Implementing the women, peace and security agenda? Somali debates on women's public role and political participation

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In conflict and post-conflict settings, the international community operates with a Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. One of its aims is to increase women's political participation, where an underlying assumption is that increased participation leads to more inclusive societies and more sustainable peace. During and after war, gender roles are often deeply contested as part of larger societal transformations and uncertainties. In Somalia since the 1960s, gender roles and expectations have undergone substantial changes, influenced by the political system of the time, the women's movement, civil war and religious transformations. The international community's role in these societal transformations should not be over-estimated. Research with Somali women shows that debates on women's roles in public spheres are taking place irrespective of the women's empowerment agenda from abroad, and that Somali women have at least since the 1960s had public and civic leadership roles. Furthermore, the 'international' and 'local' are difficult to disentangle. The Somali female elite has often spent years abroad and introduced new gender perspectives from places as divergent as Egypt, Russia and the United States. Global cultural and religious trends are influencing post-war Somalia, Somaliland and Puntland. In this complex socio-cultural landscape, the international focus on women's political participation can support but also risk delegitimizing 'local' processes and perspectives. Rather than discussing the implementation of an international normative agenda, it would be more fruitful to understand local debates on women's public roles in post-conflict contexts.