



## The Voices of Somali Women Conference

### Concluding Report

The “**Voices of Somali Women**” conference held on February 23, 2013 laid the foundation for an ongoing discussion regarding the many important roles of Somali women and the struggles they endure to have their voices heard. Honored guests spoke on sensitive topics such as gender equality, political inclusion, clan power sharing, single motherhood, rape, suppressed media coverage and the importance of sound Islamic doctrine. The conference, led by the **Somalia Strategy Forum (SSF)** consisted of 4 keynote speakers, three of whom were Somali-born women.

**Mrs. Ladan Osman**, Contributing Spokesperson for the Somalia Strategy Forum (SSF), welcomed participants and attendees traveling in from all parts of the country. Her warm and welcoming introduction of each speaker help set the tone for an impassioned conference that provided a rare look inside the complexities of Somali culture and governance.

**Mr. Yusuf Maalin**, Executive Director of the Somalia Strategy Forum (SSF), addressed the audience by welcoming everyone and expressed his support for the empowerment of Somali women. He recognized their vital role in the stability of Somalia’s future and stated “**Empowering Somali women is the key to building a better future. What is good for women is good for all.**”



## Speaker Presentations:



**Dr. Lynette A Jackson** is an Associate Professor of Gender and Women's Studies and African American Studies. She is also the Executive Director of International Affairs at UIC.

Dr Jackson opened her speech by drawing from personal experiences during her time spent in Zimbabwe. She was able to illustrate parallel issues that affect the Somali women of today. She said "I want to make the point that women are not always victims, in fact they are more than victims." She recalled a slogan from a parade she attended that lifted up the memory of women who were victimized by sexual assault. It read "We don't need protection, we

demand respect."

Her research has taken her into exploring the convergence of factors and processes that focus on the NOW. She believes that addressing the marginalization of women is a key element in the struggle of liberating their voice. She called on Somalia to wage a non-violent war against itself in order to correct its injustices. She stated that "Without freedom and justice there is no sustainable peace." She believes strongly in the Somali Diaspora and its powerful constancy in the political & economic makeup of the country.



**Mrs. Fowsia Abdulkadir** serves as a Policy Analyst at the Public Health Agency of Canada, and is a PhD Candidate at Carleton University's School of Canadian Studies in Ottawa, Canada. Her personal research has been on subjects of black feminist thought and gender based analysis.

Her main focus of the evening was the "Role of Women in Rebuilding Somalia."

She believes that the multiple roles of Somali women must go beyond the traditional family makeup.

She was very moved by the topic of the conference and shared a deep passion for finding the hidden voice within Somali women. She believes that by awakening the spirit of Somali women a positive transformation can occur.

She expressed how Somali women have demonstrated their activity economically and through family influence, but have been marginalized politically. She said "Somali women are not lacking agency, they are lacking inclusion at the political table." She explained how women historically have been responsible for connecting communities beyond their many differences in order to find resolution. She also acknowledged the need to define institutions in order to understand their positive and negative impact on society. "Politicizing clan power is dangerous for society" she said. In short, clan power sharing has traditionally been the responsibility of Somali men, resulting in the neglected voices of Somali women.



**Dr. Hodan Said Isse** is the Adjunct Assistant Professor in the finance & Managerial Economic Department at University of Buffalo School of Management. Dr. Isse is also the wife of former Somali Prime Minister Dr. Abdiweli Mohamad Ali.

Dr. Isse made a strong case against the current state of family values in Somalia. She explained how over the past 20 years values have drastically diminished in the country and throughout the Diaspora.

Civil war and fractions of society have contributed to the plight of Somali women, but she insisted that “Somali women are the backbone and glue holding society together.”

She also called for a rehabilitation of Somali men. She shared that Somali women do not want to replace the position men have in society, but rather support and strengthen their position according to sound Islamic doctrine.

Dr. Isse pointed out the customary views of Somali women:

- Women do not assume positions in clans due to marriages outside of their own clan
- Women do not have a fighting capacity due to non-ownership of weapons
- Women have no ownership in property
- Women do not contribute to blood compensation

She highlighted major factors that negatively impact Somali women:

- Somali Customary Law and proliferation of clan assembly
- Somali clan misrepresentation
- Somali identity controlled by male dominance
- No legal institutions supporting Somali Women
- Proliferation of single motherhood
- Poor media coverage of rape cases affecting Somali women

Lastly Dr. Isse provided possible solutions to empower Somali women:

- Targeted Gender Policy
- Change in social conditioning
- Combating the misinterpretation of Islamic doctrine
- Accountable policies and government
- Fighting the myth of customary law

In closing Dr. Isse stated that “Women are powerful, they deliver babies, but they also deliver profits as well for economic development.” She believes that Somali women are the promise that will help revitalize their country and themselves.



**Ms. Halima Abdirazak** studied at the University of Phoenix and is currently CEO of Midnimo MedicalTransportation.

Ms. Abdirazak spoke passionately about education and its vital importance in empowering Somali women. She shared how, before the civil war, education was a high priority. She stated “women took a great role for educating the people of Somalia, but despite the admiration and respect bestowed upon the Somali woman, their ambition to obtain certain status within society and the education establishment was met with resistance and became a source of struggle.”

She explained how decades of war destroyed Somalia’s educational system, but did not dampen women’s interest in seeking an education and better way of life. She said “Things are slightly better now with the resurgence in understanding that the education of Somalia’s girls is integral to the nation’s health and prosperity.”

Ms. Abdirazak shared her deep appreciation for being able to participate in the “Voices of Somali Women” conference and said “I’m very grateful to take part in this event. As a Somali woman, I understand the important roles Somali women play in the family. We are administrators, the family accountants and family enforcers for what is right.”

**At the conclusion of the conference, the speakers engaged the audience for a short Q&A session. They also emphasized the importance of a continued dialogue and awareness of women’s rights and empowerment. Members of the audience shared how they were left better informed, inspired and motivated to continue in efforts of support for Somali women.**