



ALiGN

Advancing Learning and Innovation on Gender Norms

BRIEFING

**Understanding the barriers to girls' and
women's access to higher education in
Puntland, Somalia**

A video and blogging project

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Key messages

- The number of girls enrolled in primary and secondary education globally is higher than ever before, and yet in Somalia large numbers of girls still drop out of secondary schools as a result of discriminatory gender norms. The Somali Institute for Development Research and Analysis (SIDRA) conducted qualitative research – including a video and blogging project – to understand the social, cultural and economic barriers that affect access to higher education for girls and women in Puntland, Somalia in particular.
- Key obstacles were found to include social and cultural practices such as early marriage and female genital mutilation, clan systems and preferential treatment of boys; financial barriers due to privatisation of the education sector and the costs of transportation and equipment; widespread low literacy of parents, particularly among pastoralists and rural communities; poor English language skills; the vulnerability of girls to verbal and physical abuse as they travel to/from school; and a lack of female role models within higher education due to low recruitment levels and limited career progression of female teachers and lecturers, coupled with beliefs that only men should pursue a career within academia.
- The videos and blogs stimulated discussion about young women's entitlement to higher education. Young men participating in the project also began to change their views regarding the potential for young women to become university lecturers and to occupy higher leadership positions within tertiary institutions.
- The focus group discussions and interviews suggest that Somali language, literature and religion are being used to motivate and advocate for girls' and women's empowerment, however acceptance and support by families and the community for girls' education is critical to overcome gender stereotypes and bias.

Introduction

Gender inequality is common in Africa's educational institutions, where cultural, sociological, economic, psychological, historical and political factors play a part (UNESCO, 2015). In Somalia, as in other developing nations, large numbers of girls often drop out of secondary schools as a result of discriminatory gender norms such as early pregnancy, early marriage and the demand for girls' involvement in household work (UN Women, n.d. a).

In Somalia, fewer female than male students progress to secondary and tertiary education. Although comprehensive data on the transition between secondary and post-secondary/university education are scarce, data from Somaliland, Puntland and South Central's Department of Policy and Planning Education Management Information System (EMIS) show that fewer girls enrol in secondary schools compared to primary schools (Puntland Ministry of Education, 2016) and fewer still enrol in tertiary education (see Table 1).

This data also shows that the number of female teachers drops significantly between primary and secondary school in Puntland, from only 14.4% of teachers in primary schools to 3.5% in secondary schools. Female faculty members make up only 9.3% of staff in tertiary institutions (ibid.). Studies for Somalia have shown that women participate in research and knowledge-generation to a lesser extent than their male counterparts (SIDRA, 2017). Globally, stereotype-based cognitive bias negatively impacts women's career advancement in institutions of higher learning, resulting in under-representation of women at the top of institutional leadership hierarchies (Diehl and Dzubinski, 2016).

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) highlights compelling evidence of a correlation between the number of female teachers and girls' enrolment in higher education, especially in sub-Saharan Africa (UNESCO, 2006). In countries where there are equal numbers of male and female primary teachers, there is close to gender parity in student intake. According to the 2018 Global Education Monitoring Report (UNESCO, 2018) the best performing five where there was greater gender parity among male and female primary teachers and in students' enrollment were Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland and Nicaragua. In contrast, in countries where women constitute only 20% of teachers, there are far more boys than girls enrolled in school. The worst performing five where there was much gender disparity in teachers and students were; Yemen, Pakistan, Iraq, Syria and Chad (UNESCO, 2018).

Although transition rates in Puntland dropped between secondary and higher education institutions in 2013/2014, enrolment rates across all educational levels increased in this period. In particular, enrolment of female students in higher education institutions increased from 17.4% in 2013 to 38.8% in 2014, in part due to scholarship programmes that targeted female students as well as increased public awareness of the value of girls' education (SIDRA, 2017). Despite this encouraging finding, however, women still face challenges in standards of equity and access in higher education. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Somalia, gender disparity rapidly increases within the higher grades of primary/secondary education and also in higher education due to domestic work, early marriage, the timing of classes and economic constraints that force many girls to drop out of school early (UNDP-Somalia, 2015). However, it should be noted that women often outperform their male counterparts when it comes to their grades, despite the obstacles that girls and women face.

In many contexts, women are forced to choose between their personal wishes or professional motivations and what is 'expected of them by society'. Equally, institutional structures and cultures often exclude women or create unnecessary boundaries that they perceive as insurmountable (Burke, 2015). While there is an electoral quota in Somalia that establishes that 30% of electoral seats within parliament are reserved for women by law, their voices remain hardly heard and are valued less than their male peers. Largely due to efforts by civil society organisations, women now make up nearly a quarter of all parliamentary

Table 1. Enrolment rates of female students in Somalia

Education level	Somaliland (% female)	Puntland (% female)	South Central (% female)
Primary	45.1	44	44
Secondary	38.8	36	40.5
Tertiary	29	26	31

Source: Ministries of Education of Puntland, Somaliland and the Federal Government of Somalia

seats – the 2017 presidential election saw women’s representation increase from 12% to 24% in the Lower House and to 22% in the Upper House – but the 30% quota has yet to be reached.

To counter gender disparities, stakeholders including the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MOEHE), community members and donors such as UNDP, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the European Union (EU) have developed programmes to revise school curricula and policies. These initiatives aim to address gender discrimination, to advocate for equal access to higher education and to create targeted scholarships, training and information technologies for female students (SIDRA, 2017).

This briefing note examines the social norms that influence access to higher education by young women in Puntland and presents possible solutions for breaking down the barriers. It explores women’s perceptions of and experiences with various forms of gender bias and stereotyping in their academic career and puts forward recommended actions to increase awareness of the benefits of girls’ and women’s education.

Objectives and key research questions

The project used digital tools – especially social media platforms – to explore stereotypes and gender bias in higher education institutions in Puntland. The research was conducted from May to December 2018 under the Advancing Learning and Innovation on Gender Norms (ALIGN) programme supported by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) and implemented by the Somali Institute of Development Research Analysis (SIDRA).

The objective of the project was to examine the gender and cultural norms that govern young women’s access to education and higher education. It explored women’s experiences with confronting various forms of gender bias and stereotyping in their academic careers, asking 1) what are the barriers to promoting or achieving girls’ higher education in Puntland? 2) how can these barriers be overcome? 3) what would the situation look like if such barriers are reduced?

Data collection

This briefing note draws on three sources of data, which are described briefly below:

1. Focus group discussions and key informant interviews in Puntland
2. An online community of practice (CoP) set up by SIDRA
3. A film and blogging project among young men and women.

A qualitative case study to discuss stereotypes and gender biases in higher education

Data was collected using focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth key informant interviews (KIIs) in Puntland in July 2018. A total of 50 informants (6 males and 44 females) participated in the study from 5 academic institutions (Table 2).

An online CoP for women to share personal experiences on gender stereotypes and norms

SIDRA collaborated with members of the Puntland Women Writers’ Association (PWWA), which has a diverse female constituency and therefore provided a good platform to investigate gender stereotyping and norms. A total of 50 women participated in the discussions, including lecturers, students, employed and unemployed women aged 25-50 years old.

Table 2. Study participants

	Number of participants	Gender	Institutions
FGD			
University staff	10	4 females, 6 males	Puntland State University (PSU) University of Bosaso (UoB) East Africa University (EAU)
Secondary students	20	All female	Al Nawawi, Al Waha Secondary Schools
University students	15	All female	PSU, EAU, UoB
KII			
Interviewees	5	All female	PSU, EAU, UoB
Total	50		

By partnering with PWWA, SIDRA was able to join an existing CoP platform and be guided by long-term members to discuss issues around gender-based discrimination. The results of this CoP informed an awareness-raising workshop for secondary and university students which was facilitated by SIDRA.

Social media training to communicate around gender stereotypes

Twenty young men and women aged 18 to 27 years were trained in the use of social media and communication technology to design, create and disseminate messages reflecting their personal experiences and societal norms/stereotypes on gender.

Participants were selected from PSU, EAU, UoB and the Royal University of Business and Technology (RUBT). Individuals participated in a two-week training course in filming and blogging in order to share with the public any negative gender norms and their effects on girls/women in higher education. On completion of the training the participants were divided into four groups, each of which chose a theme for their video production from *marriage and education*, *equity and education*, *challenges during and after education* and *security and education* (Box 1). SIDRA also set up a WordPress site for participants to publish blogs on their chosen topic as well as on the challenges faced by women and girls in universities and on gender norms within these institutions and society in general.

Data from all three sources were analysed, grouped and categorised into the sub-themes described below.



Image 1: Community of Practice: Young ladies discussing the gender stereotypical challenges they face in academia

Box 1: Summary of videos and blogging

1. Short videos

Ten young women and ten young men formed four groups and were trained in eight stages of video production, including: ideation, story-boarding, script-writing, finding locations, obtaining resources, lighting, shooting, and production and editing. Eventually four short videos were produced. By attracting public attention via social media, films and blogs provide innovative ways of bringing about change on sensitive issues such as gender norms and addressing particular problems in Somalia. Youths are very active on social media platforms and therefore awareness can easily be raised throughout websites and social media networks. The videos discussed the following subjects:

Marriage and education:

This video captured the story of a girl who wants to pursue education, but unfortunately she is married off by her family. Her new husband initially promises that she can continue studying, but things change when she becomes responsible for certain domestic activities. The video was intended to communicate to parents and husbands the importance of allowing girls to pursue education, whether they are married or not.

Equity and education:

This is the story of two siblings – male and female – who finished secondary school at the same time. Both want to go to university, however the parents choose the boy. They advise the girl to settle down as she has already studied enough. The purpose was to encourage equal opportunities for education for both boys and girls.

Challenges during and after education:

This video discusses the challenges that girls and women face during and after studying. This includes lack of support from society, negative perceptions around the type of subjects that are appropriate for girls to study (e.g. midwifery and pharmacology for girls versus engineering and information technology for boys), beliefs that girls/women shouldn't stand out or be heard, and that girls' or women's households will be neglected if they work. The message from the video is that females need both moral and financial support to continue their studies.

Security and education:

This video discusses the fact that many Somalis, especially in the south, are targeted by terrorists for their beliefs, work or studies. While this does not occur much in Garowe-Puntland state, insecurity still exists in the form of young male unemployment and criminality. This, in part, prevents some girls from going to school or universities at night as they are afraid of being subject to violence.

2. Blogs:

Participants were taught how to reach an audience, communication techniques used by well-known Somali and international writers, and the importance of choosing the right topic for blogs. The trainings were held in Somali, since participants were not fully proficient in writing in English. The groups focused on the challenges faced by women in universities and gender-norm obstacles. The blogs explored the financial constraints and limited scholarships that prevent students from joining higher education institutions as well as the cultural barriers that hinder girls who finish university from becoming lecturers. Other blogs discussed the fact that female students are not voted for as departmental leaders and therefore their voices cannot be heard, and that girls who wish to study abroad receive less support from their families than male siblings or relatives.

Analysis : barriers to higher education

In general, girls and women in Somalia face considerable cultural challenges and economic barriers that prevent equal participation in society. These obstacles affect their daily lives in terms of access to formal education as well as their long-term prospects for future jobs and career paths. UNDP-Somalia (2014), amongst other international agencies, has identified four main challenges and barriers regarding gender equality in Somalia:

- participation and representation of women in politics, peace-building and decision-making
- the role and the status of women in the economic sphere
- gender-based violence (GBV) and harmful traditional practices
- legal and policy frameworks in line with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Maputo Protocol and United Nations Security Council Resolutions.

UN Women (n.d. b) highlights:

The women of Somalia bear an unequal brunt of the hardships occasioned by poverty, conflict and clan-based culture which promote strict male hierarchy and authority. This is further exacerbated by religious and cultural limitations on the role and status of women in Somali society [...]. Somalia has extremely high rates of maternal mortality, rape, cases of female genital mutilation, violence against women and child marriage. Women's access to justice is restricted both within the formal, clan-based and sharia-based judicial systems. Women face limited access to economic resources and assets. This is compounded by women's low participation in politics and decision-making spheres.

Studies indicate that barriers to girls' education are not limited to higher education but can be found throughout the education system in Somalia (Heritage, 2013). According to UNDP-Somalia (2015) data for Puntland, girls are poorly represented in school enrolment rates throughout the state – Ministry of Education statistics from 2010 indicate that 37% of primary school children were girls, in comparison to 63% boys. While reliable statistics are almost non-existent, the police recorded 223 rape cases in the same year.

The Puntland Constitution (2009) includes Article 32 on equality in access to education and states that the government shall develop a policy on female education. The Puntland Education Policy Paper (PEPP) articulates this commitment to the principle of education for all irrespective of sex, clan or class, and emphasizes its support to girls and IDP children, pastoralists and nomadic families, children with disabilities/special needs and children of the marginalized populations through affirmative actions. However, families still offer girls 'restricted' access to higher education, limiting their choice of where or which course to study. Consequently, girls are restricted to studying those subjects or curricula that correspond with 'what is expected' from a girl/woman and that conform with societal gender norms. Specifically, politics, engineering and information technology are not considered suitable for girls; whereas midwifery, medicine, pharmacology and health studies are considered unsuitable for boys. These are the professions that female graduates will be hired into following graduation.

Our findings in Puntland reflect UNICEF's (n.d.) summary of the key obstacles to education that girls face in Somaliland:

Girls' participation in education is consistently lower than that for boys. [...]. The low availability of sanitation facilities (especially separate latrines for girls), a lack of female teachers (less than 20 per cent of primary-school teachers in Somalia are women), safety concerns and social norms that favour boys' education are cited as factors inhibiting parents from enrolling their daughters in school.

Cultural and socioeconomic dynamics

Although there are some positive perceptions about the benefits of education for girls and women, certain socio-cultural beliefs and practices outweigh these (Abdi et al., 2009). There was a consensus among FGD and CoP participants that men



Image 2: Male and female lecturers engaged in a focus group discussion about gender norms and stereotypes in academia

and women are not given equal opportunities, particularly after finishing secondary school. This was attributed to cultural norms, parents'/guardians' low level of education and challenging economic situations which often lead to preferential investment in boys. Although discussions through the CoP showed that women are benefiting from the expansion of educational opportunities, this does not mean equal and full participation.

Key informants and CoP participants identified the following key barriers to higher education for women, most of which relate to discriminatory gender norms:

- i. **Early marriage**, for which the consequence is confinement to be a housewife with diminished prospects of ever continuing with studies.

'...The regular Somali family here in Garowe does not earn a lot of income, so a girl wants to "reduce the burden on her family"... She wants her own home...after she gets pregnant it becomes even harder for her to go back to school...Men do not accept leaving their kids under someone else's care...' FGD participant.

According to the organisation Girls not Brides (n.d.), the most recent available data from 2006 shows that 45% of girls in Somalia were married before their 18th birthday and 8% were married before the age of 15. In fact, UNICEF (2016a) concluded that Somalia had the tenth highest prevalence rate of child marriage in the world in 2016.

Participants in the film component of our study suggested that some girls marry young after being promised an opportunity to continue their education, but their husbands changed their minds after the wedding or in some cases his family denied permission to continue her schooling. The women in the CoP group believed that this treatment has an impact on women's self-image and capabilities, and that it explains the limited number of married women in universities.

- ii. **The perception that a woman's only role is being a wife and in charge of her home:** Social perceptions hold that the role of a woman is to get married. Men prefer uneducated girls since they are presumed to be submissive and thus 'good wives'. Additionally, investing in the education of a girl child is regarded as a poor decision with no expected returns, since girls will 'end up getting married'.

'My elder sister was married off when she was still in primary school because my father did not want to pay school fees claiming it was a waste of time to pay fees for a girl.' Interview participant.

Similar findings emerged from the CoP, where participants highlighted the conflict between domestic responsibilities and education/work, as well as cultural perceptions that women are lazy and inferior. CoP participants concluded that

women should stay at home to do chores and provide childcare. They referred to these negative beliefs as a 'community mindset', which sees every girl as only a housewife and imposes corresponding social expectations upon them¹. This was identified as one of the major barriers to girls' education and probably the hardest issue to address. However, some participants acknowledged that attitudes are beginning to change in urban areas where more girls can be seen in universities and work places².

- iii. **Financial barriers:** Increasingly, the secondary and higher education sector in Puntland is dominated by privately owned universities and secondary schools, which locks out many who are otherwise willing to educate their children (Heritage Institute for Policy Studies (2013). Public institutions also charge relatively high fees. Most parents/caregivers cannot afford fees, transportation, textbooks and stationery and those facing economic difficulties often prefer to send their sons to school.

'My father refused to pay my school fees claiming it was a waste of money. I sat home until my maternal uncle sympathized and started paying fees for me.' CoP participant.

To address the challenge of fees, some organisations like UNDP sponsor female students who are bright but come from financially constrained households. According to participants, financial barriers are inter-linked with cultural barriers. For example, there is a preference for boys' education since families do not have enough financial resources to pay for every household member to attend school.

- iv. **Harmful traditional practices and low literacy:** Pastoralists and communities in rural areas are often most reluctant to send girls to school. This attitude stems from the low literacy levels within these communities and the poor distribution of schools in rural areas, as well as deep-rooted, harmful traditional practices and beliefs.

One of the main reasons for the disparity in girls' education in Somalia is due to the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM). According to UNICEF (2016b), about 98% of Somali girls have undergone some form of FGM, which typically takes place when they are aged between 15 and 49 years of age³. These acts are often performed in unhygienic conditions by informal health practitioners who have no training (Ajiambo, 2018). After a girl undergoes FGM, the aftereffects of debilitating scarring and infections – along with the possibility of early marriage – results in the withdrawal of thousands of girls from primary school. In turn, this leads to perpetual low literacy rates amongst adult and elderly women in these communities.

According to the participants in the blog/film group, the inequity in education levels between men and women in rural and urban areas leads to a negative spiral of wider inequity. Hence, one of the groups created a video addressing the relationship between equity and education.

- v. **A lack of role models or support systems:** due to the lack of or few female lecturers in higher education institutions, most girls do not pursue careers in academia as they believe it is a man's job. The three study groups mentioned the lack of role models as a strong deterrent to young women with ambitions to pursue positions within universities.

The blog group's post on the lack of female representation among lecturers in universities highlighted the effects this has on female students. For example, girls do not dare to talk in the classroom, to participate in debates or to run for leadership in student bodies. Discussions amongst the CoP group elaborated on the importance of access to networks, suggesting that men are part of networks that support their career development and provide opportunities to develop academically. The CoP group referred to the absence of a support system and network for working women with families.

1 A similar study in South and Central Somalia found that 'one common perception is the view that educating girls will not benefit their families since they will be married [at an early age] and their education will not benefit others. Additionally, there is a persistent perception that girls' education is insignificant due to socially constructed gender roles that require women to be housewives and housekeepers' (INTERSOS and European Commission, 2016: 23).

2 Although education problems exist in both rural and urban areas of Somalia, access to education in rural regions is even more limited. Nomadic pastoralists account for about 65% of the Somali population, and only 22% of pastoralist children receive a formal education – with less than half of these being girls (The Borgen Project, 2018).

3 See <https://www.un.org/en/events/femalegenitalmutilationday/>

- vi. **A clan system and no opportunities for women to move up the academic ladder:** The clan system and preference for boys affects women's ambitions to pursue careers in higher education once they have graduated from university, as does the belief that teaching at university is a man's job. In addition, the elderly community leaders discriminate against girls when asked to recommend people for jobs and scholarship opportunities. They tend to give the chance to boys and men because they are perceived as bringing more benefits to the community than girls.

Biased selection in the labour market and scholarship opportunities based on tribal/clan systems lock girls and women out of academia and other decision-making positions. Women are rarely included in this division of power and therefore are not eligible for political positions or as civil servants. Such attitudes cause young women to lose interest in studying in higher education.

Discussions in the CoP revealed that women face new challenges in higher education, including: women being able to attain university education but being unable to occupy higher professional positions; lack of proper and transparent systems and networks for securing jobs since most positions are allocated through clan affiliations in all sectors, including into universities; and also lack of flexible working/study hours which affects women who prefer to work/study in the evening due to fears of being kidnapped or raped.

'Getting a promotion here at our university is a tug of war. I wanted to contest as a Faculty Dean in our University, but the vacancy was preferably reserved for men.' Study participant

'I and two of my friends tried to apply to become tellers at one of the banks here in Puntland but we were rejected because women are lazy. It was openly said to us that we had less chances of getting the jobs.' Study participant

- vii. **Insecurity:** Girls are more vulnerable to verbal and sexual abuse on their way to or from university, which reinforces the cultural belief that girls are 'safe' at home, and therefore should not study/work. One video/blog group reflected upon the opportunities offered to young people to study in foreign countries. The data shows that most parents discourage their daughters from studying abroad, even when they are offered scholarships, due to fears for their safety.

'I study at Puntland State University and at the same time I am working. My classes are in the evening at 5:00pm but we have to move in a group. When I know my friends will not come to class that day, I go straight home after work and hence miss class. There are many men targeting us. Some want to rape us while others want to steal our phones and the little money we use for transport' CoP participant.

Family support or lack of it plays an important role in whether a woman pursues higher education or not. Additionally, another 'risk' for women's safety is the lack of amenities for women such as female-friendly toilets in universities and other sanitary facilities.

- viii. **Language:** Poor English language skills are increasingly becoming a barrier since many schools are adopting English as the language of instruction. Since boys have more freedom in the public sphere and girls are restricted to their homes, women tend to use mainly Somali language even though it is regarded as less prestigious. Often women do not have the opportunity to improve their English language skills.

According to informants in the FGD, poor English language skills are associated with cultural restrictions on women to circulate in public spaces, lack of access to higher learning where English is taught and widespread poverty as many of the high schools offering English as a medium of instruction are privately owned and thereby costly. When there is limited finance for fees, boys are prioritised over girls in most cases, which contributes to boys mastering English language over girls.

Barriers in the transition from student to lecturer

The transition by women from student to lecturer (or another career path in higher education institutions) is often more difficult than for men. While the barriers faced by female students in accessing quality higher education are many, they increase further once women complete their studies and seek employment in higher education institutions. Indeed, women



Image 3: Male lecturers giving advice to the CoP on navigating challenges faced by female students in Puntland

often lag behind men in terms of career progression in higher education since they experience personal, organisational and social constraints (Durowaiye, 2017).

Gradually but steadily, however, a few Somali women are overcoming obstacles to become lecturers in universities or managers in secondary schools. As evidenced below, the increased visibility of female staff in higher education institutions is welcomed by students:

‘...We remember a time where we had no female lecturers, now we can see them more and more, the lecturers are feeling comfortable, their confidence building up...’ Interview participant.

According to informants, universities with male-dominated leadership – especially those led by religious/conservative men – often employ the fewest female lecturers while ‘liberal’ universities employ more. Negative stereotypes, attitudes and perceptions held by students regarding female lecturers also hinder women from pursuing a career in higher education institutions. Some informants reported that female lecturers are meaner than their male counterparts and that they are perceived to possess limited knowledge. Both male and female students often challenge their female lecturers and if they do not meet ‘expectations’, students will then ask the management for a particular female lecturer to be replaced. Male lecturers are not questioned to the same degree as female professionals.

Female lecturers should be encouraged, should have their capacity developed and should be motivated in order to overcome professional barriers resulting from gender bias and stereotypes. These lecturers will be role models, and their success stories will inspire young lecturers or students not to give up. By way of illustration, a participant shared an inspiring story of a female head of secondary school during the study:

‘... A female head of Sheikh Osman School who has improved infrastructure, discipline, and managed to produce more A- students, faced a lot of challenges from the students at first but finally they respected her...she is now adored by the students and is a role model in the community...a symbol that barriers can be broken...’ Interview participant.

(Mis)Interpretation of religious scriptures

Religion plays a central role in the daily lives of Somalis. Citations from the Qur’an are often used to discourage – and even motivate decisions to prevent – women from acquiring an education. According to informants, many girls are told that Islam commands women to stay in their houses.

There was consensus among informants that the challenge lies in the (mis)interpretation of religious scriptures to justify negative cultural practices and beliefs and to promote gender bias and stereotypes related to education of the girl child. However, one of the participants refuted this assumption:

‘In the Qur’an it says; “The first surah that came was Iqra’ and it translates to “O Beloved! Read with the Name of Allah, who has created (everything)”. It did not say, “Oh man read!” [Holy Qur’an]. The emphasis laid on the importance of acquisition of knowledge, in the above verse, surpasses any statement or action denying girls the right to education.’

The informants discussed numerous examples of other verses from the Qur’an and *hadith* of the Prophet to illustrate that Islam promoted girls’ education.

Religion can be used as a tool for advocacy and social mobilisation therefore, with *Imam* and *madrassa* teachers reportedly being utilised to disseminate positive messages in support of girls’ education and women’s employment. Likewise, the pulpit can be a platform for questioning misconceptions and for disseminating alternative views of Islamic beliefs and traditions. Educated women are rejecting such misinterpretations and, as more women master the Qur’an and study Sharia law at universities, there is increased public awareness on where religion stands on this issue.

Gender-based violence in learning institutions

GBV is the most extreme expression of unequal gender relations in society and one of the most widespread violations of human rights. While GBV disproportionately affects women and girls, it also affects men and boys. These abuses take place all over the world in homes, schools, work-places and communities. But GBV is preventable and educational institutions can play a central role in ending such violations (Sida, 2015).

School-related GBV (SRGBV) affects girls and boys across the globe, manifested in physical, sexual and psychological acts of violence, and underpinned by norms, stereotypes, inequalities and exclusion (UNESCO, n.d.). According to the United Nations Girls’ Education Initiative (UNGEI), interventions have often been short-term, involving single inputs rather than multi-level interventions, and often address one kind of violence such as corporal punishment without recognising shifting, deep-rooted norms around gender, sexuality and childhood (Parkes, 2015).

According to study informants, the most common form of GBV in Puntland in higher education institutions is verbal abuse, which is especially directed towards young girls. The way that girls dress shapes how they are treated: for example, if they dress in western-style fashion – outside the accepted style of clothing for girls – this is perceived as immoral.

Sexual harassment in schools and higher education institutions is increasing in African countries, and the victims often do not have a voice. In such circumstances, there is a clear imbalance in power as perpetrators exercise authority over their victims (Wafula, 2017). The culture and practice of customary law often exacerbate the powerlessness of victims, as illustrated by an example given of teachers marrying their students (FGD participant).

There is a need for targeted action in the classroom, by teachers and throughout the school environment to prevent GBV. Community members including parents, teachers, education officials and religious leaders should be sensitised regarding the prevention of GBV, with the first step being to encourage communities to start talking about it. Silencing victims, suppressing the problem, and/or living in denial are not the solution.

Breaking the barriers: recommendations for action

More people are becoming aware of the importance and benefits of educating girls. Our informants described how previously girls’ education and women’s empowerment initiatives were rejected as they were regarded as foreign and as Western

interventions. However, this attitude is rapidly changing to the extent that Somali language, literature and religion are being used as vehicles to motivate and advocate for girls' and women's empowerment. A common proverb used in the country now is: '*Hooyo wax baratay waa bulsho wax baratay*' (an educated mother is an educated society). Repeatedly referred to by informants, this saying points to the significance of educating the girl and the dividends that this brings to society at large.

Acceptance and support by families and the community for girls' education is a critical step towards overcoming stereotypes and gender bias (UNDP-Somalia, 2014). But this requires a multi-phased and multi-stakeholder approach.

At societal and cultural level:

- Government ministries and organisations working in the education sector should conduct sensitisation forums to counter and demystify gender stereotypes and misconceptions, using interpersonal/group communication channels.
- Government ministries, universities and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) should disseminate success stories of girls who have defied the odds to succeed in higher education as students or lecturers.
- State and non-state actors should provide different types of support to women who want to pursue higher education or to work therein. Material support could include scholarships, transportation and other financial aid. Providing day-care services for young mothers who want to pursue a career in academia is also important⁴. Communities could mobilise self-help groups and with the help of government and NGOs could raise the resources needed to support women.
- Government and development-partner programmes should provide livelihood support to vulnerable families, i.e. micro-credit programmes and skills training, in order to ensure that they are able to afford the educational costs for all children in the household, not just boys. For example, loans could be conditionally attached to the enrolment and/or performance of girls or young women in higher education. This is already being done by NGOs, but the community and the private banking sector should also get involved to ensure sustainability.

At the community level:

- Organisations like SIDRA and civil society organisations should initiate sustained dialogues with religious leaders, community elders, politicians and students in both schools and universities to counter gender bias and stereotypes in higher education.
- The government, local communities and NGOs should send out clear messages against religious 'misinterpretations' to enhance the credibility and acceptance of new gender norms and to help change perceptions and attitudes around girls' and women's education.
- Local authorities and community members should improve safety at and on the way to and from school by promoting safe and violence-free environments. This will require improvements to infrastructure such as transportation, separate sanitation facilities and improved lighting.

At schools and universities:

Universities and the government (through the Minister of Education) should lead on the following actions – several of which have already been implemented successfully in other countries (e.g. scholarships for girls)⁵

- Building the confidence of female students by including them in extracurricular activities and mentorship programmes.
- Establishing financial aid programmes (scholarships, transportation, other school fees, etc.) where only women studying or planning to study at higher education institutions will be eligible to apply.
- Providing safe environments on buses to schools and universities.
- Organising events through parents' associations that aim to sensitise parents to the importance of education of the girl child and prevention of GBV etc.
- Providing gender-sensitivity trainings for lecturers and school administrators.

⁴ In Puntland, there is no early childhood education system – nursery-level children attend Qur'anic classes and are introduced into the education system at primary level.

⁵ See, for example, the evaluation of the Girls Education Challenge (GEC) Fund <https://socialimpact.com/works-improve-girls-education-somalia/>

- Fostering female-friendly spaces by ensuring that schools have separate girls' bathrooms and water facilities. Sanitary kits should also be provided for girls.

More specifically, in order to tackle GBV in educational institutions, the following actions are recommended (Sida, 2015):

- Training teachers on how to use gender-responsive pedagogies in the classroom to raise awareness of gender stereotypes within education.
- Promoting the development and implementation of school policies and action plans on how to address all type of violence, including GBV, to specifically foster a safe and discrimination-free school.
- Creating a gender-aware counselling system that gives effective support to victims/survivors of GBV by training relevant staff.

At the government level:

- Comprehensively incorporating gender mainstreaming and other cross-cutting issues into higher education policies and curricula so both male and female students are aware of gender inequality in education opportunities and to curb the negative beliefs around the inferiority of girls.
- Recruiting female teachers at different levels of education (primary, intermediate and secondary schools) to serve as role models for female students and to create an enabling learning environment for girls in schools.
- Reviewing curriculum materials to ensure that textbooks and examinations are gender-sensitive in terms of the language, images and examples used.
- Adopting codes of conduct in universities to curb sexual and physical harassment of female students and professionals.
- Supporting self-help women's groups on campus for female students and professionals.
- Introducing a pre-university English language course for six months or one year at an affordable rate that targets women. This would increase girls' access to higher education institutions that request high-level language skills.

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About ALIGN

ALIGN is a four-year project aimed at establishing a digital platform for the Community of Practice (CoP) centred on gendered norms affecting adolescents and young adults. Project ALIGN seeks to advance understanding and challenge and change harmful gender norms by connecting a global community of researchers and thought leaders committed to gender justice and equality for adolescents and young adults. Through the sharing of information and the facilitation of mutual learning, ALIGN aims to ensure knowledge on norm change contributes to sustainable gender justice.

ALIGN's Research Fund

ALIGN's Research Fund supports small-scale action research or research translation projects which advance knowledge and evidence on gender norms across a wide range of contexts.

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