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**Girls'
Education
Challenge**



PEER TO PEER SUPPORT – THE IMPACT OF GIRLS' EMPOWERMENT FORUMS IN A GIRL'S OWN WORDS

Fifteen-year-old Warda¹ is in Grade 8, the last grade of primary school, at Kadhar² Primary School in Somaliland. She is one of 12 children in her family and one of the two who have had the opportunity to attend school and benefit from education. Her pastoralist parents live in the village with seven of her other siblings, and the remaining siblings stay with relatives in different parts of the country.

Warda has always stayed with her grandmother, who relies on financial support from her uncle to provide food and other basic needs. She and her grandmother have had to move twice due to severe water shortages. Once, when Warda was in Grade 2, she and her grandmother had to move to the eastern part of their village and she missed a year of education, as the new location had no school. Later, they moved again to town, where she began attending primary school.

Warda explains, *“Growing up, my family always faced financial difficulties and I went to this public school, which is free. At times, my family tried to make me drop out of school, but through determination and perseverance I am now in Grade 8, and very soon I will be starting my secondary education.”* Warda's story is not uncommon in the context of Somalia and Somaliland: in Somalia, nearly 3 million people are

¹ Name has been changed

² Name has been changed

currently classified as internally displaced, and drought is the most common reason for displacement in Somaliland.

When Warda was in Grade 5, she was selected to join the school's Girls' Empowerment Forum (GEF). GEFs are a platform used by the Somali Girls' Education Promotion Programme – Transition (SOMGEP-T) to develop girls' life skills, including leadership competencies. GEFs are school-based empowerment clubs which give vulnerable girls from pastoralist and poor families an opportunity to participate in the governance of their schools by addressing gender barriers in education, completing training that encourages their leadership and mentorship skills and engagement in decision-making, and attending financial literacy training.

GEFs are comprised of 10 elected leaders who represent Grades 4 to 8. The forum appoints four girls to the management board, which is comprised of the chairperson, deputy chairperson, treasurer and secretary. Each girl has different roles and responsibilities. GEF members are supported by two female mentors who can be either a female teacher, a female from their local community education committee (CEC), or a female head of school. These mentors are trained on leadership and mentorship skills, child rights, menstrual hygiene management, psychosocial first aid and other topics. Together, the GEF leaders and their respective female mentors develop an annual action plan to implement activities designed and led by girls to address gender barriers in their schools and communities. A Ministry of Education gender focal point is appointed to provide further guidance and follow up on progress achieved on planned activities.

Since joining the GEF, Warda has risen through the ranks to become the Deputy Chairperson of the forum. According to Warda, GEF conducts home visits to encourage other girls to enroll in school, fundraises money for school improvement projects such as building a security wall around the school, follows up with girls who have dropped out from school, engages with female students on the topic of menstruation and resolves conflicts among students at the school. According to Warda, the GEF has also impacted relationships between teachers, students, and parents: *“School has now become more exciting. Due to the support we have received, teaching has improved and now there is more cooperation and engagement between students, parents, and teachers.”*

The GEF also provides an opportunity for girls to expand their networks within their schools, building peer support networks for girls. Warda, who used to describe herself as shy, feels the GEF has had a tremendous positive effect on her confidence. As she explains, *“Being a member of the GEF has built my confidence. Now, I can attend any kind of meeting, be it with CECs, government officials, parents, or teachers, and I am able to air our concerns as students. I am a poet, and through the confidence I got from the GEF, some of my poems have been recorded. I am now more responsible as an individual.”* Warda's composition of poetry is especially notable, because Somali society has a rich oral literary tradition – with the writer Margaret Laurence describing Somalis as a “Nation of Poets” – and poets are both highly respected and predominantly male.

Warda is one of many girls whose engagement in the SOMGEP-T programme has created lasting, positive change at the individual, school and community levels. In fact, the program's impact evaluation indicated that the GEFs was one of the most impactful aspects of the programme. The results of this research suggest that participation in a GEF has dramatic positive effects not just on girls' Youth Leadership Index scores (a measure of self-perceptions of leadership), but also on girls' learning outcomes and attendance in school. GEF participation appears to provide girls with a stronger support network, encouraging more frequent attendance and greater participation in the classroom. Girls also receive additional help with schoolwork, either directly through the GEF or through friendships made at the GEF. These results and the accounts of girls like Warda continue to validate the assumptions underlying the life skills activities – including the establishment of GEFs – taking place under the SOMGEP-T programme.

Warda's aspirations for the future include becoming the first Somaliland female pilot. She explains, *“All pilots in the world were born after nine months just like me. I have never seen a female pilot here and I will*

be the first one. I want to look after my siblings and take them from the village to the city. I would also want to help members of my community who are struggling with life.” While she pursues these dreams, Warda will continued to compose poetry, including this poem she shared on the importance of education:

The progressive and prestigious school
Is found in Somaliland
Famous across the country and its name is Khadar Primary School
Well educated teachers bestowed by God
Enlighted the whole world and took us very high.
Their reward is paradise.
A God given well dedicated mentor shows us the path.
Kindhearted, patient teachers.
The Honorable Mum/Head teacher brings out millions of teenagers through education
Fruit and sorghum a good for the body, same as knowledge is good for personal development
Knowledge is light, can take you out of darkness.
The dark side of the house is being avoided.
We Somalis why not we run away from ignorance
Let us spend our time in education.
When you know that the world is shining brightly, you will defeat the enemy, and let us also reach the level
of knowledge to defeat the ignorance.
Time is an asset and let us not waste it. It is a lifeline.
Do you know that the country and its people are waiting for us to sacrifice our lives for our parents?
Destroy the scourge of migration and throw your hopes into the future and give peace to your country.
My school is old, and my knowledge is good, and it is with a great effort. For the knowledgeable teachers.
Thanks to God.

** CARE has been a main implementer of FCDO's Girls Education Challenge (GEC)-funded programming in Somalia since 2014. The current iteration of GEC programming in Somalia and Somaliland, the Somali Girls' Education Promotion Programme – Transition (SOMGEP-T), aims to bring about sustainable improvements to the learning and transition outcomes of marginalized Somali girls in rural and remote areas.*

Life skills development is one of the programme's intermediate outcomes. It is expected that improvements in life skills will improve girls' retention, participation and completion in school, advancements across grades, and enrolment for girls who are currently not in school. The theory of change posits that girls with a strong sense of empowerment are more likely to be able to negotiate for their rights in household decision-making and to want to stay in school, as they are more likely to recognise the value of schooling and their own potential. Improvements are also expected to positively impact learning outcomes, as girls' ability to engage in classroom discussions increase and they become more likely to attend school consistently. Empowered girls are equipped with leadership competencies that improve their self-confidence, long-term vision, voice assertiveness, organisation and planning skills.