing nuanced, contextually appropriate, and effective approaches to supporting gender equality in Somaliland. The literature increasingly points towards recognizing the complex interplay of structure and agency, the significant variations within geographical categories, and the necessity of locally-led, culturally-embedded strategies that negotiate rather than simply impose international frameworks.

Conclusion

Summary of Findings

Contemporary Somaliland embodies a dynamic interplay of continuity and change in gender roles. Traditional structures anchored in the patrilineal clan system (*qabiil*), customary law (*xeer*), and conservative Islamic interpretations persist in enforcing male dominance across political, economic, and social spheres. Men retain control over clan leadership, land ownership, and judicial arbitration, while women remain disproportionately burdened by discriminatory practices in inheritance

(receiving half-shares or exclusion) and justice (e.g., clan ediation *maslaxa* prioritizing reconciliation over victim rights).

Yet transformative shifts are evident, driven by three key forces:

- 1) Education: Female primary enrollment surged from 22% (2000) to 67% (2023), delaying marriage and expanding professional opportunities. Educated women now constitute 28% of healthcare workers and 19% of university lecturers. However, rural disparities endure—34% of girls marry before 18, and dropout rates reach 58% due to distance, GBV risks, and menstrual hygiene gaps.
- 2) Urbanization: Cities like Hargeisa enable female economic agency, with women dominating the *bacdo* trade and founding 14% of startups. Urban anonymity weakens clan surveillance, allowing 42% of female graduates to delay marriage past age 25.
- 3) Activism: Grassroots efforts secured the 2021 local council quota (10%), increasing women's political representation. Women's Peace Committees (WPCs) achieved a 79% land dispute resolution rate using hybrid *xeer*-international frameworks, surpassing male-only *shir* by 16%.

Despite progress, contradictions persist:

- Economic agency clashes with land exclusion (only 2% of titles include female co-owners).
- FGM/C prevalence remains at 98%, and GBV survivors face clan-mediated impunity.
- Educated women report higher divorce rates when challenging spousal authority and face “*qaaxaysi*” (rebellious) stigmatization.

Recommendations for Future Research

1. Longitudinal Studies:
 - Track the lifelong impact of interventions (e.g., cash transfers reducing child marriage by 22%) on women's economic mobility and social autonomy.
 - Examine generational shifts in masculinity norms, particularly among urban youth, balancing traditional provider roles with modern realities.
2. Inclusion of Marginalized Voices:
 - Minority Clans: Investigate how gender dynamics intersect with minority clan status, including resource exclusion and unique resistance strategies.
 - Youth Perspectives: Document youth-led challenges to patriarchal norms (e.g., digital activism) and their vision for gender equity beyond formal quotas.
 - Intersectional Analysis: Use mixed-methods (ethnography, surveys) to explore how geography (rural/urban), class, and disability compound gender barriers.
3. Policy-Research Synergy:
 - Partner with local NGOs (e.g., NAGAAD) to co-design studies evaluating legal hybridity (e.g., the 2021 Family Law reform) in real-world settings.
 - Measure the long-term efficacy of Women's Peace Committees in transforming clan-based justice systems.

Final Reflection: Somaliland's gender landscape is a battleground of resilience and resistance. While tradition exerts formidable pressure, women's agency, fueled by education, urbanization, and activism, is forging incremental but irreversible change. Future research must center marginalized voices and temporal analysis to navigate this complex evolution, ensuring interventions honor local context while advancing universal rights.

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