

## **The day that men would vote for women**

The new Somali Federal Parliament came to life on the 20<sup>th</sup> of August 2012 with a much broader female representation. Nonetheless, the majority of Somali women parliamentarians believe there is still much to be done in terms being represented in the Somali political landscape.

"I regret we haven't achieved the 30% of the female quota of seats," said Member of Parliament, Bibi Khalif Mohamed, during an UNPOS orientation workshop on Women and Elections held in Mogadishu on the 27<sup>th</sup> of September. "There were some clan elders who didn't want this."

There are currently 38 women MPs serving in the new Parliament, occupying some 15% of the seats.

Somali Traditional Elders were tasked to draw lists of candidates after consulting with their communities and present them to a Technical Selection Committee for screening. One of the selection criteria was a 30% quota of women in the lists.

While the representation of women in elected bodies is critical, women's effective participation in politics requires much more than the pursuit of numerical targets, Mr. Maarten Halff, UN Electoral Adviser for the Department of Political Affairs explained to the Somali parliamentarians.

"Political participation means much more than just voting or being elected; it is about taking part in decisions at all levels affecting the lives of Somali men and women. It includes the freedom to speak out, to participate in rallies, to be an active parliamentarian once elected, to form parties and to take part in shaping their vision", Mr. Halff noted. He added that women typically face greater obstacles in their political participation than men; overcoming them would involve carefully designed legislation, electoral procedures, and education.

"You are role models" said Ms. Hasmik Egian, UNPOS Chief of Staff in addressing the Somali women MPs. "Your active role as lawmakers and community representatives is critical in empowering the new generation of women and girls."

The last competitive elections were held in 1969, ending a brief period in which Somali laws guaranteed equal electoral rights for women and multi-party elections. Yet memories of that legacy linger. "I remember as a girl standing in line with my mother outside a polling station waiting for her to cast the vote" recalls MP Maryan Maalim Ali.

Somalia's Provisional Constitution calls for establishment of an Independent Electoral Commission within 60 days of appointing the Council of Ministers. This Commission will be mandated to lead the country into national elections within the current Parliamentary term.

"This is a great opportunity" says MP Sahra Korshet "We all must work together with one vision and ensure that women are represented in the Commission." However, many issues need to be addressed in parallel with the electoral process. Hon. Sahra thinks that one key challenge that all Somalis are facing and especially women is still security.

Since 1991 the country has been devastated by conflict with no functioning central government. At least two generations of Somalis have never experienced a free election. Security is still on everyone's mind; without it elections would remain very difficult.

"I haven't been able to visit my constituency" says MP Saredo Abdulla from Baidoa. "There is a distance of 260km from Afgoye to Baidoa and Al-Shabaab is out there." Hon. Saredo said she escaped to Kenya when Gen. Aidid's forces killed her father and her brother during the civil war. She became a successful businesswoman and was an MP several times previously. She is also a member of the Pan-African Parliament based in Johannesburg focusing on women's and children's issues. "I had visited Libya, Kenya, Uganda, South Africa, Egypt. Women face different issues in all these countries. In Somalia Al-Shabaab has created many problems for women," she added referring to the cultural and religious restrictions the insurgency group places on women.

Education and literacy were the other key themes touched during the one-day event. "As an MP for the first time, I would like to improve education for women and children, especially disadvantaged women who were denied access to education" says Hon. Bibi.

The change of mindset is the aim for this generation of female parliamentarians. "The focus should be on the younger generation, both men and women. My vision for the future is that one day men will vote for women and vice versa" says Hon. Saredo.

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View photos of the workshop on **UNPOS flickr account**:

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