

 Somalia/Somaliland

Creating safe spaces for women's groups to discuss issues and participate in decision making

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Introduction

Somalia ranked fourth highest in the 2012 Gender Inequality Index, with a score of 0.776 (with a maximum of 1 denoting the largest inequality possible in the measured dimensions).¹ Somalia has extremely high levels of maternal mortality, rape, female genital mutilation and child marriage. Violence against women and girls is common, although statistics are difficult to find. The participation and role of women in politics and decision-making spheres is extremely limited, perpetuating narrow gender-based roles and inequalities.

Across the country, traditional or customary law is applied more often than state law. Sexual and gender-based violence often goes unpunished, particularly as traditional Somali society does not openly discuss it. Girls are married early, with 45% of women aged 20–24 having been married before the age of 18.²

Oxfam strives to address gender inequality and empower women in an effective and coherent manner through all our interventions. One such intervention is establishing Women's Forums in target communities to increase women's participation in decision making in their communities, and to help them identify and propose solutions to protection issues. Women's Forums provide a safe space where local women and girls discuss protection and gender issues and propose potential solutions for consideration by village committees, which have the ultimate authority at community level.

Supporting Women's Empowerment

Protection analyses conducted in 2018 identified that women's participation in decision making was limited, and women's specific needs were overlooked in communities. Based on these findings, Oxfam designed the Women's Forums approach, which is currently being implemented in mainly rural areas and settlements for internally displaced people in the Sool, Sanaag and Togdheer regions of Somaliland. In these areas, existing community structures are male-dominated, and women have little or no space in community decision making. The forums are intended to support women's efforts to empower themselves, understand their rights around protection and gender issues, and have the confidence and ability to contribute to decision making, including engagement with local authorities.

1 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2012). *2012 Somalia Human Development Report: Empowering Youth for Peace and Development*, p. xviii. Available at <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/2012-somalia-human-development-report>

2 Ibid., p. 51.

Cultural sensitivity about women's participation in decision making at village level was a challenge at the start of the project. This was rooted in a combination of deep-seated cultural and social norms, which set the position of women in the house. However, the forums managed to change this, in part by building trust with local authorities and religious leaders through interactive advocacy meetings using positive engagement strategies – i.e. constructive rather than confrontational dialogues. One of the outcomes of this engagement was increased acceptance of the work of the Women's Forums themselves. In addition, the building of women's capacity has been welcomed by some local authorities, who see women as more impartial than men (since they are less strongly linked to clan rivalries) and thus better positioned to support humanitarian efforts (for example, by supporting the selection of individuals to benefit from humanitarian assistance).

Forum members received intensive training on protection, as well as one-on-one meetings with Oxfam staff. They then started supporting community protection volunteers in their work, raising awareness about protection issues, and even conducted their own campaigns, for example, during the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence. In addition, some of them have become members of village committees, and begun to speak out on women's issues through community structures.

The Women's Forums created the opportunity and space for every woman involved to raise concerns and discuss the issues that matters to them. Women now share the challenges they have faced and continue to face during droughts, cyclones, displacement and clan clashes, and empower each other. Thanks to the training provided and the support women found from each other, many women who were previously shy and unable to speak in front of others are now expressing themselves openly. They even participate in door-to-door awareness campaigns within their villages.

'Men used to meet since their childhood. We just started to meet a month ago, and we are adapting to it,' said one woman from the women's forum in Fadhiyar Village.

Women's participation in decision making is now promoted, and count with female members of community committees working with their male counterparts to set agendas and discuss issues that are specifically affecting women and girls.