



## Lul Kulmiye: A Woman of Vision and Action

By Hassan M. Abukar

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When Lul “Araweelo” Kulmiye was a child, she had big dreams.

“I will work with a pen and notebook in my hand,” she recalled saying.

Recently, when she found herself standing in a Norwegian court interpreting for Somalis, she realized that her dream has become reality.

“Wow!” she gasped. “It never occurred to me before to connect my childhood aspirations with my current professional work.”

A certified nurse by training and experience, Lul has become more than a professional interpreter. She has worked as a community advocate, women’s rights activist, and human rights crusader.

Lul became a well-known Somali community activist and leader through a freak accident in 2005.



*Lul Kulmiye*

“I was working along with a Norwegian nursing student when I hurt my right hand,” she explained.

Initially, she didn't feel any discomfort, but after a few hours, she felt an intense pain. She went to an emergency room and was told she had broken her hand and wouldn't be working for two weeks.

"I was supposed to start a summer job when the accident happened," she added ruefully.

Those two weeks of medical leave turned out to be anything but restful—they were the foundation of her community activism.

Several thousand miles away in Mogadishu, Somalia, a story was brewing about the plight of Halima Hirre, a 3-year-old girl from the Somali region in Ethiopia, who had a tumor in her genitalia. When Lul heard about Halima, she was heartbroken.

"I am a mother, a human being, and I wanted to help," she said.

Lul began contacting various health organizations—the Red Cross, Doctors without Borders, and humanitarian groups—to help Halima, but to no avail.

Representatives of these organizations told Lul there was nothing they could do because they didn't help individuals. In other words, she needed to be a nonprofit entity. Some staff members advised her to approach the media for help with her cause.

Thus Lul's quest to save Halima began.

She wrote first to *Dagsavisen*, a Norwegian daily newspaper. Then, she approached Dayniile online magazine to advocate for Halima. Instead, she was interviewed by the magazine and she told Halima's story. What happened next was an unprecedented humanitarian event that brought together Somalis in the diaspora.

"Somalis in Australia, America, Europe, the Middle East, and Asia were calling me to inquire about Halima, and some donated funds for her," said Lul, recalling her surprise and excitement.

After witnessing her ceaseless energy and determination as she tried to find a hospital for the young girl, some people asked her if Halima belonged to her clan. No, she was'nt.

Lul spent months talking to Somalis in the diaspora; from America to Malaysia, and everywhere in between. Her goal was to raise \$30,000, and she brought in about \$25,000 for Halima in a short period—all over the phone. The drive rallied other Somalis until the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota in the United States agreed to operate on Halima. Lul sent \$10,000 as a down payment to the hospital to begin the U.S. visa process for Halima and her father.

That's when something miraculous happened:

"A Somali man donated all the travel expenses for Halima and her father and found her a hospital in Vienna, Austria, that would treat the girl for free," Lul said. Plans for the Mayo Clinic treatment suddenly became redundant.

Lul, then a single mother with three young children, took time off from work, asked a relative to look after her children. She flew to Austria, where she met Halima and her father at the Vienna hospital. She translated for the family for the first week of their stay. During Halima's medical check, doctors also discovered that she had leukemia.

"I was elated to help Halima and was grateful for the trust her family had bestowed upon me," Lul said.

Then, people came forward who claimed to be from the same clan as Halima. They wanted the \$25,000 donation for her care to be given to the family. Lul carefully and deliberately consulted with the donors and many of her supporters about what to do with the money. A consensus was reached to give half the money to Halima's family and to use the other half to help a boy from Galkacayo, Somalia, who was to be flown to Columbus, Ohio, for urgent surgery. His operation was successful.

Halima's successful case earned Lul a new moniker "*Kulmiso*" (the Unifier), and she was encouraged to form an organization to assist Somali immigrants and refugees in Norway and elsewhere. But a new scenario was unfolding at home: She needed to focus on raising her children, who had been missing her while she worked on Halima's humanitarian campaign.



*The historic picture of Somali women in Rwanda in 2015*

Lul started volunteering at her children's school and in their extracurricular activities. She was relentless in making sure her children received whatever help they needed.

Yet, Somalis in Norway needed her community services.

Lul became active in the G-10 Peace and Reconciliation for Somalia, a community-based organization in Norway that served Somalis. She became a member of its executive committee and its spokeswoman.

“Within a year, we raised funds to help in the cleanup campaign of Mogadishu streets,” she said.

Her community activism took significant leap in 2014 when she became one of the founders of the Global Somali Diaspora. She has been Norway’s representative of the group ever since and was later elected to its board of directors.

A year later, Lul [attended](#) the Somali Diaspora Conference in Kigali, Rwanda, which included 40 female delegates and 50 male delegates across the globe. However, an incident at that [conference](#) launched her advocacy role inside Somalia’s political landscape.

Omar Abdirashid Sharmarke, who was then prime minister of Somalia, submitted a list of his proposed new cabinet. There was a glaring weakness: It included only two female ministers and one deputy minister. Lul and her female colleagues were outraged by the underrepresentation of women, and they peacefully protested. Their historic group photograph in Rwanda became a rallying cry for Somali women and their inclusion in government.

Prime Minister Sharmarke reconsidered his cabinet list and named three female ministers (out of [20](#)) and two deputy ministers. It was a small win for Lul and her colleagues, but nevertheless a victory. The protest ushered in a new era of women’s activism.

Another setback for women occurred when the Somali federal government’s transitional framework, better known as “Vision 2016,” organized a gathering in Minneapolis. The meeting included no women.

“This setback was a blessing,” Lul said, laughing. “It led to the formation of the Somali Gender Equity Movement.”

Suddenly, many women joined the movement to [ensure](#) their voices were heard, and they have become an integral part of the decision-making process.

“Within weeks, the movement had 8,600 members,” she said, beaming. “We had [ten](#) founders, including myself.”

It became essential to consider the group’s [activism](#) inside Somalia, which was getting ready for the 2016 presidential and parliamentary elections. At the time, only 14% legislators out of 275

were women. The Somali government and the international community wanted the next Somali federal parliament to have a minimum of female representation of 30 percent.

However, Lul and her female colleagues had much loftier goals: They wanted a female president, a female prime minister, or a female speaker.

“Realistically, we wanted to increase female representation in parliament from 14% to 40%,” Lul explained.

Lul and her colleagues lobbied hard with Somali government officials, elders, regional government leaders, and the press to drastically increase the number of elected female officials. The result was the election of 24% of women.

“It was slightly better than the 14 female law-makers in the previous parliament,” Lul explained.

Lul is realistic about the clan-based power sharing arrangement in Somalia, better known as the 4.5 system. She knows it is flawed because it favors men and disenfranchises women.

“The quality of some of the current elected female legislators may not be impressive due to the lack of educational and governmental experience,” Lul admitted.

That’s why she is adamant about the need for change in the political process.

“I don’t care if some female legislators are not qualitatively impressive. Women have to have representation,” she explained. “There are some men, former warlords, in the legislature who had blood soaking in their hands.”

The struggle for female representation in the Somali government has become Lul’s new calling. She and Zainab M. Hassan, chairwoman of the Somali Gender Equity Movement, have traveled across Somalia, meeting with women, listening to their concerns, and making sure their voices are heard.

Lul, who has won countless awards for her activism, has a special appreciation for one medal she received from Said Salah, the [legendary](#) literary figure and educator. He presented her with a symbolic camel bell on behalf of all her fellow women activists.



*The symbolic camel bell Said Salah presented to Lul Kulmiye*

Salah explained that the camel bell has special significance. Somalis were involved in civil war and the she-camel that had worn the bell had perished. Her young herder had gone crazy; and what is left of the she-camel is her bell. Somalis use various camel bells on their camels, depending on the animal's disposition. The fastest camel wears a special bell so that she could be heard when she is far away; the slowest camel, which hangs around home, has also special bell to indicate she is around.

"I am giving you the camel bell for the fastest camel because you work at a faster pace in advocating on behalf of women," Salah told Lul. "Let us hear from each other even when you are far away."

Lul's childhood dream of growing up to work with a pen and a notebook has been fulfilled. Her next dream is even grander: She wants equal representation of women in politics, social, and the economy. She wants to fight discrimination, sexism and misogyny, and stand for the



qualitative improvement of women’s conditions. She also wants to protect women from experiencing constant provocations and slights from unjust leaders.

“It is a huge task that we, women from all walks of life, want to accomplish,” she added. “Of course, we can do it with the help of everyone, including men.”

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