

Exclusive Interview with the Former Supermodel: Waris Dirie

Written by Patricia Turnier
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In 1965, [Waris Dirie](#) (in [Somali](#) : Waris Diiriye) was born in Gallacaio desert, Somalia. Her first name means in Somali Desert Flower. The daughter of Somalian nomads, Waris Dirie fled her native country at the age of 13 to escape an arranged marriage with a 60-year-old man. After fleeing Somalia, she ended up in London working as a housemaid. She was regularly beaten and practically kept as a slave with an illegal status at some point. In England, she was spotted by well-known British fashion photographer Terence Donovan. It was a serendipitous moment which would determine a great future. Waris Dirie became a [supermodel](#) [S](#)

. This sounds like a Cinderella story.

Waris Dirie worked for these brands: André Courrèges, Chanel 'Allure' fragrance, Express Jeans, H&M, Levi's, L'Oréal, Oil of Olay, Prescriptives make up, Revlon and so on. She did many fashion shows, such as "Ready to wear – Spring/Summer 1996 (John Galliano, Ralph Lauren", "Ready to wear – Autumn/Winter 2000 (Xuly Bet)". She did the cover of the 1987 Pirelli calendar. She also appeared in prominent magazines like *Elle*, *Glamour*, *Vogue* and *Marie Claire*

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[modeling](#)

career has been showcased in the 1995 BBC documentary *A Nomad in New York*

. We often hear

[supermodels](#)

say that their career was not planned. Nothing from Waris Dirie's upbringing could have predicted the future that she had. So, much like several other

[supermodels](#)

, it wasn't her intention to be in the fashion business.

Waris Dirie is a former [supermodel](#) who is multi-faceted. She is a mother, an authoress, actress [1](#) and human rights activist. In 2002, she created the Waris Dirie Foundation (now called the Desert Flower Foundation) and continues to fight against female genital mutilation (FGM) across the world. In January 2009 the PPR Foundation for Women's Dignity and Rights', an organization was founded by French tycoon François-Henri Pinault (CEO of PPR) and his wife, Hollywood actress Salma Hayek. Waris Dirie became a founding member of PPR with other people and she is one of the members of the board.

Since 2002 [Waris Dirie](#) and the Desert Flower Foundation team have given numerous lectures and presentations in the fight against [FGM](#) in schools, universities, parliaments, at press conferences, human rights seminars, and conferences on violence against

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women. They have also made presentations to NGOs in Africa, Europe and the US. Since 2005, Waris Dirie and the Desert Flower Foundation have provided a unique online service for victims of [FGM](#), girls threatened by FGM and people who endeavor to become active in the fight against FGM. Furthermore, they support victims directly and offer a “helpdesk” for victims. They also have an information service for activists and supporters as well as the international press. More than 60,000 people from around the world have taken advantage of this unique service. In Dirie’s battle against FGM, she has met many European leaders; she spoke in front of members of parliament and the European Union. Among well-known personalities, it is important to note that the late Katoucha was another former [supermodel](#) who fought against FGM and likewise the departed Muta Wangari Maathai who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004.



Waris Dirie has received many prestigious prizes and awards for her work and books, like the

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“Women’s World Award” presented by President Mikhail Gorbachev (2004), the “Bishop Oscar Romero Award” given by the Catholic Church (2005), the “Woman of the Year Award” by *Glamour*

Magazine (2000), the “Africa Award” of the German government (1999), as well as the “Corinne Award” by the umbrella association of the German bookselling trade (2002). Waris Dirie became the first woman nominated for “Young Global Leader” by the World Economic Forum in 2005. In 2007 French President Nicolas Sarkozy presented her with the “Chevalier de la Légion d’Honneur”.

Waris Dirie has authored several books which gained a lot of success internationally. They have been translated into Dutch, German, French, Italian, Greek, Swedish, Slovene, Croatian, etc. In 2010 Waris Dirie published her latest book *Black Woman, White Country* (Droemer Knaur, Munich). In 1997, Harper Collins published her autobiography “Desert Flower”. The book quickly became an international bestseller. “Desert Flower” has been published in 65 licensed editions. It was number 1 on the bestseller lists in many countries and has sold more than 11 million copies worldwide. In 2009, the Ethiopian

[supermodel](#)

Liya Kebede starred in the film-adaptation of this bestselling autobiography. The movie *Desert Flower*

was directed by Sherry Hormann. Waris Dirie served as associate producer for the film. The film is from Oscar- Winning producer Peter Herrmann. The movie recounts Dirie's childhood in Somalia, her rise to stardom and subsequent awareness campaign against female circumcision. It premiered at the Venice Film Festival and received a standing ovation. It was also screened in Africa and around the world: the movie has since been released in more than 30 countries, including the US, France, Spain, Greece, Brazil, Netherlands, South Korea, Australia and Japan. The film has been translated into several languages, including French and German.

The bright lights and the glamour life never really appealed to Waris Dirie. Instead, she chose to make the most of her international status to publicly reveal the female circumcision that she suffered at the age of 5, in the name of tradition. The former [supermodel](#) lost her sister, Haleno from FGM and a cousin. Hence, the most important battle for Waris Dirie is to restore women’s dignity.

The story of Waris Dirie is inspirational in many ways as illustrated in her resilience and boldness. She has been able to overcome her ordeal regarding the cruel and traumatic experience of circumcision during her childhood. For years she did not speak a word of English while she lived in London; she was illiterate. However, with hard work and determination she has been able to transcend this problem (by taking classes in English) by becoming a worldwide renowned author.

To summarize, from the UN to the EU, and through her own foundation, Waris Dirie isn't afraid to make her feelings known, a real soldier, philanthropist and a symbol for justice to millions of women. She continues to denounce the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) that affects millions of women throughout the world. Circa 150 million women are traumatized by FGM according to the *Institut national des études démographiques de Paris* (INED) . At least 500,000 girls are affected in Europe and more young girls become victims of this criminal practice every day. Some girls or women die from this procedure which is done often without anesthesia. Many of these victims suffer throughout their entire life from the physical and psychological consequences of these practices. The World Health Organization estimated that FGM which is mostly performed in more than 28 African countries and also in the Middle East, Asia. Waris Dirie continues to tell her life story. She is the first international celebrity to break the silence surrounding this terrible practice. Thus, she has vanquished personal and cultural barriers.

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Diversities had the pleasure to interview Mrs. Waris Dirie this winter. Here she talks mainly about her involvement in her foundation and the state of the combat against FGM.

P.T. Talk to our worldwide readers about the mission of your foundation (created in 2002), its main accomplishments and its goals for 2012 (especially regarding the new project TOGETHER FOR AFRICAN WOMEN). In addition, can you share with us one the most uplifting initiatives your foundation has engaged in for a girl or a woman?

W.D. I started the Desert Flower Foundation (based in Vienna, Austria) with the main goal of raising awareness about FGM around the world. According to the United Nations, more than 6000 girls are subjected to this cruel and inhuman ritual every day. More than 2000 girls die daily after the procedure from trauma, infections and blood poisoning. Many females die when giving birth to their first child as a consequence of this terrible and horrific tradition based on superstition in some part of the world.

When I first started talking about FGM, it was hardly known in the western world, and many countries where it was practiced refused to address the issue, let alone enact laws to prohibit FGM. Many of these things have changed by now, numerous states have adopted laws and programs against FGM and in the western world, it is much more known.

The Desert Flower Foundation offers an international media service. Since 2002, more than 3000 interviews and stories on the topic have been initiated by myself and our foundation around the world. In 2011, we started working on projects that have a broader approach: I

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believe that in order to effectively combat FGM, we need to work on empowering women in every aspect of their lives. This is what the project "Together for African Women" focuses on. We work on creating fairly-paid and sustainable jobs in East Africa because we believe that through a steady and reliable income, women will gain independence. Therefore, they will have the freedom to decide what to do with their bodies and - even more importantly - with the bodies of their daughters.

To finish, I would like to say that my foundation raises money for Somalia to invest in clinics and schools. People can find more information about the work of the foundation and details of current campaigns at www.waris-dirie-foundation.com.



P.T. You declared to the media that you were convinced that the power of information and education are the greatest weapons to combat FGM. Can you tell us what your foundation did in that sense throughout the years?

W.D. Education and information are vital. Women and men in countries that practice FGM need to know the effects, both physically and emotionally, that FGM has on their daughters. But I am also convinced that information alone will not be enough to eradicate this practice, simply because poverty plays such an important role in its persistence. Women who have to fight for the survival of their families every day will be much less likely to risk not being able to marry their daughters if they are not mutilated. This is where projects such as "Together for African Women" come into the picture.

P.T. You said to the media that the issue of FGM is in the hands of politicians throughout the world. You added that this problem doesn't concern an individual female but the collectivity. Many women continue to suffer from it worldwide. What can people of both genders, including the politicians, do to fight FGM worldwide?

W.D. They can help change the perception of women in many societies. This concerns the

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media, since it is the media that portrays women in a certain way. It also concerns society as a whole: the things we expect of women and the way we treat them. Only when women will be respected and treated as equals by men can FGM be eradicated. And this is something we can all contribute to through our behavior and the decisions we make. I want to add that I am glad to see some improvement since 2002. 16 African countries have banned FGM including Kenya, Ghana, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Ivory Coast, Togo and Benin as a consequence of the strong pressure by the international community. We need to continue this collective fight against FGM worldwide.

P.T. What needs to be done for more countries to recognize FGM as grounds for granting asylum?

W.D. This is a difficult issue, simply because so many women are affected by FGM worldwide. Additionally, changing the laws in the recipient countries is not a solution to the problem in the countries where FGM is practiced. What really needs to change is the situation there; we need to address the root causes of the problem, such as poverty and inequality, instead of trying to deal with its consequences.

P.T. What message do you have for people who think that they should not get involved in combating FGM because for them it would go against traditional customs?

W.D. FGM is a crime and it is about misogyny. It is a breach of the most basic human rights and it is also a crime that is committed against children. I do not see how any of these things could qualify as "traditions", "religion" or anything that is worth respecting or protecting.

P.T. What did it mean to you when were appointed as a UN Advocate by Kofi Annan (in 1997) for the Abolition of Female Genital Mutilation?

W.D. It was a great honor and recognition both of my work and the importance of speaking out against FGM in general. However, for administering actual campaigns and setting up projects, it was important to me to start my own foundation, which I did in 2002. At the Desert Flower Foundation, I know exactly what is happening in every aspect of our work and I am much more flexible to adapt programs or priorities if necessary.

P.T. Over the last five years, have you observed a decrease of FGM and are more people being prosecuted for engaging in that practice in the most affected countries?

W.D. There have been some cases of prosecution, for instance in Egypt and in Kenya. Moreover, there is generally more attention being paid to the problem. For a very long time, it was not even possible to address the problem. Now many politicians or wives of high officials engage in projects against FGM, which is a very good sign and a powerful statement.

In countries where FGM is mainly a problem through migration, new laws have been adopted and there have been lawsuits in several European countries such as France, Sweden, Spain or Italy.

P.T. How was the movie *Desert Flower* (based on your autobiography) received in your homeland, Somalia and has it pressured the government to make changes especially on the legal level regarding FGM?

W.D. As you know, there is currently no functional government, let alone administrative structure in Somalia. It is therefore very difficult to exercise any form of political influence. Puntland, the area where I was born and raised, have recently enacted laws against FGM. This makes me very joyous.

In some other countries, such as in neighboring Ethiopia and Kenya, the movie was very well received. It was a big success which made me very happy. I even travelled to Addis Ababa to attend the premiere of the movie with my entire family. This was a wonderful experience.

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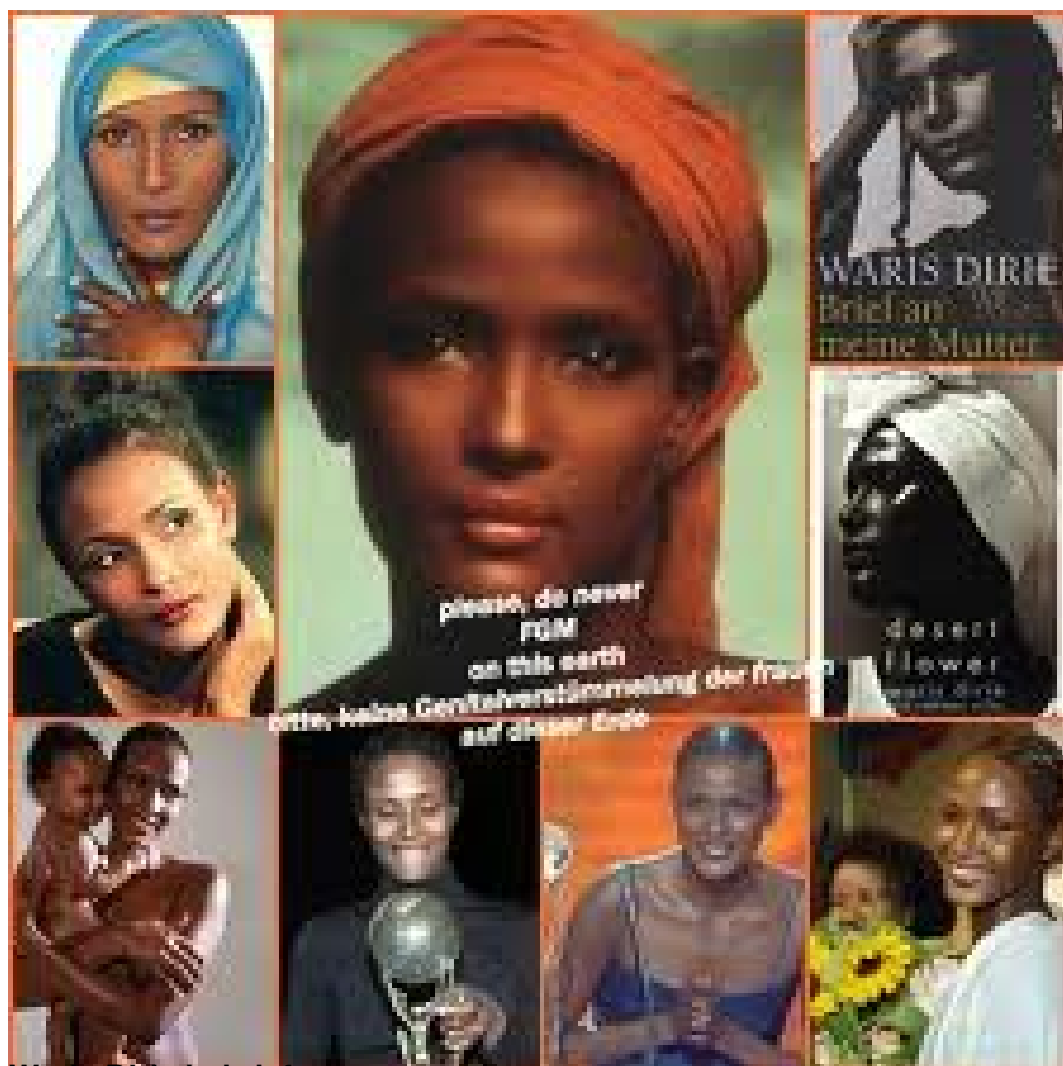
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Waris Dirie is a former supermodel, UN Special Ambassador (1997–2003), and author of the book 'Desert Flower'. She is known for her work against female genital mutilation in Europe. She is also a model and a former supermodel.

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