

INTEGRATING WOMEN INTO LOCAL GOVERNANCE AND PEACEBUILDING EFFORTS IN SOMALIA: THE STORY OF FILIS AHMED

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Somalia's traditional clan-based structures often sideline women, youth, and other groups from local governance. The marginalisation of women from governance bodies reflects deeply entrenched cultural norms, leaving their perspectives absent from critical decision-making processes in areas like education, health, and local security (Rift Valley Institute, 2023). Moreover, it results in outcomes which are, in many cases, neither responsive to, nor representative of, the views and aspirations of women at the community level.

Women are often excluded not only from decisions related to education, health, local security, or political in broader terms, but also from formal reconciliation processes. This is true, even though they are often the first to respond to disputes at the community level.

The result has been a fragile local governance system where women's potential as mediators, negotiators, and peace activists is underutilised, despite their proven ability to bridge divides, foster conciliation, and advocate for community welfare.

Somali women have historically contributed to peacebuilding through informal initiatives rather than formal processes. For example, a Peace Mother (often referred to in Somali as Hooyada Nabadda, meaning "Mother of Peace") is an influential Somali woman who actively engages in local and national peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts, leveraging her social status as a mother, wife, and respected community member to mediate conflicts.

In Somalia's context, Peace Mothers have been influential in conflict resolution and community cohesion. Despite this impact, their inclusion in governance bodies - such as district councils and customary elder forums - remains limited. This marginalisation means they have very few institutional avenues to shape laws, budgets, or development priorities.

However, some government actors, traditional elders, and programmes, such as the Somalia Stability Fund III (SSF III), have recognised the lost potential of excluding women from local governance in Somalia, and are working to increase their participation.

Empowering Women to Lead Peace Efforts

To address these issues in Galmudug and Hirshabelle States, Finn Church Aid (FCA) in collaboration with its local partner Horn Centre,



WORKSTREAM 3: DEMOCRATISATION & LOCAL GOVERNANCE

AT A GLANCE

PARTNER

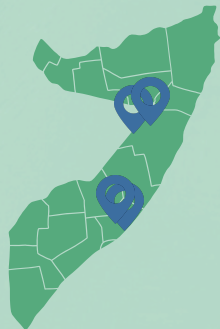
- Horn Centre through Finn Church Aid (FCA)

ACTIVITY DETAILS

- Equipping women District Councillors and Peace Mothers with the skills and support networks to lead peacebuilding and local governance efforts.

LOCATION

- Abudwaq and ,South Galkayo in Galmudug State
- Warsheikh and Jowhar in Hirshabelle State



WOMEN TARGETED BY DISTRICT

	District Councillors	Peace Mothers
Abudwaq	4	10
S.Galkayo	5	10
Jowhar	3	10
Warsheikh	6	10

THE PROJECT UNFOLDED IN FOUR STEPS:

- **Consultations and engagement:** Dialogues with women District Councillors, Peace Mothers, elders, and local officials to define priorities and secure buy-in.
- **Leadership and peacebuilding training:** 29 women received targeted training in advocacy, negotiation, and conflict resolution, in collaboration with MoIFAR.
- **Wellbeing and resilience sessions:** two intensive trainings for 58 women in Jowhar and South Galkayo, equipping trainees with psychosocial tools to manage stress and trauma linked to leadership roles.
- **Peer-to-peer networks:** new support networks were established in four districts, linking grassroots women's groups with national advocacy efforts to enable long-term mentoring of aspiring women leaders.



Peace Mothers and district councillors taking part in the leadership and peacebuilding training.

Galmudug's Ministry of Interior, Federal Affairs and Reconciliation (MoIFAR) and Ministry of Interior and Local Governments (MoILG), started an initiative in 2024 to integrate women into local governance and peacebuilding efforts. The project, funded by the SSF III, aimed to ensure that women District Councillors, Peace Mothers and aspiring female leaders have the skills, confidence, and support networks to lead peacebuilding and local governance efforts.

Activities took place in South Galkayo and Abudwaq in Galmudug State and Jowhar and Warsheikh in Hirshabelle State - which were identified as priority districts by state-level government. The activities equipped participants with skills for effective community engagement, negotiation and advocacy, supporting SSF III's broader objective of strengthening local governance structures to be more inclusive and capable of delivering essential services.

Galmudug's MoIFAR and Hirshabelle's MoILG, district mayors, traditional elders, and women's associations played active roles in the trainings, signalling a strong commitment to gender-inclusive governance at both state and district levels.

A Woman's Voice: The Journey of Filis Ahmed Barre

When conflict flares-up in Abudwaq, Galmudug State, the community turns to Filis Ahmed Barre. As a long-standing member of the Women's Network and the Reconciliation Council, she has become a trusted figure in mediating disputes and promoting peace.

However, her path into a leadership position was not straightforward. Filis began as one of ten Peace Mothers in Abudwaq trying to make a difference in a deeply patriarchal society. "It was clear from the beginning that the work ahead of us could not be managed by a small group of women alone. We needed knowledge, networks, and recognition."

Through the SSF III-funded programme, Filis received training that proved to be transformative. The sessions focused on women's participation in reconciliation and politics, building confidence to engage with traditional elders, and equipping participants with psychosocial tools to handle the stresses of leadership.

"The facilitators gave us practical lessons that left us motivated and capable. The trainings we received focused on two main areas: women's role in reconciliation, and women's participation in politics, including the barriers they face. They also gave us confidence to engage with traditional elders and take part in decision-making spaces that had previously excluded women."

With new skills in negotiation, advocacy, and conflict resolution, Filis quickly moved from participant to leader, forming a women's committee dedicated to engaging with elders and cascading the training to aspiring female leaders.



Filis Ahmed Barre standing outside the revitalised Women's Network building in Abudwaq.

In Abudwaq's six sub-districts, she gathered 60 women and shared what she had learned, from political participation to the unique role of women in peacebuilding. Many of those women are now active members of the Women's Network proving that the benefits extend far beyond the initial group of trainees.

One of the most tangible outcomes of the programme in Abudwaq was the revitalisation of the building that the Women's Network (Ururka Haweenka) operates from. Filis, alongside other trainees, were motivated to turn a previously underutilised space into an active hub - a safe and vibrant space for women leaders to meet, strategise, and support candidates who aspire to join the Abudwaq's District Council.

"The Women's Network gave us strength," says Filis. "It allowed us to expand from a small circle to a much larger movement. It is where we gather, where we build each other's confidence, and where aspiring women leaders find mentorship and encouragement."

Filis's new skills and networks also elevated the community's perception of her. Once confined to the margins of community life, she is now included in official decision-making bodies. Abudwaq district administration appointed her Head of the Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation Department, acknowledging her

contribution to peacebuilding in Abudwaq. Additionally, when Abudwaq formed a 33-member committee to review voter registration for the one-person-one-vote process, Filis was among those selected.

"Before, we were just women at home without recognition. Today, the community calls on us directly when problems arise, and we are included in decision-making committees. This recognition has given us both a stronger voice and greater responsibility," Filis explains.

Many elders, once hesitant, now welcome women's presence at the table, recognising their ability to bridge divides that others cannot. Women's contributions are often in the form of poetry, appeals as mothers or aunts, or encouragement that softens tensions have proven invaluable in reconciliation. Filis acknowledges this sentiment: "When we join elders in reconciliation, even a simple song or verse from a woman can change the mood. It reminds people of family ties and calms the atmosphere, which is why elders now appreciate our presence."

Many training participants and members of the Women's Network were invited to Galkayo Peace Week celebrations that took place in November 2025. The women were active participants; their voices were heard in debates and panel discussions, on topics ranging from 'The role of



Filis Ahmed Barre taking part in the SSF III-funded training in early 2025.

business in promoting peace’ and ‘Reducing conflict in Galkayo’.

Despite these achievements, Filis spoke openly about the obstacles that persist. Cultural barriers are deeply entrenched; traditional gender roles that are framed around domestic responsibilities continue to limit acceptance of women in political life. These challenges, Filis admits, can be discouraging, but they have not deterred her.

“Somali culture has not fully accepted women in leadership. Men often push us aside, saying our place is in the home or that women cannot move freely. Even in mediation, some dismiss us and say, ‘If men could not convince us, how can women?’ But we do not give up. Even when people doubt us, we continue, because we know the work is too important to abandon,” she says.

For Filis, the sustainability of these interventions is her main goal: building the capacity of more women, securing resources, and strengthening peer-to-peer networks. She envisions a new generation of women leaders, well trained and supported, who can take their rightful place in local governance and peacebuilding. “This is more than personal growth; it is about claiming women’s rightful place in governance and leadership.”

Using a Somali proverb, she describes the distance women feel from central decision-making:

“It is like someone calling up from the bottom of a well, asking for help to be pulled out. We need the government to keep watch over us, to support us, and to act quickly when we call. Women in peacebuilding cannot be left behind.”

Why Does it Matter?

Including women in local governance in Somalia is essential for more legitimate, inclusive and effective local governance, particularly in communities emerging from conflict. Evidence from Somalia shows that women’s participation improves responsiveness to community needs, strengthens peacebuilding, and helps shift patriarchal norms that have historically excluded half the population from decision-making (Rift Valley Institute, 2023).

The success in Abudwaq suggests that culturally rooted women’s leadership — blending formal council roles with grassroots mediation — can gradually shift societal perceptions. As women gain recognition from elders and government alike, Somalia moves closer to building inclusive governance structures that reflect and serve the whole community.

Women’s formal participation in local governance also supports national-level goals, contributing towards Somalia’s 30% women’s political quota, and broader goals of democratisation.