

# Nomadic warrior queen



**I**f Fatima Jibrell's life story was to be dramatised for a TV movie, it would probably be called 'Fatima: Nomadic Warrior Queen'. The 54 year old daughter of a Somali pastoral family has overcome war, drought and threats on her life to triumph over her adversaries and receive international acclaim for her environmental work in Somalia.

Jibrell has been awarded this year's Goldman Environmental Prize, known as the 'Nobel Prize for the environment', in recognition of her pioneering grassroots conservation work in her native country. Having secured the endorsement of an international panel of her peers, the campaigner feels she is now in a position to highlight the issues that affect communities all over the African continent to a wider audience.

Her crusades have bought her both praise and prejudice. Jibrell created the Horn of Africa Relief and Development Organisation in the early 1990's to combat the threat of massive environmental devastation in

## Fatima Jibrell, winner of this year's Goldman Environmental Prize

Somalia. Her campaign has been most effective in banning the export and wholesale deforestation of age-old acacia trees for the creation of charcoal in Puntland and Somaliland in the east of the country. She has also been successful in working across clans and educating rural communities and women about the importance of sustainable environmentally-friendly alternatives and civil society involvement in government. However, Jibrell maintains there is still a lot to be done.

'We don't feel successful in the real sense, we feel that we've got results,' she says. 'But to replicate these results all over Somalia will take a long time and will depend on support from international and world citizens. And I'm not talking about aid. Aid is not something we can rely on at all.'

Jibrell spoke to *NewsAfrica's* Sylvia Arthur about her life, work and what winning the prestigious \$125,000 award will do for the Africa region environmental campaign.

*NewsAfrica*: Firstly, congratulations on your success.

Why do you think that not much importance is placed on environmental issues in Africa?

**Fatima Jibrell:** The environment is mostly a concern for poor people in Africa, either fishing, nomadic or pastoral communities or small farmers, hunters, wild fruit gatherers and honey collectors. People like that depend on living off the environment in a very direct way. But people who have electricity, who can have daylight whenever they want, are very much removed or somewhat disconnected from nature. They depend on science creating artificial environments for them. They can get into their car or a room and turn on the air conditioning. So they feel like they are more in control and because it's related to poor people in Africa, environmental issues are left to the wolves.

But why aren't environmental issues high on the political agenda?

Because Africans don't have inherited institutions or money that is generations owned. Unfortunately, the Western system that we inherited from colonial times has made us rely on Western ways of governance and we've lost our ancient ways. And, by then, we did not learn them totally. We learnt what the cook of the governor learnt. You can't learn from a governor if you're a cook. You can only learn how he dresses, how he spends, how he looks down on people. You don't know how he organises things, how he builds institutions. So, that's the way we govern, from the cook's mind.

But grassroots people don't appreciate environmental concerns, do they?

I came from a pastoral family, nomadic. What we ate was from nature. And there were not thousands of people in one place. Now we have cities, we have millions of people in one place. There's no culture we can fall back on and learn from. We have to learn to run institutions. We haven't learnt that yet. We are in the process of doing that and without resources and priorities we can't do it. Civil society has to learn to have full con-



trol of a government. They have to have a system of checking governance and that's the only way. It's there. It's started. It's the 'in-thing' in Africa now but we have a long way to go.

#### **Explain the political and economic backdrop against which you work?**

We work on natural resource management. We train nomadic people and pastoralists to manage their own land so they can reduce the frequent reoccurrence of drought, rejuvenate the acacia forests and grasslands that are no more and reduce the dust blowing, soil loss and the scarcity of rain water. We're also working with communities in the coastal areas. Somalia has the longest coast in Africa yet they don't know how to use the coastal and marine resources. There are too many foreign fleets coming in, destroying all the marine resources and dumping waste.

#### **How much support or otherwise have you had from those in authority?**

In Somalia, for 10 years there's been no real, internationally recognised government. There are warlords, there are some elders. Unfortunately, most of them are not helpful. They're more harmful than helpful. They're more friends of the resource looters than the protectors. However, we're training the people, especially young people and women, who're in the process of questioning things they never questioned before. So, they're in a process where they'll call whoever calls themselves government responsible in the future.

#### **Why is it important to create this link between women's empowerment and the environment?**

We look at nature holistically. All these skirmishes and fights are over resources and our problems are resource-based conflicts. Unless we learn to share power and resources we will neither save the environment or its people. So, this is one way of holistically looking at it and holistically solving it - to share, to bring in the stakeholders together on an equal footing.

#### **Why focus on women in particular?**

Because women are the ones who're left with the disaster. If you look at the Somalis in London today, the majority are men. Not many women can just knock on the door of another country. They neither have the resources nor the skills to go across the ocean and find a refuge. So, women are at a disadvantage.

When things fall apart, they're the ones who carry the heaviest burden. The majority of breadwinners in Somali society are women. At the same time, they are the least resource given person in the family. The girl child education is very poor, they're not at all a priority. So, unless women are supported the environment will collapse on them. They're the ones who lose the most. A tree is burnt and shipped as charcoal to Arabia.



#### **'If we take care of nature, nature will take care of us'**

Whoever gets \$2 or \$1 is a man and nothing goes to the woman. And she has lost the tree which she used as medicine, shade, grass for her livestock, she collected gum from it to eat and to sell, she weaved from it, she made utensils from it, she used the fruits either for medicine or for food. She loses all that.

#### **What gave you the awareness of the environment that you have?**

I'm one of many and I work with teams. My organisation Horn Relief is one of the founders of Resource Management Somali Network, which is the only environmental network in Somalia. The reason I wanted to establish this and work in holistic management of resources is because I was born to a nomadic family. A few years ago, I made a trip revisiting the landscape we moved through all year round, from the coast to the mountains to the plains. And the areas that we used to lose baby camels in because they couldn't see when they went into the tall grasslands, today, are blowing dust. The areas that my mother used to tie me to on the corner of the hut with a long rope so I wouldn't wander around and be eaten by a lion. Today, there's not a single lion

there, not even a tree. That's what keeps me going, rehabilitating these old grasslands. Some of them have come back through our work.

#### **Tell us about the charcoal wars?**

Charcoal usage came with the British. The British Garrison in Yemen a century or so ago needed energy to cook with and Somalia's fallen acacia trees, dry wood on the ground, were collected to turn into charcoal and shipped to Yemen. People learnt that it was easier and faster to use that than fire wood. The government then regulated the manufacture of charcoal to the use of dry wood only but when we lost government, all the dry wood was collected, turned into charcoal and sold. People tasted the money. They had no jobs and those from cities had no connection with the ancestral grasslands they came back to. They didn't feel it. They just chopped and used the dry wood. When they finished, they started cutting the 50 to 300 year old acacia trees. And that's what happened. There were skirmishes and shootings between the resource looters and concerned activists. We were successful in Puntland. Somaliland has also been relatively effective in banning it. However, both of them use charcoal domestically for energy and that's taking a toll on the limited forests. They've now moved to Mogadishu and other parts where the forests are the biggest and there are all kinds of wildlife. If you go to the capital you'll see mountains of charcoal waiting for shipment.

#### **Is that where you're intending to move your campaign to now?**

We have two teams in Mogadishu but it's hard for them because these business people are willing to kill. It's a struggle. It looks like the charcoal burners are on the winning side right now.

#### **How can the environment be used to create sustainable social and economic development?**

The whole issue is that the major resources are from the environment and equal sharing of resources and fair enhancement and conservation of the environment will guarantee self reliance in Somalia. Somalia has the longest coast and it used to be very well protected. The last ten years its been depleted but I still believe it's enough to sustain Somalis and more. It doesn't only belong to Somalia but to all world citizens and if we take care of nature, nature will take care of us. ●