

Madame President, Excellencies, Civil Society colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for this invitation to provide an update on the situation of women and girls in Somalia.

My name is Amina Arale, I am a young human rights defender and peace advocate. I was born and raised in Somalia, and I have witnessed human right violations in my country for 30 years. I join my voice with those of my fellow human rights defenders who have tirelessly fought for peace and justice in my country, and who have lost their lives and loved ones in the process.

Today, I speak in my capacity as the Executive Director of the Somali Women Development Centre (SWDC). My organization strives to combat gender-based violence against women and girls by enhancing their participation in all spheres of public life.

SWDC established the first free hotlines for victims of sexual and gender-based violence, and provides medical, psychosocial, material and legal support, in addition to safe spaces for survivors through one-stop centers. My organization is one of the largest providers of legal aid and access to justice programs in South-central Somalia, we support more than 2,000 survivors of gender-based violence every year.

My statement today will address four key points:

- 1) The impact of the conflict on women and girls in Somalia
- 2) Challenges relating to access to justice
- 3) Women's participation in the peace and security sector
- 4) Women's meaningful participation in economic and political life

1. Impact of the conflict on women and girls

The culture of violence bred by 30 years of war and political instability has devastated Somali society, from state institutions to ordinary households. Somalia is today deeply unequal, and gender discrimination affects the majority of women, across social and economic status. Somalia ranks at 0.77 on the gender inequality index, where one (1) represents complete inequality. Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) is pervasive and shrouded in silence. Minority groups, for example, remain quiet about how SGBV affects their communities in order to avoid stigmatization and social exclusion.

We welcome some of the concrete steps taken by the government to address SGBV, including the drafting of a Sexual Offences Bill, and efforts to hold perpetrators to account. The consultative process surrounding the drafting of the Bill, which included input from civil society was a positive example of inclusive policymaking that is responsive to the needs of survivors and organizations working on SGBV.

However, much more must be urgently done.

Madam President, to date, Somalia has not signed, adopted, or implemented the Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The Somali government committed to develop a National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325 but has not yet done so. The Security Council must urge the government of Somalia to ratify and implement all regional and international legislation to protect the rights of women and girls, and ensure that all national legislation, including the Sexual Offences Bill and the FGM Bill, meet international standards and are rigorously implemented. The Somali Government must also accelerate establishment of the National Human Rights Commission and ensure respect for international human rights law.

The federal government and regional authorities must also ensure that impunity will not be tolerated and all reported cases of SGBV, particularly by security personnel, are swiftly investigated and respect the rights, safety, and privacy of survivors in any process. The government should support the creation of specialized courts for addressing cases of SGBV against women and girls and juvenile courts for children.

It is critical that the government undertake efforts to sensitize various stakeholders including religious, traditional leaders, and local authorities such as law enforcement and the judiciary about SGBV. Talking about SGBV is the first step toward eliminating it.

2. Challenges relating to access to justice for women and girls

In the fragile context of Somalia, women's access to justice is especially challenging, due to discriminatory laws and the lack of gender-responsive programs. Women are therefore left with rights in name but without any actual remedies, and men remain the "providers" of justice.

The participation of women in the judiciary and the legal profession has also met with resistance in Somalia. Despite many years of advocacy there are few female prosecutors and no female judges in the country.

For 19 years, my organization has been working on increasing women's participation in the justice sector. We have found that women's inclusion in this sector not only improves justice for women but for society as a whole. Inclusion of women as judges, prosecutors, lawyers and court officials ensures that the judiciary is more representative of Somali society and it is better able to respond to the needs of diverse groups of women. Access to justice must be about more than prosecuting crimes, it must also empower women, and transform underlying gender inequalities that render women vulnerable to violence.

3. Women's participation in the peace and security sector

Women have actively contributed to peace and to ending the civil war in Somalia. However, 14 of the peace agreements that have been reached over the last three decades have failed due to the exclusion of women. The last peace agreement in 2000 was signed after women were included, yet their role as key contributors to peace remains largely unrecognized. The Somali Government has to date also failed to implement the gender provisions in peace, security and state-building agreements.

The government must ensure women's rights are central to peace and security decisions at all levels. To achieve this goal, we need to address all barriers and protection risks that limit women's full participation in building peace in Somalia.

Women make up 11% of the police force, making Somalia the country with the third-highest number of female officers in Africa. However, only one female brigadier general is in a top decision-making role in the police force. The Government must do more to ensure that women are not only reflected in the ranks but also in senior roles.

4. Women's participation in economic and political life

Women have been excluded from the negotiating table, decision-making and leadership roles, in the economy and politics, despite the fact that they are the main breadwinners in about 80% of Somali households.

Politically active women also often face retaliation to discourage them from future activities. The Security Council should urge UNSOM to work with the government to develop a mechanism to protect women aspirants and provide updates on progress made in engaging with women's civil society in all its activities. The Council must also explicitly call on the Government to respect the rights of women human rights defenders.

It was as a result of the advocacy of local and international women's groups that a 30% quota for women was included in the Garowe Principles, even though it was not mentioned in the accompanying road map to peace or the by-laws of the country. The Security Council must now call for the Somali government and state authorities to ensure this quota for women is implemented in the upcoming 2020 elections, which will offer a historic opportunity for women to participate in the first universal suffrage elections that this country has had in fifty years.

Thank you, Madame President.