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## COUNTRY REPORT -- SOMALI REPUBLIC

### The country: its Geography and History

The Somalia Republic is triangular in shape and about 670,000 km<sup>2</sup> in area. It stretches from 11.59° north to 1.39° south and from 41.39° west to 51.24° east. The northern and eastern coasts are washed by the Indian Ocean.

The population as estimated since the referendum of June 1961 is at 5 million.

The Republic of Somalia is located at the horn of Africa and the people are mainly nomadic and shift about with the seasons from place to place following the grass supply for their livestock. About 2/3 of the Somali population are nomadic and live in semi-dry land where the heat of the sun is hard to withstand. The people are always fighting natural forces and seeking shelter and protection from them. The main economy of the nation depends on the livestock, namely camels, sheep, goats and cattle.

### Social structure

The Somali social structure and interaction is typical in that the Somali people are an isolated homogeneous group with a strong sense of solidarity. The Somalis, whether in the Republic or outside it, speak only one language, have the same religion - Islam and the same cultural heritage. Furthermore, the Somali society is interwoven and inter-related by both the custom, which encourages inter-tribal marriage and nomadic way of life, which facilitates contacts between different tribal groups.

The social and cultural taboos of the Somali people are based on traditional knowledge handed down from past generations. Since the Somali language is not written, poetry, proverbs and sayings have become the usual record for Somali culture.

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Islamic religion, to which almost 100 per cent of the population subscribe is a great determining factor for all activities and social functions. Nevertheless the role of religion is secondary to that of the traditional culture and where these two factors come into conflict, tradition is given precedence over religion.

Somali customary and religious beliefs are therefore sacred and new ideas and modern scientific theories have to reckon with the important social forces. In modern history of the Somali people there have been many instances when these two traditional factors have combined in their opposition against progressive schemes. For instance first attempts of opening schools by colonial powers in Somalia were opposed by both traditional and religious leaders on the grounds that the social and religious outlook of the new generations would be radically altered.

#### Obstacles against (women) development

Somali society falls into two distinct categories today. About 30 per cent of the population are nomadic and follow the traditional way of life. The rest is the western-affected urbanized community. In nomadic way of life the womenfolk were and are the centre of the economic well-being of the society. A woman is not only a mother, with all the duties this entails, but is expected to look after the animals, feed them, milk them, process the milk and other foods for the family. Man's role is limited to an overall protection of the nomadic unit and the search for the next place where the unit should move to, in order to find sufficient grass and water.

While the men in the nomadic society loiter around or visit other men in neighbouring units, women run the machinery of the nomadic life. It is because of their importance as the centre of the economy that men have to pay dowry; and that the activeness of young female is as important as her physical attractiveness.

Religion determines the family law including marriage, divorce, inheritance, settlement of disputes between spouses etc. Customary law is equally important and is used in matrimonial cases before recourse is made to religious doctrines.

Men in Somalia, as in many Muslim countries, have the right in theory to divorce their wives whenever they so wish. In practice, however, women can compel their husbands to pronounce divorce. This is due to the important role which they play in the society.

With the introduction of urbanization, the role of the Somali women has fundamentally changed. First, religious doctrine became more important than it had been in the traditional way of life. Secondly, women lost their place in the economic setup of the society and became home-bound.

Because of this last development, which is to some extent foreign to Somali culture, womenfolk were for a long time prevented from schools or participating in urban economic activity. Nevertheless as in many parts of Africa, women have, through the backdoor of first selling small goods to each other and then carrying openly on the market, gradually changed attitudes.

#### Women's education in Somalia

The conservatism of our society had generally been a great obstacle to education. Several decades after the boys' parents consented to let their daughters attend schools. Women's education proper started in the forties and is not far-reaching.

Economic problems in the Somali Republic had more effect on the female than the male section of the population. Although education in Somalia is free, a father who could not afford to send all his children to school, would give priority to his sons.

It was a common belief in Somalia, as in many other developing countries to consider education for girls as unimportant and not required. This belief was gained as a result of two main factors:

- (a) The impression that education was a privilege to be enjoyed by men only;
- (b) The confinement of most African womenfolk, especially in Muslim countries, to homes, socially and religiously.

The two last factors together with others prevented women from effective participation in education on equal footing with men.

Though it afterward took time to make people believe that education for girls, as their participation in the economic life of the country was needed, with patience and time women gained a place, though a minor one at that, in almost all fields of education.

Today girls attend all levels of education in Somalia. From primary they go to secondary or vocational schools. Even some have attended universities abroad and obtained degree qualifications.

But the curriculae in schools havenot yet adopted themselves to the special needs of women, though modest attempts have been made in some vocational training. Plain as it is, the proportion of vocational training for girls as compared to that for the male is very small. Given this and the non-availability of females, government offices and business alike were compelled to employ men in posts as infant and primary teachers, clerks, secretaries and nurses. The incompetence of the male in these fields became very acute and this emphasized the need for female trainees.

In order to remedy this deploring situation, the Government of the Somali Republic has lately been taking some considerable programmes for the improvement of vocational training for women. Consequently women were given some facilities in joining, the already limited in number, vocational institutions and even co-education was introduced in some institutions to meet this deficiency.

Today in both the clerical training and teacher training centres or colleges girls are enrolled. Special nursing schools are established with the aid of UNICEF and WHO.

Despite this the number of women who could take advantage of these opportunities remain small. For one thing the rate of drop-outs are higher with girls than is the case with the boys. The traditional belief that a woman's place is at home, is used to discourage further or vocational education for women. A woman is also compelled to discontinue her education as soon as she finds a suitor.

#### Adult women education

An increasing awareness of the significance of adult education in improving home-living in the Somali community has prevailed during the last ten years. Due to such genuine awareness in the Republic of Somalia fairly well-organized centres were established in some parts of the Republic to provide married and unmarried women with the appropriate knowledge and experiences in home economics and home management.

This was the first spark which gave force to prepare Somali women for better citizenship and provide them with the proper training in ways and means to elevate the standard of living in their homes. As the Somali women showed keen interest in learning the fundamentals of home improvement, other centres were established in other parts of the country.

It was found necessary that attention is to be placed upon raising the abilities and skills of the teachers of our women centres so as to be able to impart their knowledge and experiences to their students efficiently.

For this purpose an intensive training programme of six months' duration for in-service teachers in the women adult education centres was implemented last year and this year by UNESCO. In this programme a number of teachers were released from their duties to take part in the studies.

In providing this intensive programme the main target was to provide participants with more skills and abilities in the theoretical subjects as well as with the appropriate practices in sewing, home-crafts, food and nutrition, laundry and home improvement, child care and family planning, and hygiene and sanitation.

### Transition in family

There is little, if any, social transition in Somalia towards the modern nuclear family. Since the large majority of Somalis are yet nomadic, it is necessary to consider both nomadic family units and settled family units:

Nomadic family units are the traditional extended family unit, even though they live in the big towns like Hargeisa or Mogadiscio, and one still is expected to support and give housing to any member of his extended family. Economic survival for the family as a whole demands this and demand is backed up by social and religious customs.

Thus, for economic, religious, and social reasons, the Somali, whether a nomad or a town dweller remains a member of the traditional extended family. As more industry comes to Somalia, this may change. Up to now, no industries there call for a large number of workers, and thus the traditional family unit has not been disturbed.

The question of women's role in the non-transition remains in good measure the same as that of the traditional Muslim. She becomes a member of her husband's extended family unit upon marriage. If she objects to his supporting members of his family, she is, more than likely, asking for a divorce: for it is not a Somali woman's right attitude to be ungenerous to the husband's family. Furthermore, if she objects, she is not only out of his family's good graces, but out of society generally.

The only difference is that the town woman in modern Somalia has a more say in the choice of her husband than her counterpart in the rural area. This will, of course, differ from one girl to another depending on the amount of education she had and correspondingly with the education of the would-be husband.

### Somali women and politics

The Somali women have been at the vanguard of the movements for independence. Many of them lost their lives during the hard struggle against the colonial regimes. They were the spirit that never yielded and which moved men to action.

In recognition to their political conscientiousness the constitution recognized their place in the society. Article 9 of the Constitution stipulates (quotes) "All Citizens, without distinction of race; of national origin; of birth; of language; of sex; of social and economic conditions or opinion are equal in right and in duty before the law".

In this way women enjoy equal political and legal rights and privileges as men. Furthermore, Article No.9 of the constitution, in relation to the right of access of public functions, states "All citizens who satisfy the required regulations of the law have equal rights of access to public function". This law thus prevents any legal discrimination against women.

Furthermore, the labour code of the Somali Republic affords further protection to the position of women in employment. The labour code for instance protects expectant and nursing mothers in that they are given four months' leave during which period they could deliver the child and pass the first period after delivery. Moreover, the nursing mother is also entitled to two working hours off-duty each day for a period of about six months so that she could give care to the child.

Despite this equality before the law, few women play a continuous part in the political life. Many of them do not, since independence, use their right of vote. In the coming general election, however, several women have placed themselves as candidates, for Municipal elections and one is running for a seat in the National Assembly. Though women societies and organizations are now being formed in big towns, the womenfolk have not yet organized themselves effectively.

But as the number of professional and educated women increases, Somali women can look forward to playing a more important role in all fields in the near future.

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