

Hodan Ahmed Remarks
National Democratic Institute's Madeleine K Albright Lunch
Washington, DC, May 29, 2013

- Thank you for that thoughtful introduction, Abigail.
- As Abigail said, my name is Hodan Ahmed and I am from Somalia.
- I left my Home at very early age, not by choice but because of the civil war.
- I lived in India for the following decade where I studied and graduated from University
- When I finished my education, I wanted to return to Somalia and give back to my country, so my children will grow up as proud citizens of Somalia; an opportunity I missed it my self
- My first trip to Mogadishu was in early 2003, I was devastated by the level of destruction. I could not believe what had become of the capital city of Somalia. The whole city was turned into IDP camps and women and children were facing intolerable suffering! All because of warlords who were hungry for power.
- What was even more painful was that on top of all this suffering, it was the girls as young as 5 who were still going through the cruel traditional practice of Female Genital Mutilation, I knew for sure I wanted to help these girls! I wanted to safe these girls.
- Unfortunately, it was still too dangerous for me to live in Mogadishu, so I settled in Nairobi and decided to work with development organizations focusing on the issues of FGM and HIV/AIDS.
- After several years of working with these organization and no matter how many awareness campaigns we did or how many people we reached, things were not improving.

- There was a gap between the grassroots efforts to deal with these issues, and national laws and policies that were not responding to the problems!
- I realized that no matter what we did, these Problems were continuing to happen. You can't make long-term improvements to peoples' lives without having the politicians and the political institutions make those issues a priority.

So, I wanted to find out what parliamentarians especially women were doing about these issues. I looked for Opportunities so I could get Access to the lawmakers

- So I joined NDI in 2010, hoping that working with politicians-- especially with women parliamentarians-- would help improve the daily lives of all Somalis, but mostly women and children.

But what I found shocked me! Women in the parliament were facing their own challenges including security, limited resources and lack of capacity to address these issues.

- I worked closely with the women in parliament and women in civil society and with the little resources they had, we lobbied among religious leaders, traditional elders and their male counterparts for a law prohibiting FGM. Today, the newly adopted provisional constitution prohibits FGM.
- This was such a remarkable victory for me personally – But I also know that it is not yet time for to rest! We have a long way to go! As there are many other priorities to be addressed.

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- Although Somalia has a new government now it is still going through a transitional process and I believe there will be many opportunities to address more priority issues.
- Let me go back to NDI work in Somalia. NDI has worked in Somalia since late 2005. At that time NDI was one of the few international NGOs to provide technical assistance and governance support to new Somali public institutions.

- NDI's first goal was to empower women in parliament and help get them involved in the peace and reconciliation process.
- But it was difficult to find financial support. Multilateral donors were not yet invested in Somalia and NDI had to rely on a small amount of funding from the National Endowment for Democracy and private donors so that we could begin our work with women.
- As I stand here today, we still struggle to find financial support to promote women's political participation.
- So today, I am honored to announce that NDI is launching the "Madeleine K. Albright Project", a global fund to support women to PARTICIPATE, COMPETE AND LEAD in political life.
- As Secretary Albright say often, there will never be progress on issues like FGM, HIV/AIDS, education for girls or economic empowerment -- unless women are empowered and increase their numbers in the halls of parliament and the corridors of power.
- But to make that happen, we need your support and help.
- The Madeleine Albright Project is a way you can get involved today in NDI's work and help women determine their own future, the future of their families, and the future of their country.
- Before I close my remarks , I would like a moment to recognize my Family who are scattered around the world, they live in the USA, Kenya, Somalia and UK and want to tell them that Insha Allah very soon we will unite and live in peaceful Somalia again.
- I thank you all for taking time from your busy schedules today to join us.