

Somalian lady praised for staunch outreach

By Jeppe Hirsland Wohlert
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NEW YORK (NNPA) - Hawa Aden Mohamed was only eight when she experienced the brutal pain of circumcision. Performed in a small Somali village, the operation was carried out without anesthesia, using only basic cutting tools and thorns.

The practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) cost her sister's life and nearly took Hawa's own as her wounds did not heal properly. Today, she is at the front line of a decade-long and bitter fight for women's rights in Somalia.

Her sister's death along with her own experience triggered Hawa's involvement in the women's rights movement. The frustration over circumcision turned into anger at the patriarchic Somali society, which considers the voice of women worthless.

"The Somali woman has no say in political decisions. She has no say in family decisions. Recently, for the first time, we elected one female minister to the Somali Puntland State, and one in the federal government," she said.

"But this is just tokenism. It is not enough," concluded the 56-year-old Hawa, who sat down for an interview on her way to Texas, where she is receiving the Amnesty International Ginetta Sagan Award on Friday for her outstanding work for women's rights in Somalia.

BET

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enhance our delivery of that product in a way that's more engaging," he said in a statement.

"By no means is this a lessening of our news commitment, but instead an improvement of our overall news offering."

What BET officials are calling a "new approach" is actually an old one that BET used in the 1990.

BET viewers see the new format, set to start this summer, as a continued dismantling of substantive programs for Black viewers that started with the cutting of "Lead Story," "BET Tonight" and "Teen Summit," all in late 2002.

BET Nightly News was the last major news source to leave the station since BET was purchased by Viacom, one of the largest global media empires, in 2000.

The award recognizes the outstanding achievement of women who — often at great personal risk — are working to protect the liberty and lives of women and children in areas where human rights violations are widespread.

Hawa Mohamed is the founder and executive director of the Galkayo Education Centre for Peace and Development (GECPD), an organization committed to eradicating FGM and strengthening women's political influence through human rights and literacy campaigns that have reached more than 7,600 women since 1999.

The GECPD aims at improving women's capacity to defend and advocate their rights in society, starting with the family.

An estimated 135 million girls and women have undergone genital mutilation, and two million girls a year are at risk for it. FGM is practiced extensively in Africa and is common in some countries in the Middle East.

FGM can lead to death from the pain, shock, hemorrhage and damage to the organs surrounding the clitoris and labia. Afterwards, urine may be retained and serious infection can develop. Use of the same instrument on several girls without sterilization can cause the spread of HIV.

Despite the horrors of the ritual, Hawa believes the subject is still too much of a taboo to be debated openly in the country.

"I don't see FGM stop-

ping in my lifetime," she says. "We have to change the mentality of people, and the change has to come from the family. There are educated parents who discuss FGM. If they decide not to have their daughters circumcised, we advise them not to tell other people, who might not respect the decision."

The Somali women's rights movement started in the late 1970s but was impeded by the civil war in 1991.

"It was set back 40 years in time," maintains Hawa, who fled the war to Canada, where she continued lobbying for women in Somalia before returning and founding the GECPD in 1996. By then there were no longer

signs of public debate and awareness of women's rights in a country troubled by killings and the power politics of local warlords.

Civil war still plagues parts of Somalia, making it very hard to travel around. Although the women's rights movement has spread beyond Puntland, it is difficult to coordinate the struggle on a national scale.

Religious justification of female circumcision is common in Somalia, but Hawa argues that the practice of circumcision is not found in the Koran, but in the nation's culture and tradition. She continues to educate religious teachers about the dangers of FGM and has managed to establish dialogue

with a few.

"In the beginning, the work at GECPD was very difficult. FGM was taboo. People did not want to talk and threw rocks at us and the buildings we worked in. Today, at least, we are able to create some debate about Somali traditions."

Last year, the GECPD launched a more visible and confrontational women's rights movement in Somalia. With Hawa Mohammed as one of the key figures, the GECPD managed to organize and coordinate the unprecedented "Zero Tolerance For FGM" demonstration on International Women's Day, Mar. 8.

"We were scared. But we had no choice. We'd dis-

cussed women's rights for years. Activists were asking, what next? We'd exhausted the talking," says Hawa about the demonstration, which drew more than 20,000 people — including the Puntland vice president and five cabinet ministers.

The demonstration passed peacefully and raised awareness about the dangers of FGM among the people of Puntland.

"The demonstration created debate, a debate which is still going on today. And dialogue at least brings new questions," says Hawa.

More than 98 percent of Somali women have suffered genital mutilation, according to Equality Now, the New
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Report: Child deaths high in poor nations

WASHINGTON (AP) - Almost 11 million children in developing countries die each year before the age of 5, most of them from causes that are preventable in wealthier countries, the World Bank said in a report released Sunday.

The causes include acute respiratory infection, diarrhea, measles and malaria, which together account for 48 percent of child deaths in the developing world, according to the report called World Development Indicators.

"Rapid improvement before 1990 gave hope that mortality rates for infants and children would be cut by two-thirds in the following 25 years," the report said. "But progress slowed almost everywhere in the 1990s."

The report said only 33 countries are on track to reach the 2015 goal of reducing child mortality rates by two-thirds from its 1990 levels. It said only two regions — Latin America and the Caribbean and Europe and Central Asia — may be on track to achieve the target.

Five years ago world leaders outlined a number of development objectives, formally known as the Millennium Development Goals, to achieve by 2015. They include boosting primary school enrollments, removing obstacles to greater numbers of girls going to school and improving health care.

Many countries have made progress toward achieving the goals, but Francois Bourguignon, the bank's chief economist, said: "I must admit many countries are off track and a huge effort is needed" to help them progress toward the 2015 goals. Some nations are more behind schedule than others, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa.

One section of the report tracks progress on all the indicators. It provides evidence that inequalities within countries — between rich and poor, urban and rural and male and female populations — may be as much a barrier to achieving the goals as inequalities between countries.

In India, for example, school attendance rates for the richest 20 percent of the population are twice as high as for the poorest. And in the West African nation of Mali, "the mortality rate of children from poor, rural families is twice as high as those from rich urban ones," the bank report said.

On primary school, the report says, 51 countries have already achieved the goal of complete enrollment of eligible children and seven more, mostly in Latin America, are on track, but progress has been slow in parts of Africa and Asia. Worldwide, more than 100 million primary-age school children remain out of school, almost 60 percent of them girls.

"I think that the news show had been diluted over the years... It was never given the resources to be able to garner stories from across the country."

— Ed Gordon



was always to try to get more money and the news was a very costly venture," he said.

Despite the planned periodic updates, whenever a major news program is lost, it leaves a void, Gordon says.

"It was an important vehicle, much like *Jet* Magazine. There are stories that if you don't pick up *Jet* or if you don't tune into BET Nightly News that you just wouldn't see anywhere else. And I'm not sure you're go-

ing to see that vehicle again for a while."

The answer is to push for more Black-owned and controlled media, says Gordon.

"Black America has to be realistic about where we are and stop being satisfied with one," he says.

"We were satisfied that BET Nightly News was there, yet we weren't demanding more of a Black perspective from anywhere else. So, what happens is

when that one goes away, then you're left with nothing."

Donna Brazile, a political strategist and regular commentator on CNN, says the news aspect of BET is important, but sees the cut as an opportunity for other Black community news sources to be marketed and used.

"It's a sad commentary to see BET's Nightly News Show bite the dust. I hope they find time in their entertainment line-up to inform their audience of what's happening in the news...It's a major loss for those of us who view BET as speaking with an authentic voice," Brazile says.

A subsidiary of Viacom, Inc. BET markets itself as "the nation's leading television network providing quality entertainment, music, news and public affairs programming for the African-

American audience."

It reaches more than 80 million households according to Nielsen media research.

However, some have also viewed the reduction of the news and public service content as more of an emphasis on its musical entertainment, which often features near-public nudity, programming pitched to youth.

"It seems that the drive, which is an understandable drive, to be profitable, supercedes the need for information," Daniels says.

"This is a part of the larger problem of the conglomeratization of media and the homogenization of media," he says.

"You have such huge monopolies that it's hard for Black people to break into television, period. There are big interests that control the electronic media."