

2019 Sun Hak Peace Prize winner Waris Dirie

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Sun Hak Peace Prize Laureate Waris Dirie

An Advocate for Women as God Made Them 2019

Waris Dirie (Somali: Waris Diiriye) (born 1965) is a Somali model, author, actress and social activist. From 1997 to 2003, she served as a UN Special Ambassador. Dirie was born into a nomadic family in 1965 in Galkayo, Somalia. At the age of thirteen, she fled to Mogadishu in order to escape an arranged marriage to a 60-year-old man. There, she briefly lived with an older sister and her family.

Dirie along with a few relatives later moved to London, where she resided with and worked for an uncle, who had been appointed Somali ambassador. When his term in office ended, Waris remained in the city and held a job at a local McDonald's. She also began evening classes to learn English.



Career

By chance, photographer Terence Donovan, who helped secure for her the cover of the 1987 Pirelli Calendar, discovered Dirie. From there, her modeling career took off, appearing in advertisements for top brands such as Chanel, Levi's, L'Oréal and Revlon.

In 1987, Dirie played a minor role in the James Bond movie *The Living Daylights*. She also appeared on the runways of London, Milan, Paris and New York City, and in fashion magazines such as Elle, Glamour and Vogue. This was followed in 1995 by a BBC documentary entitled *A Nomad in New York* about her modeling career.

In 1997, at the height of her modeling career, Dirie spoke for the first time with Laura Ziv of the women's magazine *Marie Claire* about the female genital mutilation (FGM) that she had undergone as a child, at the age of three along with her two sisters. That same year, Dirie became a UN ambassador for the abolition of FGM. She later paid her mother a visit in her native Somalia.

In 1998, Dirie coauthored her first book along with nonfiction author Cathleen Miller: *Desert Flower*, an autobiography that went on to become an international bestseller. She later released other successful books including *Desert Dawn*, *Letter to My Mother* and *Desert Children*, the latter of which was launched in tandem with a European campaign against FGM. In 2009, a feature-length film based on Waris' book *Desert Flower* was released, with the Ethiopian supermodel Liya Kebede playing her. The movie has so far been released in 20 countries including France, Spain, Israel, Greece, Poland and Brazil. In January 2010, it won the Bavarian Film Award in Munich in the "Best Movie" category. It was also nominated for a Film Award in Gold in the "Outstanding Feature Film" category at the German Film Awards, and won the Audience Award in the "Best European Film" category at the San Sebastián International Film Festival.



In 2010, Dirie was appointed Peace Ambassador for the Year of Peace and Security by the African Union.

In 1997, Dirie abandoned her modeling career to focus on her work against FGM. That same year, she was appointed the UN Special Ambassador for the Elimination of Female Genital Mutilation. In 2002, she founded the Desert Flower Foundation in Vienna, Austria, an organization aimed at raising awareness regarding the dangers surrounding FGM. Waris followed that in January 2009 with the establishment of the PPR Foundation for Women's Dignity and Rights', an organization she founded along with French tycoon François-Henri Pinault (CEO of PPR) and his wife, Hollywood actress Salma Hayek. Waris has also started the Desert Dawn Foundation, which raises money for schools and clinics in her native Somalia, and supports the Zeitz Foundation, an organization focused on sustainable development and conservation.

Dirie has received many other prizes and award for her humanitarian work and books including:

Woman of the Year Award (2000) by Glamour magazine.

Corine Award (2002) of the umbrella association of the German bookselling trade Women's World Award (2004) from former President of the USSR, Mikhail Gorbachev. Bishop Óscar Romero Award (2005) by the Catholic Church.

Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur (2007) from former President of France, Nicolas Sarkozy. Prix des Générations (2007) by the World Demographic Association Martin Buber Gold Medal from the Euriade Foundation (2008), founded by Werner Janssen in 1981 Gold medal of the President of the Republic of Italy (2010) for her achievements as a human rights activist.