

UGAASO: LESSONS FROM A WOMEN'S DIALOGUE SPACE IN THE SOMALI REGIONAL STATE OF ETHIOPIA

Report



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BACKGROUND

The Somali Region of Ethiopia, like many parts of the world, has a deeply and enduringly patriarchal political system where gender norms and intra- and inter-clan dynamics combine to weaken the presence, participation and leadership of women in political spaces. Attempting to change this is Ugaaso, the Women's Dialogue Space (Ugaaso-WDS), a platform for current and emerging women leaders in politics, civil society and business in the Somali Regional State (SRS) of Ethiopia. It was established to support women in creating a separate political space for them to discuss political developments, jointly strategise and advocate for positive gender outcomes, amplifying women's voices and strengthening their participation in the public sphere.

In 2023, members of the WDS formally registered Ugaaso as an independent civil society organisation (CSO) in Ethiopia and adopted its current name, which translates as a feminine form of the title given to traditional leaders in Somali culture. Ugaaso-WDS aims to improve women's participation in decision-making and has the overarching objective of challenging the patriarchal norms and structures that undermine women's public and political roles in the SRS. Its key objectives are: promoting women's political inclusion and participation in decision-making, advocating for girls' and women's rights, promoting women's interests and needs in government policies, providing legal aid, providing protection from violence and discrimination, and building the capacity of women in – or aspiring to be in – politics.

Ugaaso-WDS has been able to navigate and disrupt some of the more enduring barriers to women's political participation in the SRS. It is now well integrated into existing political structures and dialogue mechanisms and has developed innovative strategies to generate support for women's participation in politics, including among traditional and religious leaders. At the same time, it has built connections and trust between influential women across political parties, helping it gain visibility at the regional and national level and establish a strong constituency cutting across the political spectrum in favour of women's participation in politics.

This paper aims to showcase some of the innovations and lessons emerging from Ugaaso-WDS, highlighting the strategies that have helped it gain traction to advance women's political representation and participation. Consequently, it aims to share insights that can be used to inform how other similar women's political platforms or networks are designed and managed both within Ethiopia and in other conflict-affected contexts. The paper draws on a series of workshops and consultation meetings facilitated by Conciliation Resources in Jigjiga, Ethiopia, involving Ugaaso-WDS members and local civil society networks and experts. It also builds on a 2020 baseline study conducted by CR's partner KasmDev on the status of women's political participation and socio-cultural inclusion in the SRS.

Fundamentally, the experience of Ugaaso-WDS shows that with the space, power and resources to work together across political fault lines, women in politics can and will achieve meaningful gains for gender inclusion even in the most patriarchal and at times hostile environments. Specific elements in the approach of Ugaaso-WDS contributed to its impact, which may prove instructive for similar platforms as well as other initiatives promoting gender inclusion.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

The **Women's Dialogue Space (WDS)** was established in 2021 as a platform for current and emerging women leaders in politics, civil society and business to jointly strategise and amplify women's voices in the public sphere. In 2023, WDS members registered as a CSO under the name of **Ugaaso**, with the aim of putting the ideas discussed in the WDS into practice and looking at gender inclusion beyond women's political participation. Ugaaso is also able to work more independently due to its ability to source its own funding as a registered CSO. To avoid confusion, the structure profiled in this paper will therefore be referred to as **Ugaaso-Women's Dialogue Space (Ugaaso-WDS)**, highlighting its dual roles of acting both as an advocacy organisation and as a platform for women in the Somali region.



A policy and advocacy workshop with the Womens Dialogue Space, KasmDev and Conciliation Resources.
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Ugaaso-WDS demonstrates that women themselves are best placed to identify the entry points and methods to promote gender inclusion in the spaces they operate in but must be given the space, resources, long-term support and flexibility to do so, rather than conforming to a predetermined approach developed by international organisations. To do this, it's essential that the women involved are given the time to build trusting relationships and a shared vision as a platform, which can be facilitated by engaging in joint research and analysis. Here, Ugaaso-WDS is a rare model of cross-partisan collaboration in a fiercely competitive and divided political system.

For Ugaaso-WDS to make an impact towards its shared vision, it benefited from connections and relationships built early on through the Women's Dialogue Space – both with existing women leaders and with institutions, networks and platforms at the national level – which amplified the work, profile and messages of the platform.

Ugaaso-WDS also made meaningful inroads with traditional sources of resistance to women's political engagement, notably male power-holders and religious leaders, some of whom became powerful supporters of the platform following proactive and sustained engagement from Ugaaso-WDS members.

This paper begins with some background, sharing some of the main barriers to women's meaningful political participation in the Somali Region before outlining the main areas of work of Ugaaso-WDS and its achievements. Subsequently, the paper shares in more detail some of the lessons emerging from the development of the platform as well as their implications for international supporters of women's political participation.

BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S MEANINGFUL POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Women in the Somali Region have always faced various significant barriers to participating in and shaping the political arena, which has tended to be dominated by male clan elites. Although there has long been a sizable minority of women in legislative and executive positions, those women have often been unable to assert influence on policy and decision-making due to a history of tokenistic inclusion and the continued domination of political spaces by male elites. Since 2018, following a change in government, progress has been made in increasing the number of women decision makers. For example, the number of women in the Somali Regional Council increased from 27% to 29% in 2021, despite the prediction that it would decrease after the election, while the first women Speaker in the Regional Council was appointed.¹ Nevertheless, increasing the number of women in government positions will have limited impact unless underlying gendered norms and practices can be transformed. In a 2020 baseline study on women's political participation, women politicians and civil society activists highlighted the barriers discussed in the subsections below.²

Gender norms

Gendered cultural norms significantly restricted women's engagement in the public sphere, with participants of the baseline study highlighting undesirable and outdated social norms that limit women's societal roles to the private or domestic sphere. Women political actors described not being taken seriously by male political actors and even in male-led CSOs, social expectations discouraged women's meaningful contribution. These factors combined to silence women in politics by reducing their self-esteem and confidence in speaking in front of men as the concept of 'xishood' or modesty is idealised in women. At the same time, women frequently face pushback or backlash when taking part in public or political activities, with women who seek political office frequently accused (primarily by men but also by women) of promoting what are perceived as foreign values (*gaalnimo*) incompatible with Somali cultural

norms. Participating in politics can be reputationally risky for women, resulting in many women avoiding political participation in the SRS. Ugaaso-WDS members shared stories of women in politics who had experienced sexual exploitation, harassment and abuse, which underlines and reinforces the unequal power dynamics at play, serving as another barrier to participation but also creating further stigma around women's engagement in politics.

Inter-clan and patrilineal dynamics

Another barrier outlined in the baseline study is the patrilineal kinship system that favours male representatives. Politics and inter-clan rivalry is closely intertwined in Somali society, with clans and subclans frequently vying for political influence and power through formalised governance systems. Against this backdrop, the prevalent belief among traditional male leaders and wider society that women are less capable than men of representing the community's interest results in an aversion to selecting women for leadership roles. There is also a widespread perception that a Somali woman has 'no clan' when she marries outside her father's clan, which renders her an outsider in both her husband's and father's communities. This gives rise to the perception that women have less loyalty to clan affiliations, further compounding existing barriers to their selection by male clan elders as candidates for holding political office.

Socio-political marginalisation

Women frequently occupy a more socio-politically marginalised position in the SRS, with lower economic status and educational attainment, which is negatively correlated with political awareness and access to information. As such, many women lack essential knowledge concerning their legal and political rights, as well as the knowledge required to engage meaningfully in politics.

1. KasmDev and Conciliation Resources (2022) 'A Baseline Study on Women's Representation in SRS' Public Decision Making Positions – Somali Regional State'.
2. KasmDev and Conciliation Resources (2020) 'Promoting women's meaningful political participation in the Somali Regional State, Ethiopia'.



Instrumentalisation of women's political participation

During a workshop in September 2023, Ugaaso-WDS members highlighted the way in which, before 2019, women's political participation had been instrumentalised by previous administrations. Under the Abdi Mohamoud Omar (more popularly known as Abdi Iley) administration (2005–2018), women's representation was high in numerical terms, but their influence over policy was weak. Appointing women to key positions within government was used by Iley's administration as a strategy to guarantee their control over power structures and resource accumulation. The selection of women political candidates was often based more on personal or clan connections than a candidate's knowledge and experience or a sincere vision for developing a robust political platform for women. Young and inexperienced women were put in charge of key positions in government, particularly in finance and revenue institutions, because they were seen as more easily manipulated and controlled.

In parallel, initiatives claiming to promote women's participation both in politics and civil society emerged but were often hollow, based more on the personal interests and agendas of male power-holders than evidence and analysis. As such, women representatives have struggled to advance their own political interests or use their position to secure concrete gender inclusion outcomes, which has harmed morale and momentum within the women's movement. Instead, their involvement has been met with resentment among some men who perceive themselves as unjustly displaced by women, and even among broader sections of society who associate inclusion initiatives with the preservation of authoritarian control and repression under the former administration.

UGAASO-WDS: A SPACE TO CONNECT AND NURTURE WOMEN LEADERS

Established to help address some of the most pressing barriers to women's political participation and leadership in the Somali Region, Ugaaso-WDS has engaged in several complementary workstreams that together form an effective approach.

Joint, inclusive analysis and learning

In 2019–2020, Conciliation Resources and Kasmodev convened three strategic dialogues for women from across political divides to discuss barriers to women's political reports. Based on the outcomes of these discussions and a subsequent report that was finalised in 2020, the need for a space for women to build connections and engage in joint advocacy was identified as key. On this basis, Conciliation Resources and Kasmodev launched the first Women's Dialogue Space in early 2021, with the first meetings bringing together members of all registered political parties, MPs, representatives of religious groups, government officials, civil society members, including victims and survivors' groups, members of Jigjiga University, and women from the diaspora. These initial meetings mapped barriers to women's political participation and participants developed an initial Terms of Reference for the platform. Members of the Women's Dialogue Space have also been supported and inspired by a series of comparative learning exchanges, including a visit to Hargeisa in 2021, where engagement with women politicians in Somaliland has shaped their own work and thinking.

Building a long-term vision for women in politics in the SRS

An initial priority for the Women's Dialogue Space was the development of a strategic roadmap that brought together discussions and analysis from Ugaaso-WDS sessions and outlined key short-, medium- and long-term steps to be taken to support women's leadership in the region. This was to serve as a guiding document for Ugaaso-WDS advocacy and public engagement activities. On 15 May 2022, the Ugaaso-WDS hosted a dissemination event for the roadmap at which key gatekeepers including clan elders and religious leaders expressed a willingness to work with the Ugaaso-WDS to advance women's political participation. A follow-up meeting with religious leaders and clan elders was held on 10 August 2022 where women explored the intersection of religion, tradition and barriers to women's political participation. Subsequently, the chair of the Council for Peace and Unity³ and the Deputy President of the Regional Sharia Court showed support for women's role in politics when

they featured in a documentary shown on regional TV that showcased the work of the Ugaaso-WDS.

Mentoring and support

Ugaaso-WDS has also worked with Kasmodev to deliver a mentoring programme for newly elected women members of parliament, pairing them with experienced women politicians for mutual support and learning. As part of the implementation of this programme, a mentorship guideline was developed that framed the guiding principles and objectives of the programme. The programme launched on 11 June 2022 following a series of training sessions for mentors. Regular monitoring and evaluation reviews of the scheme have been conducted since, with the programme being adapted to respond to some of the challenges raised during these reviews.

Building networks for advocacy and exchange

In 2022, members identified a need for Ugaaso-WDS to become more active in national spaces, including in shaping key national political processes such as the National Dialogue. As such, connecting with women's networks and establishing an increased presence at the national level were identified as key priorities for the continued development of Ugaaso-WDS. During a comparative learning and advocacy visit to Dire Dawa and Addis Ababa in September 2022, introductions to TIMRAN (a national CSO working on women's political participation) and the Network of Ethiopian Women's Associations (NEWA) were made and opportunities for ongoing collaboration were explored.

Members of Ugaaso-WDS identified that for the platform to actively participate in national networks, it needed to register itself as a CSO. The process to do this was initiated in December 2022, with regional registration being granted in early 2023. Ugaaso-WDS has been in the process of formalising its structures, including developing by-laws, electing a board and developing an organisational structure and policies. Following its registration, Ugaaso-WDS was invited to join the national Coalition for Women's Voice in the National Dialogue and on 1 September 2023 was elected to its steering committee. This is significant as Somali voices, in particular Somali women's voices, have long been marginalised in Ethiopian national politics. Ugaaso-WDS has also worked to expand its presence in the Somali region and include women outside of Jigjiga, the region's political centre. On 24 August 2023, a sub-regional chapter of Ugaaso-WDS based in Gode city was inaugurated.

3. This is a traditional mediation rapid response/crisis unit serving the Somali Regional State used to resolve communal and clan-based conflicts in the region and sits under the regional government's security bureau.

SUPPORTING WOMEN'S POLITICAL PLATFORMS: LESSONS LEARNED FROM UGAASO-WDS

During the learning sessions, Ugaaso-WDS members highlighted a wide range of positive outcomes spanning three key areas. First, they've noted increased trust between women political actors across political parties, increased confidence of diverse women political actors, and the development of strengthened analysis, understanding, and advocacy for a cross-party and cross-clan agenda for women's participation in politics. Second, they highlighted the integration of the platform into existing regional and national political structures, dialogue mechanisms, and initiatives. Third, the platform has piloted innovative approaches for navigating resistance to and cultivating support for women's active political participation, including effective strategies for engaging with traditional leaders, religious leaders, and male champions and gatekeepers, as well modelling collaborative modes of inter-party engagement.

Below are eight key lessons that emerged from the Ugaaso-WDS reflection sessions:

1. Women are best placed to identify the barriers, entry points and methods to promote gender inclusion in the spaces they operate in

The Ugaaso-WDS experience highlighted the importance of developing a locally led, contextualised analysis of women's experiences and gender norms in order both to shed light on context-specific barriers and to identify context-specific opportunities to advance women's political participation. In particular, it was critical that this analysis not only came from women in the context but continued to be owned by them too – such that they could formulate subsequent recommendations and lead the implementation of follow-up activities. Consequently, analysis of specific barriers and norms affecting women's political participation was used to shape the formation of Ugaaso-WDS and define its goals, objectives and approaches in ways that made sure the platform was relevant to its context. For example, representatives of Ugaaso-WDS shared analysis on the common perceptions of a woman as having 'no clan' when she marries outside her father's clan, indicating that this can undermine such women's political capital when seeking political office in a clan-based political system. They then discussed how this could be reframed as a potential opportunity for women to leverage these perceptions to act as relatively more neutral mediators and connectors between clans. This analysis has since been used by Ugaaso-WDS to make a context-specific positive argument for increasing women's political participation and to identify additional entry points for women into political processes.

Recommendation: Support women to identify and analyse barriers to their meaningful participation in politics and support them to develop and lead initiatives to overcome these.

2. Allowing time to develop mutual trust and a shared vision can be critical for diverse women's political platforms to succeed

Bringing together diverse political stakeholders can be challenging in the SRS context, where there can at times be limited contact between clan, political and other groups in decision-making owing to political polarisation, inter-clan competition and a hierarchical, exclusionary political culture. Ethiopian politics at both national and regional level has become increasingly characterised by polarisation, with entrenched divisions between political parties and along clan, ethnic and religious lines.

Ugaaso-WDS members have shared their experiences of fear, tension and mistrust between members. One participant from the ruling Prosperity Party (PP) noted that "my own belief was that if I sat next to an Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) member, I would be held accountable for sitting next to an opposition party member". When one ONLF member first received the invitation to Ugaaso-WDS, she suspected that it was a politically motivated attempt to undermine her and her party. Several said that they felt pressure to conform to the party line, which was prioritised above all else, including women's political agendas. In part due to these fears, many members were initially sceptical of the nature of the initiative and the chances of it succeeding where so many other initiatives had been co-opted and/or failed.

Overcoming this kind of distrust and scepticism takes time, and Ugaaso-WDS members have since acknowledged the importance of the initial investment of time and effort in building a cohesive group and shared vision. Rather than rush into frequent meetings to plan actions, initial Ugaaso-WDS meetings were spaced out and focused on developing trust, strengthening personal relationships and identifying shared challenges. This way, members felt less pressured into agreeing concrete actions but were able to focus on building a space and grouping that each member had confidence in. Political party representatives were then able to come to a "unity with diversity" approach, whereby the "ONLF is still ONLF, PP is still PP, but the women members can all share objectives and an agenda."

Recommendation: Build in sufficient time for diverse participants to build trusting relationships, understand each other's perspectives, and craft a coherent shared vision which they are all committed to realising.

3. Joint analysis can bolster relationships but also enable coherent strategy and advocacy

Joint analysis is an integral part of a contextualised, conflict- and gender-sensitive approach to peacebuilding. Yet the Ugaaso-WDS experience shows that the benefits go further, helping to strengthen intra-group cohesion and strategic coherence within the Ugaaso-WDS while underpinning the group's advocacy efforts. In this case, the initial joint research and analysis undertaken by Ugaaso-WDS members focused on identifying key challenges facing the group concerning women's political participation and provided a rare opportunity to discuss whether existing primarily clan-based systems of governance could deliver inclusive political processes for women. With members often unable to engage in such discussions within their respective political parties, the analysis highlighted shared experiences and helped generate a shared sense of direction and, ultimately, shared objectives.

Over time, the Ugaaso-WDS increasingly linked its research agenda with its advocacy campaigns to good effect. For instance, to address the dynamic whereby clan elders act as gatekeepers and overwhelmingly favour male candidates in administrative appointments to zonal and woreda administrations, the platform conducted and disseminated a snapshot study highlighting the extreme under-representation of women in these structures compared to regional and federal parliament, where women make up about 30% of positions. The study was completed in just a few months and provided a robust evidence base, which was then harnessed by the network members to advocate both within their respective institutions and jointly. This led, in January 2023, to the regional government committing to prioritise women for vacant positions in zonal and woreda administrative structures.⁴

Recommendation: Facilitate shared analysis and research among participants to encourage collaboration from the outset, inform vision and strategy, and identify objectives and entry points.

4. Women's dialogue platforms can help women model cross-partisan trust and confidence building in the political system more broadly

Since being part of a space for cross-party collaboration and trust-building on women's political participation, Ugaaso-WDS members have been changing attitudes in favour of civil and peaceful inter-party engagement. One Ugaaso-WDS and PP member described how she responded to criticism from male PP colleagues for

speaking with an ONLF representative at a conference, explaining that while she might have differing political views from the ONLF, they also have certain common objectives for the Somali region and that she respects the ONLF official as a former freedom fighter and political opposition leader. This Ugaaso-WDS member noted that the experience of the Women's Dialogue Space platform has given her the opportunity to feel more comfortable publicly modelling peaceful engagement with political opposition figures. Similarly, a Ugaaso-WDS and ONLF member highlighted how she had used her experience of working in non-partisan ways within Ugaaso-WDS to support mediation efforts between the two factions of the ONLF. As such, it is clear that women's political participation platforms like Ugaaso-WDS can shift norms and behaviour around cross-party interactions in fruitful ways, whether by modelling collaborative engagement or supporting women to facilitate it through dialogue and confidence building.

Recommendation: Take a risk-based approach to developing cross-party women's political platforms that identifies and mitigates risks to the women and organisations involved.

5. Relationships with existing women leaders can strengthen learning and advocacy outcomes

Ugaaso-WDS members consistently credited the progress of their platform to the relationships they had developed with women leaders within the SRS and internationally who had provided mentorship and learning opportunities and championed the platform. Early in the Women's Dialogue Space process, members wanted mentorship from established women leaders in the SRS, particularly in parliament and the cabinet at both the federal and regional levels, along with women leaders from the ONLF. It was important to them that mentors were knowledgeable about their rights, the limits of those rights, and the challenges that impede their inclusion in the political process. Consequently, a mentorship programme was initiated between Regional Council members, more experienced regional representatives and new appointees with less parliamentary experience. Ugaaso-WDS members that have received this support describe the important role it has played in developing their political awareness, confidence, voice, and ability to navigate political settings. Ugaaso-WDS members also appreciated the cross-contextual learning gained by engaging women leaders outside the SRS, which has strengthened members' networks, knowledge and skills, allowing them to collectively grow together. Women that participated in a comparative learning trip to Hargeisa, Somaliland, explained that learning from women politicians who have succeeded in exerting

4. While not a strict quota system, relevant institutions and mechanisms have been directed to express preference for women candidates (positive action).



influence to advance the cause and interests of women in Somaliland was a catalytic and inspirational experience for them. The visit helped Ugaaso-WDS members identify their own gaps in terms of soft skills, such as public speaking and negotiations.

However, it was the relationships with other senior women leaders in the SRS that enabled Ugaaso-WDS members to get platform objectives onto the agenda in other political spaces within SRS institutions. For example, sustained contact with women leaders in the Bureau for Women and Children's Affairs meant Ugaaso-WDS agenda points were raised more frequently within the regional government. Further, after significant engagement with Ugaaso-WDS, the previous Deputy Speaker of the Regional Council advocated for increased women's representation in the Council, leading to the appointment of a woman Speaker. Such advocacy contributed to an increase in the number of women cabinet members from just one in 2019 to four in 2022, though since then it has fallen to three.

Recommendation: Build and harness relationships with influential women leaders to provide mentorship for aspiring women politicians and promote the messages and objectives of women's political platforms among their male counterparts.

6. Establishing connections with national institutions, networks and platforms can build profile and open new doors for political engagement

Ugaaso-WDS has built up a considerable profile within the SRS and nationally by developing institutional relations with, and integrating within, national networks and platforms. For example, through their sustained focus on relationship-building with NEWA and TIMRAN, two groups promoting women's political participation at the national level, including in the National Dialogue, Ugaaso-WDS was invited to become a member of the National Coalition for Women's Voice general assembly meeting in Addis Ababa in February 2023. The National Coalition for Women's Voice is an important network of more than 50 organisations across Ethiopia advocating for meaningful women's participation in the National Dialogue and to make the process responsive to women's needs, interests, perspectives, and aspirations. The deepening relationship with TIMRAN also resulted in Ugaaso-WDS being invited to co-organise a women's peace forum held in Jijiga in February 2023. And critically, six months after Ugaaso-WDS formally joined the National Coalition for Women's Voice, it succeeded in becoming elected as a Steering Committee member for the coalition.

These outcomes show the significant value that focusing on developing connections with relevant existing institutions, networks and platforms can have in accelerating the embedding of the relatively new Women's Dialogue Space platform within the existing political ecosystem of women's networks. In turn, these memberships and connections of Ugaaso-WDS leadership with political actors in Addis Ababa have served as powerful endorsements that have strengthened Ugaaso-WDS members' political reputation and legitimacy within the SRS. This successful integration of diverse groups of Somali women from the SRS in national Ethiopian initiatives is even more significant in light of the historically limited participation of Somalis (both male and female) in national-level processes.

Recommendation: Invest in building connections with networks and institutions at different levels where they can support a platform's profile, connections and learning.

7. Proactive and early engagement with male power-holders can mitigate resistance against women's meaningful political participation

From the outset, Ugaaso-WDS members invested time in cultivating an influential cohort of politically influential male allies who then actively supported and intervened on issues of key concern for the platform. Ugaaso-WDS assessed which male allies would be critical in the success of upcoming advocacy campaigns, and engaged with them well in advance to garner their political support. For example, before an SRS Cabinet discussion on the formation of the Regional Elders Council, Ugaaso-WDS members knew there would be pushback on their request to reserve a minimum of 20% of positions for women candidates. They met multiple times with senior male elders and political allies, including top government leaders, cabinet members and the regional president. Because of their sustained engagements with key male political allies, a number of male champions, including the Regional President, spoke strongly during Cabinet discussions in favour of a commitment to reserve a minimum of 20% of positions for women leadership in the *Guurti*, the traditional Somali Council of Elders due to be established in 2024. Ugaaso-WDS has continued its advocacy to ensure this commitment is delivered but has continued to face opposition from some male power-holders.

Similarly, in the run-up to elections, Ugaaso-WDS engaged proactively with political gatekeepers with influence over the selection of electoral candidates within the major political parties to ensure its members received endorsements from male power holders and their proactive support. Ugaaso-WDS members leveraged gendered norms to secure this support from gatekeepers, including narratives that women are a 'safe pair of hands' who are less concerned with

risk-taking, corruption and fuelling inter-group competition and are more committed to accountability, implementing policy promises and taking more consultative and inclusive approaches to decision-making and policy development. Ugaaso-WDS members also drew on examples of women role models, including examples from women-led countries during the Covid-19 pandemic. They also drew gatekeepers' attention to relevant legal and policy commitments, including SRS legal guarantees and the PP protocol commitments during the 2021 election, as well as Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's commitment to gender parity in politics.

Recommendation: Identify influential resisters to women's political participation within participants' own political movements at the outset and engage them proactively.

8. Religious leaders can be powerful supporters of women's participation in political activities and overcome the resistance of clan elders and public constituencies

Ugaaso-WDS's experience highlights the value of working with cultural influencers to develop and share theological arguments for strengthening women's meaningful political participation. While some religious leaders in the SRS have opposed women's involvement in politics, Ugaaso-WDS members recognised that the support of influential religious scholars was crucial to opening space for women's meaningful participation. Consequently, Ugaaso-WDS worked closely with selected religious leaders to establish a religious basis for women's political participation in the region and culture. Once Ugaaso-WDS had worked with the scholars to clarify that there are no religious grounds for women's exclusion, Ugaaso-WDS members used this in conversations with traditional leaders to advocate for their inclusion. It also created entry points for more public-facing advocacy efforts to shift public narratives that present barriers to such initiatives. For example, members of the Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (the highest religious authority in the Somali region) expressed a willingness to work with Ugaaso-WDS to clarify public misunderstandings of Islamic scripture that obstruct women's rights, including participation in public decision-making. In parallel, the members of the Regional Sharia Supreme Court and Regional Islamic Affairs Supreme Council noted that there is much debate around the issue of women's participation in theological circles, and that there is scope to clarify misunderstandings regarding religious positions on women's participation in public life.

Recommendation: Where relevant and possible, work with religious institutions to establish and share compelling religious arguments for women's participation in politics.

Conciliation Resources is an international organisation committed to stopping violent conflict and creating more peaceful societies. We work with people impacted by war and violence, bringing diverse voices together to make change that lasts.

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