

## Edna Adan: A Goddess Walks Among Us



“**Saving the World's Women**” is the title of a special issue of the New York Times, August 2009, authored by Nicholas Kristof and Sherly WuDunn, a noted husband and wife team who won the Pulitzer Prize for international reporting in 1990. This coveted prize was given in recognition of their reporting on the Tianamen Square protests of 1989 in Beijing. That period of their lives developed in an unexpected way, dramatically changing the focus of their work as they explain in the same New York Times article.

“Traditionally the status of women was seen as a soft issue—worthy but marginal. We initially reflected that view ourselves in our work as journalists. We preferred to focus instead on the “serious” international issues, like trade disputes or arms proliferation. Our awakening came in China.

After we married in 1988 we moved to Beijing to be correspondents for the New York Times. Seven months later we found ourselves standing on the edge of Tianamen Square watching troops fire their automatic weapons at pro-democracy protesters. The massacre claimed between 400 and 800 lives and transfixed the world; wrenching images of the killings appeared constantly on the front page and on television screens.

Yet the following year we came across an obscure but meticulous demographic study that outlined a human rights violation that had claimed tens of thousands more lives. This study found that 39,000 baby girls died annually in China because parents didn't give them the same medical care and attention that boys received—and that was just the first year of life. A result is that as many infant girls died unnecessarily every week in China as protesters died at Tiananmen Square. Those Chinese girls never received a column inch of news coverage, and we began to wonder if our journalistic priorities were skewed.”

These new priorities were revealed fully in a book some have called the most important they have ever read: *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*, published by Knopf, New York, 2009. In this remarkable book that by turns breaks the heart then inspires, a chapter is devoted to the telling of the story of Edna Adan and her work to help the women of Somaliland.

## Somalia and Somaliland

Somaliland is located on the horn of Africa and has been going its own way as much as possible from Somalia for close to two decades. As is true of much of Africa, the country (officially unrecognized by the international community as independent from Somalia) has as a general backdrop a complex history of tribalism, colonialism, socialism and post colonialism/socialism. It has however its own regional government and is to some extent left to itself by Somalia. It sees itself as the inheritor of British Somalia which was independent for a few days in 1960. The Somaliland revolution, a reaction to the repressive dictatorship of Siad Barre and the general instability that led to the collapse of the central government allowed the territory to assert its independence in May of 1991. The need for separation is obvious when viewing a few facts about Somalia. It was named “most failed state” by Foreign Policy Magazine in 2009 beating out such hellish places as Sudan and Zimbabwe. An attempt in the same year to hold together a fragile coalition government failed with the southern half of the country falling into the hands of Islamic rebels who established Sharia law. On the 13<sup>th</sup> of May 2009, the president of Somalia approved the implementation of Sharia law for all of Somalia. Many people made their way north and west to Somaliland, fleeing the chaos.

For more information about the history of Somaliland and its standing in the world, Edna Adan’s speech before the [International Planned Parenthood Federation](#) on Sept. 28, 2010.

## Sharia

All [Muslims](#) believe Sharia is [God's](#) law, but they differ as to what exactly it entails.<sup>[1]</sup> Modernists, traditionalists and fundamentalists all hold different views of Sharia, as do adherents to different schools of Islamic thought and [scholarship](#). Different countries and cultures have varying interpretations of Sharia as well.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sharia>

The threat to women under systems of radical Islamic thought are many and Somalia represents an area that some of the most repressive interpretations of Sharia are found.

The notorious treatment of women by the Taliban can be found and explored more at this link:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taliban\\_treatment\\_of\\_women](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taliban_treatment_of_women). This illustrates just how brutal and unjust this sort of interpretation of Sharia can be.

In Somalia where Edna grew up, female genital mutilation was routine and Edna recounts, “ At age of eight, while my father was out of town...I was caught, held down and it was done.” It is worth noting that Edna grew up the daughter of a doctor, at the highest level of Somalia society but at the time of her youth (she was born in 1937) woman’s status was almost non-existent, so even within a state that was at that time a British protectorate and the fact of her family's high status provided no protection for Edna against this barbarity.

Other practices detailed in Sharia and worth paying anxious attention to are zina--sexual relations outside of marriage, punishable by beatings, imprisonment and stoning to death; forced marriage; honor killing and ird—the view of a woman's sexual purity that involves many restrictions of movement, dress and association.

## Edna's History

Edna Adan grew up in Somalia and as a journalist noted in an interview with Edna she excelled at being her country's 'first.' Listen here for more details:

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/womanshour/03\\_06\\_02/wednesday/info2.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/womanshour/03_06_02/wednesday/info2.shtml)

But briefly she was the first female to win a scholarship to study in Britain—she was not even allowed to sit in the same exam room as the boys—first to qualify as a nurse-midwife from her land, first and only person to dream, plan and eventually make real a hospital in which women could study, train and help other women.

As this biography says of her: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edna\\_Adan\\_Ismail](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edna_Adan_Ismail)

“Edna Adan was born the daughter of a prominent Somali medical doctor and was trained as a nurse in the United Kingdom. She later married Muhammad Haji Ibrahim Egal, a Somali politician who was elected Prime Minister of Somalia in 1967. She started building a hospital in Mogadishu in the mid 1980s, but was forced to abandon it and leave the country. She was the World Health Organization Regional Nursing Adviser during 1986. From 1981-1987 she was Regional Technical Officer for Mother and Child Health with responsibility for issues relating to harmful traditional practices which affect the health of women and children (such as FGM) and for training midwives and Traditional Birth Attendants in the 22 countries of the Eastern Mediterranean Region of WHO.”

It is clear that Edna's vision has been for health and safety, for women in particular. This dream was not accomplished without set backs. During the time when she first attempted the building of a hospital that had to eventually be abandoned due to the civil war, Edna was arrested and jailed.



Edna's hospital destroyed by war.

This experience was addressed in an interesting discussion about human dignity that can be accessed on [www.humiliationstudies.org](http://www.humiliationstudies.org)

“I think humiliation is a very difficult thing to describe. But I think humiliation is when someone tries to bring someone down to their level. They think that you are above them and they want to hurt you,

humiliate you, bring you down down so that you have no more self-respect, so that you loose the respect you have for yourself and others loose the respect they have for you. Once they said I was planning to escape from the country and I spent six days in jail for that. They put me in a cell of my own but I didn't have a toilet and it had no doors. The cell next to me was full of men...and I needed to use the bathroom.”

Edna goes on to describe how the police insisted that she use the bathroom with no door on it in front of all the men. Edna was able, by appealing to the men and their sense of how they would feel about their own mothers and sisters being forced to perform this private function in front of others, to back them down. They eventually turned their backs to give her privacy.

At the time of her retirement from the WHO Edna had a savings of \$300,000 and a Mercedes. Watch this video for a deeper look at this amazing woman:

## **Video: How Many Mothers for a Mercedes?**

By [NAKA NATHANIEL](#)

There are several wonderful people featured in [the video](#) that accompanies [Nick's Sunday column](#). I'm confident that one person will stand out, Edna Adan.

The story goes that after a distinguished career with the World Health Organization, Edna Adan returned home to Somaliland where she started the country's first maternal hospital. Besides using her pension, she sold her Mercedes to get the hospital started. She's been saving the lives of mothers and children ever since.

### **The Hospital and Edna's Work**



First Baby Born in the Hospital



First graduating class of mid-wives 2004

The university hospital is now a realized dream. Many women and their children are being served, but of course there is much to do and many people of Somaliland to train in order to help educate and serve.

**Hospital Profile** [www.ednahospital.org](http://www.ednahospital.org)



The Edna Adan University Hospital is situated in Hargeisa, Republic of Somaliland.

The hospital is a non-profit charity that was built by Edna Adan Ismail who donated her UN pension and other personal assets to build the hospital in order to address the grave health problems that endanger the lives of women and children in the Horn of Africa. The Project has the approval of the Government of Somaliland, and the Local Government of Hargeisa has donated the Land that measures 9,600 Square meters. The hospital is on the main road near the Bank of Somaliland at Dumbuluq, and is located in a less affluent area that contains a third of the population of the city in a part of the town that has never had a hospital in the past. The site is centrally and conveniently located, is well served by public transport making it easily accessible for emergency referral.

The Hospital is supplied by the city piped water supply and to the city electricity power. The hospital also has its own electricity back-up generator.

The Hospital started with 25 maternity beds. However, as the need for hospital beds became pressing, and as personnel became trained, the hospital services expanded to accommodate an additional 8 pediatric and 13 medical and surgical beds, and a Private Room. The present total capacity of the hospital, including newborn babies, is 69 patients. While the hospital became fully operational on March 2002, the training of Nurses and Laboratory Technicians was in progress while the hospital building was under construction.

The construction of the hospital was started on the 1st of January 1998, and as it progressed, private individuals, business people in Somaliland and elsewhere, as well as international organizations, also made valuable contributions enabling the hospital to become functional on the 9th of March, 2002. Her current goals are stated in her year end (2010) newsletter below.

**My Ambition: to Train 1000 Midwives**



“The training of the Community Midwives from the different regions of Somaliland continues with 42 women due to graduate in March, 2011. They are the best motivated group of women we have and I am confident they will have a strong impact on the high maternal mortality rate of our women. My ambition is to train 1000 community midwives to cover the needs of our people. Even if I don’t make it in my lifetime, I hope some of my former graduates will accomplish that goal.”

### **If a Goddess Walks Among Us**

As I am sure she does in the embodied form of Edna Adan, I would like to call to all to think about supporting her work in some way. Money is essential of course, but many of us have our own struggles with this, so perhaps we could hold her and her work in our prayers, spread the word about her face book page, her web site and the needs of the women of the area. Also, read *Half The Sky* by Kristof and WuDunn, a book whose practical suggestions for helping the world's women are plenty and inspiring.

<http://www.ednahospital.org/edna-hospital>

<http://www.facebook.com/#!/edna.hospital>

Submitted as Final Project for Level 111 Luna Blanca Studies with Sisters In Celebration.

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