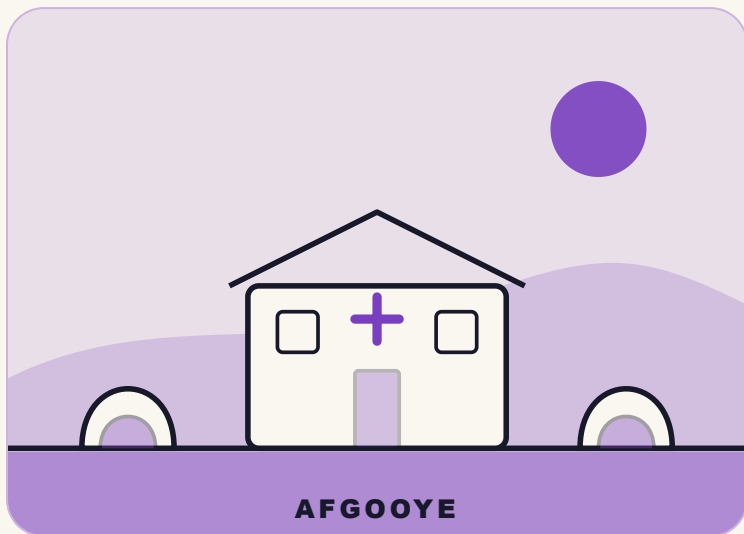




## SOMALIA

# The doctor who sheltered 90,000 strangers

When Somalia fell into war, a doctor turned her farm into a city of safety. She never turned anyone away.

**WHERE** Afgooye corridor, Lower Shebelle

**WHO** Dr. Hawa Abdi, a doctor and lawyer, and her daughters

**WHEN** 1983 to 2020

4 min read

# The story

**H**awa Abdi was born in Mogadishu, Somalia. She was twelve years old when her mother died. Her mother died during childbirth. The loss broke her heart, but it gave her a goal. She vowed to become a doctor. She wanted to keep other mothers alive.

Her father worked at the seaport in Mogadishu. He backed her dream. In 1964, she won a scholarship to study medicine in Kyiv. She worked hard and graduated in 1971. She became one of the first female gynecologists in Somalia. Later, she went to school at night to earn a law degree too.

## A clinic in the dust

In 1983, Dr. Abdi opened a small rural clinic. She built it on her family's ancestral land near Afgooye. The farm sat about thirty kilometers outside Mogadishu. At first, the clinic had just one room. She treated about twenty-four women each day. Most were poor farmers who had never seen a doctor.

Dr. Abdi charged nothing if a patient had no money. She gave medicine and delivered babies safely. For eight years, she ran this quiet practice. She planted fruit trees and grew maize on the farm. Life was calm and steady.

## When the war came

In 1991, the Somali government collapsed. A brutal civil war tore through the country. Guns filled the streets of Mogadishu. Gangs attacked homes, and neighbors turned on neighbors. Many educated doctors and teachers fled abroad. Dr. Abdi could have left too. She had medical degrees and friends in Europe.

Her grandmother told her to stay. She told Hawa that poor families had nowhere else to run. Dr. Abdi decided to stay on her farm. Soon, terrified families began to walk down the road from Mogadishu. They carried small bundles on their heads. They had lost their homes. Dr. Abdi opened her gates and welcomed them.

In 1992, a terrible famine hit Somalia. Food ran out, and people began to starve. Dr. Abdi refused to turn anyone away. She sold her family's gold jewelry to buy grain. She bought maize and milk to feed hungry children.

Every morning, she helped bury the dead. Some days, they buried fifty people. Yet she kept treating the living. She gave every family free land to pitch a tent. She drilled wells for clean water. Women built dome homes out of sticks and cloth. The farm became a bustling refuge.

**I may be a woman, but I am a doctor. What have you done for society?**

DR. HAWA ABDI TO ARMED MILITANTS, 2010

## Two rules for peace

By the late 2000s, about ninety thousand people lived on the farm. It had grown into a small city. Most residents were women and children. Dr. Abdi set two strict rules for everyone who entered.

First, nobody could divide people by clan. In Somalia, clan rivalry caused much of the war. Dr. Abdi banned clan talk completely. In her camp, everyone was simply Somali. If anyone started a clan fight, guards threw them out.

Second, no man could beat his wife. Dr. Abdi turned a small storage shed into a jail. If a man hit a woman, guards locked him in the shed. He stayed there until village elders settled the case. In a land ruled by warlords, women found peace behind her gates.

**90,000**

people  
sheltered at its  
peak

**400**

beds in her  
hospital

**850**

children in the  
camp school

**37**

years of  
service

## Standing up to guns

The clinic grew into a four-hundred-bed hospital. Dr. Abdi's two daughters, Deqo and Amina, studied medicine abroad. Both daughters returned to work by their mother's side. Together, they performed

surgeries and trained local nurses. They opened an elementary school for eight hundred and fifty children. Most of the students were young girls.

In May 2010, hundreds of heavily armed fighters attacked the camp. They belonged to a militant group. The fighters surrounded the hospital with trucks and machine guns. They ordered Dr. Abdi to hand over the keys. They said an older woman had no right to run a hospital.

Dr. Abdi did not flinch. She had no guns, but she looked the young commander in the eye. She told him that she had served Somalia for decades. Then she asked what he had ever done for his people.

The militia ransacked the clinic and put her under house arrest. But Dr. Abdi secretly reached a phone. She called reporters, aid agencies, and allies across the world. Meanwhile, hundreds of women inside the camp marched in protest. They surrounded the gunmen and demanded her freedom.

The fighters were ashamed and surrounded by angry mothers. They backed down and withdrew. Before they left, the militia commander even wrote Dr. Abdi a formal letter of apology.

Dr. Hawa Abdi spent thirty-seven years caring for displaced families. She died in Mogadishu in August 2020 at the age of seventy-three. Her daughters

continue her mission today. On a patch of dusty farmland, one woman proved that compassion is stronger than war.

## How it unfolded

- **1983** Dr. Hawa Abdi opens a one-room clinic on her family farm.
- **1991** Civil war begins, and displaced families seek refuge on her land.
- **1992** Famine strikes, and she sells family jewelry to buy food.
- **2010** Armed militants attack the hospital, but she refuses to leave.
- **2012** She is nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.
- **2020** Dr. Abdi dies at age 73, and her daughters lead the foundation.

### CHAPTER TWO

## What makes it special

Most relief camps are run by foreign aid agencies or armies. This one was built and defended by one Somali doctor and her daughters.

For decades, she kept ninety thousand people safe from warlords, famine and clan hatred.

#### OUR TAKE

*Courage does not always hold a weapon. Sometimes it holds the clinic door open and refuses to leave.*

### CHAPTER THREE

# What we can learn

## 1 Use what you have where you are

Dr. Abdi did not wait for a hospital building. She started with one room on her farm.

**Try this:** Pick one skill you have. Use it to help one neighbor this week.

## 2 Set clear ground rules early

She kept ninety thousand people at peace by banning clan division and domestic abuse.

**Try this:** Write down two simple rules of respect for your family or team.

## 3 Stand firm when bullies demand your work

Unarmed against hundreds of fighters, she looked the commander in the eye and refused to back down.

**Try this:** Practice saying a calm, polite no to one unfair demand this week.

## 4 Train the next generation to carry the torch

Her two daughters studied medicine and returned to lead the hospital by her side.

**Try this:** Teach a young person in your life one practical skill you use every day.

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ONE THOUGHT TO TAKE AWAY

**Courage does not always hold a  
weapon. Sometimes it holds a clinic  
door open.**

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## Sources

**The Guardian**

[The doctor undaunted by Somalia's insurgents](#)

**Face2Face Africa**

[The heroic Hawa Abdi, one of Somalia's first female obstetricians who saved thousands during the civil war](#)

**TED**

[Mother and daughter doctor-heroes](#)

**Dr. Hawa Abdi Foundation**

[Keeping Hope Alive](#)

Fact-check note: Camp population is reported as roughly 90,000 at its height in 2010 to 2011, though numbers fluctuated with drought and conflict.

Sources give the number of militants in the May 2010 raid between several hundred and 750 fighters. Her daughters are both doctors: Deqo Mohamed (also known as Deqo Adan) and Amina Mohamed. Lines marked "Our take" are interpretation. Everything else comes from the sources above.