

Public Perceptions of Women's Quota in the Somali Parliament

Shafie Sharif Mohamed¹,
Somali Researchers Association (SRA)
shafie@sra.so

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70806/t5d6tk57>

ABSTRACT

Somali women are progressively entering the spheres of politics and leadership, challenging historically male-dominated structures. At present, several women occupy significant positions of authority, among them the Deputy Speaker of Parliament, a former Minister of Foreign Affairs, and the current Minister of Women and Human Rights.

In the 2017 and 2022 parliamentary elections, Somalia introduced a 30 percent quota for women's representation. However, women secured only 24 percent of seats in 2017 and 19 percent in 2022, making the attainment of the quota in the 2026 elections unlikely. The quota's limited implementation is partly due to its external rather than locally driven origin. Moreover, research on women's parliamentary representation in Somalia remains scarce, leaving important knowledge gaps for policy and advocacy.

Objective: This study aims to examine public perceptions of the women's quota in the Somali parliament and to identify the level of women's representation that is locally accepted and considered realistic.

Methodology: Data collection was conducted on a nationwide scale, employing a mixed-methods approach that combined online and offline techniques. A stratified random sampling of residential addresses was undertaken across all major regional states in Somalia, encompassing both urban and rural areas, to ensure broad geographic and demographic representation. The target population consisted of Somali residents aged 18 years and above. Based on national population estimates, a total sample of $n = 1,500$ was targeted, yielding 1,372 completed responses, corresponding to a response rate of 91.5%.

Findings: The findings suggest that while many respondents favored a reduced quota for women's parliamentary representation, a minority opposed quotas altogether, insisting that women should compete directly and let voters decide their share. The survey also indicates that a large portion of the public perceives men and women as having unequal capacities in certain qualities and behaviors considered essential for holding parliamentary office.

Key Words: Women, Parliament, Election, Quota

INTRODUCTION

Somali society is often described as socially conservative with respect to women's political participation. Nonetheless, evidence of gradual transformation is emerging, as women increasingly occupy prominent leadership positions. A notable milestone occurred in 2022, when Saadia Yasin Haji Samatar became the first woman elected Deputy Speaker of the Lower House of Parliament. Likewise, between 2012 and 2014, Fawzia Yusuf Haji Adam held the dual roles of Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, signaling a growing recognition of women's capacity to serve in high-level governmental office.

Although a 30% quota for women's representation in Somalia's parliament is not yet enshrined in the constitution, it was introduced through international and national political agreements, particularly following the 2012 Garowe conference which outlined a roadmap for Somalia's post-transition governance including a commitment to a 30% women's quota (Hussein, 2019). The quota has also received strong endorsement from the United Nations and UNDP as a critical milestone for gender equality in Somali politics (United Nations Security Council, 2021; United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2025). Furthermore, Somali women's groups and civil society have actively advocated for legislation to guarantee this quota, although progress has been uneven, with the lower house approving relevant

legislation but the upper house yet to do so (Warsame, 2021; Abdi, 2020). Despite these commitments, implementation remains a key challenge. In the 2017 and 2022 parliamentary elections, women secured only 24% and 19% of seats respectively, falling short of the 30% target (Inter-Parliamentary Union [IPU], 2017; IPU, 2022). Given that the quota has not been achieved in two consecutive electoral cycles and is not constitutionally mandated, its future enforcement is uncertain. Critics also argue that the quota was not a locally driven initiative but rather an externally imposed one, which complicates its acceptance within Somalia's clan-based political system (Chr. Michelsen Institute [CMI], 2022; Ministry of Education, Women and Culture [MEWC], 2022). This study aims to investigate public perceptions of the women's quota in the Somali parliament and to identify what quota allocation is locally accepted.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the past decade, Somalia has made measured efforts to enhance women's political representation, notably through the introduction of a 30% parliamentary quota. Despite this formal commitment, actual outcomes have consistently fallen short, with women securing only 14%, 24%, and 20% of seats in the 2012, 2016, and 2021/22 electoral cycles, respectively (Heritage Institute, 2022). While appointments to high-profile roles, such as Deputy Speaker and ministerial positions, have been seen as milestones, the indirect, clan-

based electoral system and the absence of legal enforcement mechanisms continue to impede meaningful representation (United Nations Security Council [UNSC], 2021). This pattern mirrors broader trends across multiple countries where structural and cultural barriers dilute the effectiveness of gender quotas.

Similar constraints are evident in other regions. In Morocco, the 10% parliamentary quota introduced in 2002 was initially celebrated, but its impact remained largely symbolic. Women were often relegated to unelectable positions or lacked party backing, revealing a superficial commitment to gender parity (James, 2007). This echoes the Somali experience, where male political elites have reportedly manipulated the selection process by occupying women's seats through proxies or leveraging clan and financial influence to marginalize legitimate female candidates (Chr. Michelsen Institute [CMI], 2020). Such practices expose the limitations of quota systems when they are not grounded in genuine political will or supported by inclusive institutional practices.

Furthermore, both domestic and international research highlights how women's quotas, when externally imposed or weakly enforced, fail to generate sustainable outcomes. In Somalia, civil society organizations such as the Somali Women's Political Forum and HINNA have pushed for enforcement, but efforts are often undercut by

patriarchal resistance and lack of local ownership (HINNA, 2021). Comparable findings arise from Egypt, where a 64-seat quota was repealed post-2011 due to public backlash and perceptions of external imposition (Tadros, 2013), and from Kenya, where the constitutionally mandated two-thirds gender rule has repeatedly been stalled due to legislative inaction (Mutunga, 2015). In Pakistan, while reserved seats increased the number of women in parliament, their influence remained minimal due to hierarchical party structures and exclusion from key decision-making (Bari, 2010).

These comparative insights reinforce a critical lesson: numerical targets alone are insufficient to transform gender dynamics in politics. The Somali case, like those in Morocco, Egypt, Kenya, and Pakistan, underscores the need for robust legal enforcement, grassroots advocacy, and cultural change to complement quota systems. Without these components, quotas risk becoming performative rather than transformative tools of inclusion. Effective women's representation thus depends not only on legislative provisions but also on broader reforms that dismantle structural inequalities and foster political environments conducive to female leadership (Ben, 2018; UNDP, 2024; DW, 2022).

METHODOLOGY

Data collection was conducted on a nationwide scale, employing a mixed-methods approach that

combined online and offline techniques. A stratified random sampling of residential addresses was undertaken across all major regional states in Somalia, encompassing both urban and rural areas, to ensure broad geographic and demographic representation. The target population consisted of Somali residents aged 18 years and above. Based on national population estimates, a total sample of $n = 1,500$ was targeted, yielding 1,372 completed responses, corresponding to a response rate of 91.5%. This provided adequate statistical power at a 95% confidence level with a 5% margin of error.

The online component comprised a structured poll hosted on the Somali Researchers Association (SRA) website and disseminated widely through social media platforms, including Facebook and WhatsApp groups. To mitigate potential coverage bias and ensure inclusion of individuals without internet access, trained SRA enumerators conducted in-person interviews in sampled communities using tablet-based survey software.

The questionnaire was developed in the Somali language to enhance comprehension and cultural appropriateness, and it included both closed-ended and open-ended items to capture quantitative measures and qualitative insights. Prior to implementation, the instrument underwent pilot testing with a sub-sample of $n = 10$ to refine question wording and ensure internal validity. Data collection took place over a two-year period, from

August 2022 to August 2024. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Somali Researchers Association, and informed consent was secured from all participants before data collection. Data quality was assured through daily consistency checks, supervisor reviews, and double-entry verification for offline responses.

FINDINGS

We conducted a comprehensive survey consisting of 12 questions targeting selected community members to gather their perspectives on the importance of negotiating an improved women's quota in the Somali parliament. The survey also explored respondents' views on the feasibility of achieving fair and deserved representation for women in Somalia's political system. Based on the survey results, the following key findings summarize public opinion regarding women's quota in parliament:

Respondents' Profile

Information on the basic demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the survey respondents is essential for understanding and contextualizing the findings presented in this report.

Gender: During data collection, respondents were given equal opportunity to participate. 46% of the participants were female, while 54% were male.

Age: To ensure a diverse sample, the survey included a question on respondents' age,

categorized into ten-year intervals. The age group 21–30 years accounted for 33.3% of respondents, followed by 40.7% in the 31–40 years' group, and 22.2% in the 41–50 years' group. Respondents aged above 50 comprised the remaining percentage.

Occupation of the Respondents

The survey sample comprised respondents from diverse occupational and social backgrounds relevant to the study of Public Perceptions of Women's Quota in the Somali Parliament. Participants included academicians, business professionals, politicians, religious leaders, clan elders, youth representatives, members of women's organizations, civil society activists, and other stakeholders with potential influence on women's political representation. This diversity enabled a comprehensive understanding of perspectives across various segments of Somali society.

Attitudes Toward Women's Quota

During data collection, respondents were asked whether they support allocating a 30% Women's Quota in Parliament. Nearly two-thirds (64%) opposed the measure. This opposition was particularly strong among traditional leaders, most of whom expressed negative views on women's representation, reflecting prevailing cultural norms that associate political authority with men. Religious leaders were less likely to endorse it, often framing their objections through cultural or

religious interpretations. While, politicians who feared losing influence in power-sharing arrangements also resisted the quota. Opposition was not limited to men; some female respondents also rejected the quota, at the same time, a significant number of male respondents expressed strong support for women's participation, with some advocating for quotas beyond 30%. As one male participant remarked: *"I often wish there were more women politicians to choose from in this country."*

In contrast, women's organizations and feminist groups strongly endorsed the quota, with many arguing that the 30% threshold should be raised to 50%, reflecting calls for gender parity in political representation and alignment with global feminist discourses on equality.

Future of the Women's Quota in Parliament

In the 2017 elections, Somali women were formally allocated 30% of parliamentary seats through the quota. However, this target was not achieved in either the 2017 or 2022 elections, and projections suggest that the 2026 elections are also unlikely to meet the threshold. As a result, many women have become increasingly doubtful that clan leaders are willing to nominate and support more female candidates.

To capture public perspectives, respondents were asked: "What percentage would you recommend as

the appropriate quota for women in parliament?” The options included 10%, 15%, 20%, 25%, maintaining the current 30%, increasing it to 50%, or eliminating the quota altogether in favor of open competition with men.

The findings revealed that 47% of respondents recommended setting the quota at 20%, while 16% favored reducing it to 10%. Meanwhile, 17% rejected the quota altogether, 13% preferred maintaining the current 30%, and 7% supported increasing it to 50%. Overall, 83% of respondents supported having a quota at some level, while 17% opposed it outright.

Perceptions of Elections Without Quotas

Respondents were asked whether they would recommend that women and men compete equally without assigning a specific quota to either side. Five in ten (50%) responded “yes,” while about one-third (32%) said “no,” and 18% were unsure. One respondent argued that in Somaliland, men and women equally seek people’s votes. Another respondent noted, “In Europe and America there is no women’s quota, so why do we need one here?” A third respondent remarked: “The 30% women’s quota is not a Somali-led initiative; therefore, it is difficult to achieve.

Barriers to Women’s Clan-Based Political Representation

Clan identity is a central organizing principle of Somali politics, where parliamentary seats are often distributed through clan-based power-sharing arrangements. Within this framework, questions of women’s representation are especially sensitive, as leadership and political authority have historically been dominated by men.

Against this backdrop, respondents were asked whether they would be satisfied if a woman represented their clan in parliament. The responses revealed a prevailing skepticism toward women’s role in clan based politics. More than six in ten (65%) felt that women are generally not suitable to represent the clan, reflecting deeply rooted cultural perceptions of political authority as a male domain. A quarter of respondents further emphasized that men make better political representatives for the clan than women. Unfavorable views were also closely tied to concerns about women’s husbands and the perception that marital ties could compromise their loyalty to the clan. One respondent captured this inequality by stating: *“Men have an easier path to get to parliament, while women have to do more to prove their worth.”*

These findings highlight how patriarchal norms and clan based political structures intersect to constrain women’s participation. Resistance is not only rooted in assumptions about women’s political capability but also in fears that their allegiance may be divided. At the same time, the recognition that

women face a steeper path underscores the structural disadvantages they encounter, providing a clear rationale for measures such as gender quotas to promote more equitable representation in Somali governance.

Clan-Based Obstacles to Women's Political Participation

Female parliamentary candidates continue to encounter barriers that their male counterparts rarely face. A key challenge is the perception of divided loyalty: women who marry outside their natal clan are often viewed with suspicion, as it is assumed they will prioritize serving their husband's clan. This entrenched belief undermines women's credibility and limits their opportunities for parliamentary representation.

Survey data illustrate the strength of this perception. When asked whether women are denied parliamentary seats because of their marriage ties, 75% of respondents agreed, while 25% rejected the claim and 5% were uncertain. The overwhelming agreement reflects how deeply rooted clan-based reasoning remains in political culture. Importantly, women respondents were more likely than men to identify this as a significant barrier, suggesting that women experience its effects more directly in their political aspirations.

Civil society organizations, however, present a more supportive stance. They are generally more

likely to advocate for institutional reforms, including women's quotas, as a means of addressing these barriers. Their position highlights the importance of advocacy groups in challenging entrenched social norms and promoting inclusive political participation for women.

Perceived Lack of Political Vision Among Women MPs

Effective politics requires both a clear vision and a coherent agenda. Members of parliament are expected to demonstrate independent political leadership and policy priorities, without which their influence in legislative processes remains limited.

When asked whether women members of parliament possess a clear political vision and agenda, 67% of respondents answered "No", while 26% said "Yes", and 7% were uncertain. The perception that women parliamentarians lack an independent political vision was identified as one of the main reasons women have been unable to achieve the 30% parliamentary quota.

This concern has also been raised at the national level. In a 2023 public gathering, President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud reflected on the debate surrounding the women's quota. He explained that women initially complained that clan elders were the primary obstacle preventing them from securing seats. However, once elected to parliament, many

women were observed to return to those same clan elders for guidance and approval on political decisions.

Such reliance reinforces the perception that women parliamentarians lack autonomy, thereby weakening the case for greater inclusion. It illustrates that women's political participation is constrained not only by the gatekeeping role of clan elders but also by the persistence of traditional power structures even after women enter parliament.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study align with the broader literature on gender quotas in fragile and patriarchal political systems, which consistently shows that numerical targets alone are insufficient to achieve meaningful representation. As highlighted by Heritage Institute (2022) and UNSC (2021), Somalia's introduction of a 30% quota has not translated into consistent gains, with women securing only 14–24% of parliamentary seats across recent electoral cycles. Our survey confirms this shortfall, as public opposition to the quota remains strong, with nearly two-thirds (64%) rejecting the policy. Similar to cases documented in Morocco (James, 2007) and Kenya (Mutunga, 2015), quotas in Somalia are undermined by weak enforcement mechanisms, resistance from political

elites, and cultural norms that associate leadership with men.

A key theme emerging from both the literature and our findings is the role of patriarchal political structures in reproducing exclusion. Just as women in Morocco and Pakistan were marginalized through token appointments or party hierarchies (Bari, 2010; CMI, 2020), Somali women face suspicion regarding their loyalty to the clan, particularly when married into other groups. Survey evidence shows that 75% of respondents believe women are denied seats due to marital ties — an attitude that directly mirrors broader research on clan-based power-sharing as a barrier to women's inclusion. This intersection of gender and clan identity not only constrains access but also fuels perceptions that women's political authority is secondary to male-dominated structures.

Another critical area of convergence lies in perceptions of women's political vision. While international studies highlight the limited influence of women elected through quotas when denied leadership roles (Tadros, 2013; UNDP, 2024), our survey respondents similarly questioned whether Somali women MPs possess an independent agenda. Nearly 67% stated that women lack political vision, with President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud publicly echoing this concern in 2023. Such perceptions reinforce the argument advanced by Ben (2018) and others that quotas, when not

accompanied by leadership development and institutional support, risk producing symbolic representation rather than substantive change.

At the same time, divergence can also be noted. While opposition to quotas was widespread, male respondents in our survey included a notable minority who strongly supported expanding women's participation, in some cases beyond 30%. This finding suggests a gradual cultural shift and demonstrates that resistance is not universal. It further highlights the role of civil society, women's organizations, and reform-minded male allies in advancing advocacy for gender parity — a trend also observed in Egypt and Kenya, where civil society efforts have kept debates on women's representation alive despite institutional inertia (Tadros, 2013; Mutunga, 2015).

Overall, the discussion demonstrates that Somalia's experience is not an isolated case but part of a broader global pattern where quotas encounter both structural and cultural resistance. Yet, the Somali case also underscores the urgency of moving beyond symbolic measures toward integrated reforms that combine legal enforcement, capacity-building, and grassroots advocacy. Without such steps, women's political participation will remain limited, and the 30% quota will continue to exist more as an aspiration than as a reality.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study highlight the persistent structural and socio-cultural barriers undermining women's parliamentary representation in Somalia. Despite the introduction of the 30% women's quota, women continue to face resistance rooted in patriarchal norms, clan-based power-sharing arrangements, and perceptions of limited political capability. Survey results reveal that not only do a majority of respondents oppose the 30% quota, but many also advocate for reducing women's representation to levels as low as 10–20%. This reflects the enduring dominance of male-centered political culture and the marginal space afforded to women in decision-making processes.

Two critical perceptions emerged as central obstacles. First, the view that women's marital ties compromise their political loyalty reinforces skepticism about their ability to represent their clans effectively. Second, a significant proportion of respondents questioned whether women MPs possess independent political agendas and vision, with some arguing that their reliance on clan elders after attaining office weakens their autonomy. Together, these perceptions underscore how gendered expectations and clan dynamics intersect to constrain women's political participation.

At the same time, the study identifies spaces of support. Civil society organizations and women's

groups demonstrate stronger advocacy for quotas and inclusive reforms, often pushing for parity beyond the 30% threshold. This suggests that while public attitudes remain largely resistant, there are influential actors willing to challenge entrenched norms and champion women's political empowerment. For Somalia to move toward meaningful gender equality in governance, policies must address both structural and attitudinal barriers: strengthening women's leadership capacity, reducing dependence on clan elders, and promoting institutional reforms that normalize women's presence in politics. Without such measures, the 30% quota will remain symbolic rather than transformative.

REFERENCE

- Bari, F. (2010). *Women parliamentarians: Challenging the frontiers of politics in Pakistan*. *Gender and Development*, 18(3), 51–60.
- Ben, A. (2018). Gender quotas and cultural resistance: Rethinking the constraints. *Journal of Political Reform*, 12(2), 88–104.
- Chr. Michelsen Institute. (2020). *Gender and politics in Somalia: Obstacles to women's political participation*. <https://www.cmi.no>
- Deutsche Welle (DW). (2022). *Somalia's political gender gap: Women still fighting for 30 percent quota*. <https://www.dw.com>
- Heritage Institute. (2022). *Somalia's 2021/2022 electoral cycle: A review of women's participation*. <https://www.heritageinstitute.org>
- HINNA Women Organization. (2021). *Women's political participation in Somalia: Progress and challenges*. <https://www.hinna.so>
- James, M. (2007). Quota systems and women's representation in Morocco: Between symbolic success and structural limitations. *Middle East Journal of Politics*, 4(1), 22–35.
- Mutunga, W. (2015). *The implementation of the two-thirds gender principle in Kenya*. *Nairobi Law Review*, 7(2), 101–119.
- Tadros, M. (2013). Politically motivated restrictions on women's parliamentary participation in Egypt: The case of the repealed quota law. *IDS Bulletin*, 44(5–6), 100–109.
- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2024). *Somalia gender equality report*. <https://www.undp.org>
- United Nations Security Council (UNSC). (2021). *Report of the Secretary-General on Somalia (S/2021/154)*. <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil>
- Abdi, S. A. (2020). The role of civil society in advancing women's political representation in Somalia. *Journal of Somali Studies*, 7(1), 45–61. <https://somalistudiesjournal.org/vol7/issue1/abdi.pdf>
- Chr. Michelsen Institute. (2022). *Excluding women: The clanization of Somali political institutions*. <https://www.cmi.no/publications/7277-excluding-women-the-clanization-of-somali-political-institutions>
- Hussein, M. A. (2019). Women's political participation and representation in post-conflict Somalia. *Journal of Eastern*

- African Studies*, 13(3), 476–494.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2019.1614737>
- Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2017). Somalia parliament election results 2017.
<https://data.ipu.org/parliament/SO/SO-LC01/election/SO-LC01-E20161023/>
- Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2022). Somalia parliament election results 2022.
<https://data.ipu.org/parliament/SO/SO-LC01/election/SO-LC01-E20211101/>
- Ministry of Education, Women and Culture. (2022). *Political participation and election monitoring report*.
<https://www.mewc.org/index.php/tools/political-participation-a-election-monitoring/2022-elections-monitoring/12029-somalia-parliamentary-and-presidential-elections-2022>
- United Nations Development Programme. (2025). Quota for women parliament and FGM ban bill in Somalia.
<https://www.undp.org/somalia/news/quota-women-parliament-and-fgm-ban-bill-somalia>
- United Nations Security Council. (2021). Security Council meeting on Somalia women's political participation.
<https://press.un.org/en/2021/dsgsm1640.doc.htm>
- Warsame, A. M. (2021). Women's political participation in Somalia: Barriers and prospects. *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations*, 15(2), 85–96.
<https://doi.org/10.5897/AJPSIR2021.1078>