

ACCEPTANCE SPEECH BY HAWA ADEN MOHAMED ON THE OCCASION OF RECEIVING THE ROGER NASH BALDWIN MEDAL OF LIBERTY AWARD FOR INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am profoundly happy to be here with you all and humbled to receive this prestigious award, first as a person and second as the head of Galkayo Education Center for Peace and Development (GECPD).

It is a great honor for me to be associated with the legacy of Roger Nash Baldwin, an ardent human rights defender, a great advocate for civil liberty, a staunch social reformer and pacifist, who stood up against militarism and persistently defended the rights of human beings. Baldwin's innovative approaches to the defense of freedom, civil liberty and minority rights have inspired many followers to emulate his examples. The many positions and offices he held, nationally and internationally, demonstrate the greatness of the Man.

I would like to extend my sincere thanks and appreciation the American Jewish World Service (AJWS) who presented my candidacy to the Human Rights First for the award.

As I accept this award my mind is preoccupied with the afflictions endured by the people of Somalia, who have been suffering a gristly civil war since 1991, almost two decades. In such war situations, the most vulnerable groups are women, children, elderly, minority groups and displaced communities. Somalia, a country of eight million population, of which one million have immigrated as refugees to many countries of the world, while over one million are internally displaced (IDPs). The suffering of the women and girls under such circumstances is immense and when compounded by the traditional and cultural discrimination that girls are subjected to since childhood the suffering is greater.

She is, time and again, denied fundamental needs and rights in diverse ways such as: preference for sons, early marriage, the practice of female genital mutilation, also known as FGM, domestic violence, discrimination and less access to education and unequal gender preferences between male and female.

Girls and women in general live in environment where two mutually reinforcing tenets determine the cultural and religious spaces for women. In the cultural and traditional context, the Somali women's space is defined by tribal and clan rules (Xeer) at household level (father, brother and male cousins), while at the wider social, economic and political levels, the male community is entrusted to decide on women's issues and kind of rights they can have.

It is this basis that formed the establishment of Galkayo Education Center for Peace and Development (GECPD) as a program response to the limited educational opportunities for the Somali girl, women, minority and displaced communities

GECPD was founded in 1999 by a group of women educators and professionals, as an education and resource centre for women in Galkayo. Our mission is to empower women through education and to promote and strengthen women's capacity to seek, defend and advocate for their fundamental rights in all spheres of life. This education centre provides free education for girls, women, minority and war displaced groups.

Educating the victim, to us, was the best way to insulate her against a prejudiced culture, to adequately equip her with skills in preparedness for life's challenges.

We were not without challenges right from the outset.

We faced wide spread criticism, skepticism, suspicion and outright hostility from the community including women.

I have been called a witch and been accused of bringing foreign ideas, turning the girls from their religion and turning them into boys.

We have been labeled traitors to Somali culture and the Islamic religion, and had Friday sermons preached against us in the local mosque.

We were pelted with stones for the first two years, had our car destroyed and part of our compound torn down by angry local residents.

These events strengthened our resolve to peacefully pursue our goals by opening dialogue with our detractors in order to demystify our purpose. Many of these issues were perceived as alien concepts that should have been censored and kept out of the social sphere. We had to contend with their deep rooted traditional views regarding our initiatives and their threats to derail our course.

Our commitment, perseverance and resilience have yielded social dividends in terms of the community goodwill we now enjoy. They used to call me a "WITCH" before, now they call me "AUNT".

We also approached the Somalia Diaspora community who came to our rescue and funded the first of many projects.

Today GECPD is a well established educational facility, equipped for primary education with enrolment of 773 girls; vocational training for 150 girls. Second chance education for 830 adolescent girls, and integrated literacy for 1770 adult women. The program is implemented at nine education centers with the participation of community education committees, and women support groups,

The program would have not been possible without the financial contributions from our partners around the world - some of whom are here tonight - and the Somali community in Diaspora. The continued support of these organizations to our women's programs is a testimony to human solidarity independent of race, religion, social, political and geographical considerations.

We have integrated in the curriculum, human rights components that are pertinent to the girl child's growth and well being. Such issues include FGM, HIV/Aids, gender

awareness, women and girl rights, violence against women, civic education, peace building, community health and environmental education.

Our gains, seen in retrospect, seem little short of phenomenal. However these are the fruit of our continued partnership with individuals and organizations that share in our convictions and dreams and to whom we owe our sincere gratitude.

These gains should be assessed within the context of the prevailing political situation in Somalia. Many parts of Somalia are still characterized by lack of economic recovery, endemic humanitarian needs, minimal healthcare and education, depressing sanitation facilities and population displacement. There is increased vulnerability of the girl/women population to sexual and gender based violence in IDP camps including rape, harassment, early marriage, FGM and domestic violence.

As we celebrate this award, let us give thought to the plight of these vulnerable people. I appeal, on behalf of the Somali women, to the international community not to give up on the efforts to assist, restore peace in Somalia. With the support of the international community I am sure that women's rights, human rights and justice will be possible in Somalia.

On behalf of GECPD I am sincerely appreciative to Human Rights First for honoring our efforts with this award. When GECPD was established it did not occur to me that one day the work we set out will be recognized internationally in this way. This award is in recognition of our labor in advocating for the rights of the woman and girl child. This honor gives credence to the course of many afflicted women activists, who have to endure verbal abuse, threats to their security and that of their family.

We hope this award will be a means to give a human face to the challenges that accrue from any form of human conflict.

In this regard it is an award, not for me, but really for all of you who have contributed in advocacy, financially, materially and morally. My heartfelt appreciation goes to all our friends and partner organizations the world over.

Thank you for the honor of this award and having me here tonight