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SWDO
Somali Women's
Democratic
Organization

THE SWDO/AIDS PROJECT: "SOMALIA: INFORMATION CAMPAIGN AGAINST INFIBULATION"

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The SWDO/AIDS Project in Somalia is pursuing two basic objectives:

- to launch and implement a campaign to eradicate infibulation; and
- to strengthen and support SWDO structures in conducting this campaign and its related activities.

AIDOS provides technical and methodological support to its Somali counterpart, while SWDO alone is responsible for the content.

The current project began at the end of February 1987. It will be useful here to recapitulate the various stages of its progress, since these provide clear evidence of the theoretical aspects of cooperation projects, in particular among women, and the practical difficulties that may be encountered by an information campaign such as that against infibulation.

In order to boost SWDO's management capabilities (commitment and mobilization ability are high, but equipment and technical and managerial expertise are lacking), AIDOS has established an office at SWDO headquarters, and has equipped it to serve as a centre for organization and management of the project against infibulation and for the production and printing of documentary materials.

The task of this centre is to produce the materials needed for the campaign and to collect all information required by SWDO in connection with the promotion of activities aimed at both Somali society and SWDO's international partners.

In future this office will be the logistic heart of SWDO's activities. To make the office structure operational, the following activities are being carried out (even though there is much room for improvement):

- rehabilitation and improvement of the existing structures (restructuring of the office rooms, repair of furniture, etc.);
- installation of equipment (furniture, typewriters, photocopiers, stencil machine, photo-engraving machine, cutter, personal computer with laser printer, book-binder, etc.);
- training of office personnel. For some of the staff members the

training will be at the beginner level, for some others it will focus on rationalizing work standards and procedures (secretarial work, collection and filing of documentary materials, drawing up of originals for printing, elaboration of simple audiovisual programmes, organization and management of projects);

- collection of documents on female circumcision available in Mogadisho and from abroad;
- filing and cataloguing the materials;
- beginning the production of low-cost and small-circulation printed matters.

All these activities are far from finished, because of objective difficulties existing for all technical activities in the country as well as because of the nature of the work itself.

The information campaign is planned on two main lines.

The first, a "mass" action through the mass media, which should create the widest possible publicity for the fight against infibulation and provide a widespread basis for discussion of this practice (actually it is only in the last few years that the practice of infibulation has come to be questioned within Somali society, and then almost exclusively in Mogadisho).

The second line of action is that of direct contacts, by means of seminars structured as discussion groups lasting 3 to 6 days depending on the targets.

Subsequently, a Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) was set up, grouping 10 experts from the different Ministries concerned and Somali educational and research institutions. The TAC has discussed at length the problem of identifying the characteristics of the campaign's different target groups with a view to ensuring maximum impact.

Here, the research conducted by the Somali experts has been utilized and the information and suggestions drawn from the international literature have been adapted to the Somali social and cultural environment.

The Committee then decided on the operational guidelines of the campaign, on the bibliographical references to be utilized, the contents to be chosen for the campaign and the points to be emphasized. In some cases it also drafted the relevant texts required. The materials were sent to ILO-Turin for elaboration and adaptation to teaching requirements. These materials consist of five "Information Packages" (for women, young people, religious leaders, medical and paramedical personnel), and each package is divided into several sections, including text, instructions for its utilization and

audiovisual materials.

From Italy the materials were sent back to Mogadisho, where the packages for women, religious leaders and young people were translated into Somali (approximately 900 pages in all) and were reviewed and corrected in detail by the Committee.

Since language problems made it impossible to correct the final draft in Italy, the texts were prepared in Mogadisho for printing and were then sent back to Italy to be printed and collected in "packages" including both the text and the teaching aids.

Here I should like to emphasize that the operation of translating the packages into Somali has proved to be a long and difficult one (and this despite the fact that the project avails itself of the best translators available, all teachers at the Somali National University), because Somali is a very old language, but has only recently been codified in writing while the packages require specialist field lexicon, particularly as regards the medical, sociological and teaching parts. For these reasons the translation of the medical package and the paramedical package is still under way and the work is proving to be a very complex one.

As soon as the "women package" could be used in its draft form (end of December 1987) a 10-day "Educator Training" course was held in Mogadisho, during which the participants began to use the materials and become acquainted with the methods of work for which the material had been prepared.

The campaign began with the first group of seminars for the target "Women". In particular we would like to mention the special seminar for the Benadir female poets (Benadir is in the Mogadisho region), which was followed by a poetry contest.

Two actions in particular meet both the depth requirement and mass requirement, namely the poetry competition just mentioned and the present International Seminar "Female Circumcision: strategies to bring about change".

The International Seminar was organized in the framework of the project, both to meet the need for a closer examination of the themes with selected groups of Somali and foreign participants, and the need to make our presence felt—in other words to raise the Somali society's awareness that great strength and commitment are being deployed in discussing this practice and that the discussion is to be seen in an international perspective of defense of the basic human rights.

I would like to expand on the subject of the poetry competition. The artistic expression of the Somali culture, which reflects a traditional-

ly nomadic society, depends almost exclusively on oral expression. Furthermore, the traditional social organization is based on consensus at different levels. In such a society, consensus is achieved by conviction and persuasion, of which argument is the essential tool. Somali poetry, which focuses on ideological content and which achieves very high formal levels, represents an extremely suitable and powerful means of spreading ideas, which is deeply rooted in the cultural traditions.

Prizes were awarded to the best poems from the formal point of view as well as the most effective in terms of the themes dealt with. The competition was advertised in the press and the award ceremony was filmed by television. The winning poems were broadcast on radio and the campaign makes frequent use of them in its radio programmes. After this brief account of the activities that AIDOS and SWDO have carried out jointly in the past year and a half of hard field work, I would like to highlight a few points arising from this instructive experience.

Whenever North and South are involved in a cooperative project, the training problem always crops up: a "know-how transfer"—whatever that might be—always involves a training effort.

At the basis of any educational model lie a given ideology and a given culture. The problem is how to use the most technical aspects of a given educational model while at the same time adjusting its ideology- and culture-based aspects to the social and cultural reality of the country in which the educational model itself is applied. Without going deeply into this matter, I would point out that this is true of any educational action, but is especially true of an information campaign which focuses upon an issue which lies at the heart of the local culture.

If we consider the education and information transmission models, present in today's Somalia, one immediately sees that there are several and that they are not very compatible.

- The educational model is represented by traditional instruction which is family-based, oral and non-formalized. This, the most widespread model in the nomadic society, could be called the "natural" model.
- The Koran school provides another traditional model. It is highly structured and has remained the same over the centuries; it is based on repetition and the total subscription, of both the body and soul, to the acquisition of a Muslim identity both as an individual and as a member of the society of believers. This could be called the "religious" model.

• Still another model is provided by the Government's institutional instruction. The Somali Government has made enormous efforts to guarantee mass literacy to its population, but follows quite traditional "school" education models.

• The experience of the Somali National University, set up with Italian cooperation and which follows the educational philosophy of Italian universities, provides what we might call the "academic" model.

• Finally, with the aim more to inform than to educate, there is the "political propaganda" model, based essentially on the one-way message with no immediate feedback.

The art of persuasion and the art of rhetoric are widespread and highly valued in the Somali society and represent the real mode of information transmission. And, further, the women's community is characterized by a high degree of cohesion and internal communication, since it is kept separate from that of men and that within it an informal "discussion group" model is applied spontaneously.

If we then want to start an education programme, especially aimed at women, concerning so important an issue as the traditional infibulation practice, it seems clear to me that we must use a model as near as possible to what I have called the "natural" model. This model has the characteristic of having a strong affective and trust connotation and involves a continuous interaction between the teacher and the learner without the learner's being able to fully rationalize his or her learning process.

Nevertheless, the anti-infibulation campaign must be rich in scientific content (including, for example, the health consequences, anatomy and physiology, the link between a fact remote in time and its long-term consequences), which can counter, with reason, the tremendous power of deep and unconscious cultural roots and motivations.

The two other educational models we have mentioned, namely the "school" and the "academic", must also be used to transmit content characterized by a high degree of formalization. All this, however, must be done with maximum attention to the "mode" of information transmission. This is why it seems to me that the model—which I would call "discussion group" rather than "seminar"—chosen by ILO and AIDOS jointly as the one to be used in our information campaign, is the best suited to our aims.

It should be noted that this "discussion group" training model is greatly innovative with respect to the models which are being used in the institutional context in Somalia today and might present some

methodological difficulties when used by the educator. In order to maintain its impact and to reach the heart of the matter to which it is applied, such model must not atrophy into a mechanical repetition which has lost its significance.

I have often had the impression that educators working on the campaign, and especially the women members of the organization, tended to follow the "propaganda" or "school" models rather than conform to the spirit of the more congenial "discussion group" model, which is absolutely necessary in order to reach the participants' inner self and have their deep-rooted convictions questioned. I think all this can be ascribed to the long militant experience of the educators. This may represent a limitation, but in fact it is counter-balanced and actually neutralized by their powers of persuasion.

However, I believe it is advisable to channel their energies into more professional behaviour as educators. I think that the educator training activities that SWDO and AIDOS are carrying out should be continued together with continuous monitoring and assessment.

Great attention should be paid to safeguarding the autonomy of the SWDO staff in the technical and technological field (office and programme management, availability of the equipment), in which the project is pursuing its on-the-job-training policy.

All these efforts must be continued in a dual direction so that SWDO may take maximum advantage of a treasure of knowledge and human and technical resources, which are indispensable to it in this long and difficult struggle.