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### **Somalia: Empowering women to feed families**

“Like so many in the Horn of Africa, Nadifa needed food. The twice-widowed mother of four left her children at their makeshift hut in an internally displaced persons (IDP) camp outside of Mogadishu to seek dry food aid in a neighboring camp. After waiting hours, she returned home with nothing. She found a gunman inside her home, raping her 11-year-old daughter. She screamed for help, trying to pull him off the child while protecting her other children. Neighbors stood by as the militia abducted Nadifa. In an abandoned building, with a hood over her head, she was pistol whipped, kicked, punched, and scorched with burning plastic” (Shannon).

Tragically, what happened to Nadifa is becoming commonplace in Somalia. Somalia is an African nation that covers 246,201 square miles. It is the easternmost country in Africa and shares a border with Kenya, Ethiopia, and Djibouti. Its geography varies from north to south. The northern portion of Somalia includes a few low rolling mountains, whereas the rest of the country is made up of vast expanses of desert. The southern region of Somalia is home to the nation’s only two rivers, the Jubba River and the Shabeelle River. Most of the country’s farmland is located between these two rivers. However, less than 13% of Somalia’s land is suitable for agriculture and only two percent is actually cultivated (Gelletly 22). During periods of drought, famine becomes widespread, most notably perhaps in the northern and southern portions of the country. For over 20 years, civil unrest has caused the agricultural output to suffer even more. This has put a strain on food supply, especially food imports because the violence prevents food aid from reaching its intended location.

The Horn of Africa has long been in a state of despair and poverty. For the past twenty years, Somalia has struggled with famine and violent outbreaks stemming from a lack of a central government. Some of the fighting stems from the rigid clan systems that exist in Somalia. There are six main clans in Somalia: Daarood, Dir, Isaaq, Hawiye, Digil, and Rahanwayn. The Daarood, Dir, Isaaq, and Hawiye clans typically are pastoral nomads, people who travel about looking for food and water for their flock of animals. These four clans live primarily in the north and central part of Somalia. The Digil and Rahanwayn clans are commonly farmers. They tend to live in the southern region of Somalia. These clans are often pitted against one another for valuable commodities such as food, land, and water. Al-Qaida-linked Al Shabaab insurgents are also responsible for some of the violence taking place in Somalia. They have been behind numerous bombings and assassinations. Yet another group, the Transitional Federal Government of Somalia, formed to create stability amongst the Somali people, has instead been drawn into the fighting. The ongoing conflict has led to increasingly treacherous conditions for the people of the country, especially women, as well as jeopardizing Somalia’s food security. Women are being raped, beaten, and robbed as they search for food. Many of these attackers are either Al Shabab insurgents, angry clan members, or members of the Transitional Federal Government. “As sexual predators run rampant over famine-affected ground, food security and women’s security become inextricably linked” (Shannon 2).

The warfare in Somalia has made it difficult to define a typical family. Many families have been separated due to warfare. Thousands of Somali citizens have fled their homes and are now living as refugees. Over 400,00 people call IDP camps their homes. (IDMC) These camps, centered in Mogadishu, are hardly a safe place to live. They are especially dangerous for women because rape, gang rape, and brutal attacks are common. Not only do Somali citizens flee to refugee camps within Somalia, they are

also trying to escape to neighboring countries. The UN News Centre declared that approximately 239,000 Somalis have fled to surrounding countries.

Somali citizens who continue reside in the cities may live as either a nuclear or extended family. Marriages are typically arranged by clan members, and women are given away to be the man's property. Especially during times of conflict, women are given as "a means to guarantee the safety of the bride's family" (SIGI). The average age of a Somali bride is 14 or 15. Somali men are allowed to have up to four wives. Divorce is also allowed, but only men can initiate the process. It is thought that the spousal abuse rate in Somalia is quite high, however no official statistic is available. Somali culture accepts domestic abuse as a way of life. Somali women will typically have around seven children. The more children a Somali woman has, the higher her status in her culture. The children will be delivered at home with a midwife as there are approximately only .4 doctors and 2 nurses available to treat every 100,00 Somalis (Shannon 75). When a parent dies, the sons in the family inherit twice what the daughters are entitled to.

Urban families may live in a variety of dwellings ranging from a circular hut to a cement room. Only the wealthiest urban families have electricity. The majority of the Somalis use wood or charcoal to provide energy. Charcoal has become an increasingly popular way for families to earn a little money. However, this has resulted in massive deforestation. "As of 2002, environmental experts estimated that only 4% of Somalia's vegetation remained" (Gelletly 26). This startling statistic reveals the devastating reality that Somalia is facing in terms of food security. Urban families typically shop at food markets that have a variety of local and imported food. The markets commonly have spaghetti-like pastas, teas, canned goods, and rice. Outbreaks of violence disrupt food distribution and shortages often occur in the markets. In some parts of Somalia, the Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity has started gardens for the Somali people. These gardens are spread out and not all Somalis have access to such gardens.

Education is extremely limited in Somalia due in large part to the chaos and conflict taking part across the country. Because of the warfare, literacy rates are hard to obtain. The male literacy rate is 49.7%; the female literacy rate is almost half that at 25.8% (CIA world fact book). Though these percentages are only estimates, the difference between the male and female literacy rates is astounding.

In these times of extreme conflict, the women of Somalia are harshly discriminated upon. Somali women rarely own land and tradition denies Somali women access to bank loans (SIGI 2). With this restriction, women are bound to the duties of family and motherhood. The maternal death rate is the second highest in the world, behind only Afghanistan (CIA World Factbook). In Somalia, 98% of young girls are subjected to female circumcision (Gelletly 75). Female circumcision (also known as infibulation, genital cutting or genital mutilation) is done to girls before they go through puberty. Their genital area is sewn shut, leaving a tiny hole for urine and menstruation. This procedure is done without anesthesia and can cause numerous health problems. Later, when a woman loses her virginity, the stitches are ripped out. The loss of virginity before marriage is extremely shameful for a woman and she would then be considered impure and her family and clan would be dishonored. If the woman was raped, an agreement is usually reached between the clans of the victim and the rapist. However, rape victims are often so ashamed that they feel their lives are ruined. Besides having traumatic effects, the rape of women in Somalia can be life threatening, especially if they are a circumcised virgin. The ripping of the stitches can cause hemorrhages and, if an excessive amount of blood is lost, death.

Many women are too scared to leave their homes because of the violence they may face. When they don't leave their homes, they can't look for water or go to the markets to purchase food. Their fear of leaving their homes makes it virtually impossible for women to hold even the most menial jobs. Lack of jobs, and thus lack of an income, has put strain on many Somali families who previously supplemented their lives with money made from the women's market ventures. "The threat of rape, continues to limit

women's freedom of movement" (SIGI 2). When a women's movement is threatened, especially in a country where pastoral nomads make up over half the population, her livelihood is destroyed.

The treatment of the women in Somalia is deteriorating. The Millennium Development Goals, adopted by the United Nations in 2000, lists gender equality as the third goal. The goal of gender equality is further broken down into smaller goals. These goals include educating women and girls and increasing their power in the political aspects of their countries. The warfare in Somalia has made it practically impossible to measure progress in reaching the goal of gender equality. Education has suffered greatly since the outbreak of war in 1991. In 2011, Al Shabab forces took over schools and fired on opposing parties leaving teachers and children vulnerable to retaliatory fire. These attacks caused teachers to flee, and students to drop out of school (Human Rights Watch 2). Another goal of gender equality is to increase women's power in the politics of their country. However, since no central government exists in Somalia, women have no chance of making their voice heard politically.

The people of Somalia would benefit greatly from granting gender equality to its women. Women are afraid to leave their homes, speak up for themselves, and become educated. Once Somali women's fears subside, their contributions to Somalia would be great. They could help to farm or earn money for their family by selling goods in the market. Education would empower them not only in business, but in other matters as well. They could be taught practical information that they can use to better their lives. They could be taught about health and sanitation. Women especially could be educated about the harmful effects of circumcision. Schooling would help them to understand more about business, thus pushing Somalia into a role of a more educated country.

Many factors influence the treatment of Somalia's women and the impact it has on food security. Climate changes, such as droughts or floods, affect a woman's ability to find food. The further away from their home that they must travel, the more likely they are to be raped, robbed, or beaten. If the women themselves are not hurt searching for food or water, their families could be in danger in their absence. Deforestation is also becoming a concern. The more trees that are cut down, the more likely it is that Somalia's grasslands will turn to arid desert. An expanding desert region will make it increasingly difficult for nomads to find places to graze their animals and for farmers trying to make a living off the land. Somalia's population has grown in recent years, partially due to the increased number of rapes and lack of contraceptives. The increased population in an already impoverished nation causes an even greater food shortage. Humanitarian aid agencies that are able to make their way into Somalia are overwhelmed by the number of people needing assistance. The lack of food often causes fights, and women who venture out of their homes to try and get help are often trampled in the mobs or thrown to the ground.

In some parts of Somalia, Al Shabab military forces demand strict interpretations of the Islamic Law. These strict interpretations prevent women from doing many of the things that they have been accustomed to doing. Punishments for violation of the Islamic law can lead to floggings, beatings, and executions (Human Rights Watch 2). Somali women who escape, flee to IDP camps within Somalia and in neighboring Kenya. The influx of refugees has caused IDP camps to become filled past capacity. One camp, in Dadaab, Kenya, was originally built for 90,000 people; it now holds 390,000 people (HRW 1). These refugees are often in a dangerous position because rape and abuse runs rampant in the camps. The battered and abused women have no one to turn to with their struggles.

Many Somali people have lost hope of a better future. They have been involved in conflict for over twenty years. The women of Somalia are being raped on a daily basis. Over 320,000 children in Somalia have been acutely malnourished (U.N. 1). One out of every four Somali children dies before age five (Gelletly 75). Humanitarian aid has a hard time reaching Somali civilians because aid caravans generally are stopped by clan or military groups. These groups then take the supplies and sell them to benefit

themselves. It has been a devastating two decades for the Somali people; however, with the help of the United Nations a brighter future can be assured.

The Millennium Development Goals lists improvement to food security and economic development as its first main goal. This goal cannot be achieved without the help of the women of Somalia. As of now, Somali women are in no position to help obtain food security for their country. Programs must be implemented to help the women of Somalia. By assisting them, these women will be able to help their country to become a more stable nation. One program established to help women is called Sister Somalia. Sister Somalia was established in the summer of 2011. It is the creation of Lisa Shannon, founder of A Thousand Sisters, Katy Grant, founder of Prism Partnerships, and Fartun Abdisalaan Adan, a Somali human rights activist. This program, based out of Mogadishu, helps provide relief to rape victims. The services they offer include phone-counseling sessions, group counseling sessions, transportation, medical care, money for resettlement, and business starter kits. Sister Somalia is currently the only program of its kind in Somalia. Programs such as this can help put women back on their feet. The businesses that they start and the counseling they receive greatly improve the lives of these Somali women. This type of program should be scaled up so that more women can benefit from Sister Somalia. This program can also be viewed as a building block for other programs. Sister Somalia has been in operation for over a year now. It has helped restore hope by showing other aid organizations that they can make a difference, and can reach out to Somalia's women.

Empowering women will only partly help to solve Somalia's food crisis. All Somali citizens need to be better educated on how to graze animals effectively. If Somali people continue to cut down trees for charcoal, and overgraze the land, Somalia will turn into an uninhabitable desert area. To help prevent water scarcity, wells should be dug across Somalia. The Zakat Foundation of America and DIAL Africa's WASH program are two organizations that are trying to combat water scarcity in Somalia. The Zakat Foundation is building wells across Somalia and the Wash Program builds wells, dams, water pans, and is digging boreholes. These programs are making it easier for women to find water for their families. Families with access to such wells can then use the water-to-water small home gardens.

Somalia cannot independently combat the loss of food security; it must have help from outside the country. The anarchy across the land has caused severe famine that humanitarian aid groups must help to combat. Food aid must be sent to Somalia, especially to the IDP camps. In these IDP camps, officials need to teach Somali people how to farm more effectively. Drought resistant crops can be used in addition to better farming practices. Several loan agencies need to be created to help Somali people set up businesses or buy seeds for farming. Food aid may need to be continued for several years, but better education and access to loans will help to reduce the need for the assistance. With better-educated people, Somalia can begin to emerge as a new country and break the bonds of oppression that have held its people for so long.

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