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FISTULA  
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## Treatment, prevention and raising awareness of obstetric fistulas

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# Meet our first international student

Sister Domenica Vensia is a 36 year-old nun. She was born in the small town of Upper Nile, South Sudan, close to the Ethiopian border.

After completing a diploma of nursing in South Sudan, Domenica joined the Komboni Missionary Sisters and began working in the Benishangul region of Ethiopia.

“I have been serving in Ethiopia for the past nine years and have witnessed many of the challenges rural women face while giving birth,” she said. “Because of the lack of skilled professionals in the area, I saw women die on delivery, even after being treated at a health institution. I wanted to upgrade my skills in a very specific way so I could help prevent the poor mothers from dying.”

In 2019, Domenica attended an event in Addis Ababa and met a doctor who told her about the work of Hamlin Fistula Ethiopia and its College of Midwives. “What I heard from Dr Barbara about this College and its high-quality training for young girls was what I have been dreaming about all my life!” she said. “I thought to myself ‘this is it’ but I didn’t know how I could ever go there. I began to explore possible ways of joining the College, studying midwifery and saving the lives of many mothers.”

Hearing of Dr Catherine Hamlin’s death in early 2020 made Domenica even more interested. “When I heard the news, I was deeply saddened, but it also doubled my interest in joining the College. I discussed the issue with the heads of my organization and they allowed me to pay a visit to the College.”

During that visit, Domenica met Sister Marit and discovered that there was no apparent way for her to enrol. The College gives scholarship to young girls from rural Ethiopia who pass their high school exams well and who are and willing to serve in their hometown for four years after graduation. The College administration obviously sensed Domenica’s drive and sincerity and accepted her application with a promise to call her if there was any possibility of a scholarship offer.

Then the global pandemic struck, and everything was thrown into chaos. The College was unable to recruit students who lived far away from the College’s supervision. This meant that the districts of Gambela and Benishangul would not be able to send students to the College. But this apparent problem worked in Domenica’s



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favour, and she was accepted as a special case, complete with a scholarship. “When I got a call from the College I couldn’t believe it! Finally, the impossible became possible and I joined the College as first year midwifery student.”

Domenica is the first international student but, she says, “I love Ethiopia and I never have considered myself as foreigner.”

Domenica is sponsored by the Komboni Missionary Sisters and, after graduation, will be deployed at the same clinic where she worked in remote Benishangul region. “On April 17, 2021 I joined the College I have been dreaming about. I am a nun and its being women’s only college makes it fit with my religious practice. The well facilitated teaching with highly skilled teachers and the breathtaking environment means the College is even better than my expectations. I am now looking forward to finishing my study successfully and helping to save the lives of many mothers who otherwise might die just at their happy moment of delivery. I thank you all for granting me the scholarship.”



Dr Hamlin used to say, “I believe that if we put a midwife into every village in Ethiopia, we could eradicate fistula from this big land.” Thanks to her vision and lifetime of work, as well as the generosity of donors from around the world, this vision is being realized. Domenica is one more midwife in the grand scheme to get rid of fistula, not only from Ethiopia, but from every developing country in the world.

## Asefelech – potter

Asefelech Elma’s story is a familiar one at Hamlin Fistula Ethiopia. Her childhood was spent not at school, but helping her mother until an arranged marriage took her away from home while she was still a teenager.

Married life began happily and she had two daughters, now aged 15 and three. With her third pregnancy, however, life changed. Her husband left the family, leaving Asefelech six months pregnant, with two children to provide for. But things got worse. Her third labour was long and difficult, and resulted in a stillborn baby and a fistula injury.

She was referred to the Addis Ababa Fistula Hospital where she was cured and returned to her home totally dry and happy. “My cure was like a miracle,” she said. “I never thought I would be dry in such short time. I have no words to thank everybody involved in my treatment. Thank you for making me a woman again.”

But life was still hard with no husband to help provide for her and her children. “Our only source of living

was in the pottery skills I learned from my mother. My elder daughter and I woke up early every morning and climbed a nearby mountain where we found clay soil to make pottery. It is from the sale of these products that we got the money to cover our rent and food. There were times where we sold nothing and went to bed hungry.”

Help finally came when HFE staff contacted Asefelech and invited her to take part in a new Women’s Hope International project. Along with 45 other fistula survivors, Asefelech is part of the first group to complete a two-month business skills program. The course took place at Desta Mender, HFE’s Rehabilitation and Reintegration Centre, where women who have had fistula surgery can gain new skills which will allow them to support themselves when they return to their homes.

Asefelech’s natural talent was soon noticed. Tigist, the Rehabilitation and Reintegration manager at HFE said “Asefelech is a very brave woman with an inborn talent that could change her life. Our role in this training is to show her how talented she is and direct her in using that talent for business. She even became a trainer for other women who showed an interest in pottery.” While she was at Desta Mender Asefelech started selling her products to the staff. “I used to do these pottery products in a very backward and labor-intensive

way. This training course showed me how to do it in a better, modern way. If I can get some starting capital, my plan is to ask some government bodies in my area if I can make these pottery products in this modern way and give my daughters the better life they deserve. I would like to forward my thankfulness to those who organize the training.”



## Tizita – midwife

Sister Tizita Haile Michael is now 24 years old.

After completing high school and being granted a Hamlin midwifery scholarship, she graduated and returned to her hometown in 2018. She began working in a remote government clinic in Dogu and after two years in difficult conditions, was transferred to Kurfa clinic which has a better infrastructure and slightly more pleasant living conditions.

Tizita now has over three years of professional experience, living and working in uncomfortable conditions but still practically proving the professional vow of service to her countrywomen which she took when she graduated.

Like most Hamlin trained midwives Tizita attended well over 100 safe deliveries before graduation which made her a highly skilled and experienced professional when she started her career. “We Hamlin graduates are different compared to similar professionals trained in other institutions. The high-quality training we received at the College and the

exceptional clinical attachment we had made us proud and confident professionals. Wherever we go we can easily win the trust of the community and become leaders in the maternal healthcare service of the clinic we are serving,” she said.

This stands Tizita in good stead as she is now the only Hamlin graduate midwife serving at the Kurfa clinic. Her senior colleagues completed their four-year contract and moved on to new jobs. Most Hamlin graduate midwives, after the completion of their contract with Hamlin are able to find jobs anywhere because they are the most competent and in-demand professionals on the market. Many of them have joined international organizations and universities.

Perhaps one day Tizita will move on but, at the moment, the rewards in her small community are great. “I remember a mother who came to me late one night for delivery and developed life-threatening post-partum hemorrhoid bleeding,” she said. “She should have been transferred to a hospital immediately, but there was no ambulance or transport available, so I decided to do whatever I could to help her. I implemented all the necessary steps



to save her life and then accompanied her to the nearby hospital on public transport. Now both she and her baby are well and healthy. Whenever she meets me, she hugs me with love and thanks me for saving her life. We became almost family afterwards.”

Hamlin regularly supports the clinic where Tizita is working so that she can continue providing quality service for mothers and their newborns. Tizita recalls an important moment during her time at the College of Midwives; “When I was a first-year student at the Hamlin College, I incidentally met Dr Catherine. She greeted me and my classmates warmly, asked us about our study and told us how our profession is very crucial to rural mothers to stop fistula. Ever since I have loved being a midwife and that is because of the commitment and love she showed to mothers. She is my inspiration.”

## Mulu – survivor

Mulu Addise arrived at the Hamlin Fistula Hospital 15 years ago.

Her story was a familiar one; after a long labour she was left with a stillborn child and a massive fistula injury, but without a husband, a home or any dignity.

Her birth injury was so severe, repeated operations and treatments over the past 15 years have failed to cure her. “In all those years with fistula I led a horrible and desperate life. I lost my marriage and home, my social life, my confidence, my dignity and everything. The loss of my father and mother four years ago worsened my grief even more. My relatives and my family including my dad, before his

death, gave up hope in me and left me in complete loneliness. This hospital and the lovely medical team members were the only untiring supporters who kept me alive until today,” she said.

But in March this year, Mulu’s miracle occurred. When her incontinence became uncontrollable because of the damage done to her bladder she called the hospital and was told that a new surgeon who performs a very specialised diversion surgery was about to arrive.

Dr Wondwossen, an Ethiopian urologist, joined the hospital staff in 2020 and it didn’t take long for Mulu to arrive at the hospital looking for her final cure. In the first week of March 2021, she had her final surgery and became totally dry.

“Before the actual surgery I went willingly through the necessary treatments. In those long years

with fistula, especially the past four years, I was in my worst physical and psychological situation. People were talking behind my back that I had HIV /AIDS because I was too underweight. Look at me now! I am the happiest woman in the world. I became completely dry after over 15 years and now I walk around with confidence and dignity. For me Emaye (*Dr Hamlin’s affectionate nickname which means ‘mother’*) is like an angel sent to save innocent and poor people like me. I wish she was immortal.

May God put her soul in heaven. I cannot thank all the staff here and those who support this work enough. Thank you.”



# Meet Dr Zehara



My name is Dr Zehara Sualih and I am a surgeon at Hamlin Fistula Ethiopia (HFE) where I have been working since January, 2015. I have performed around 700 fistula repair surgeries in that time.



I became interested in fistula surgery when I heard about this hospital. It is the best centre in Ethiopia to take care of women in such need. I don't have words to describe the selfless effort of Drs Reg and Catherine Hamlin to change the lives of poor women who could only truly live because of their care.



I love everything about my job at HFE, even though I found using some of the instruments in the operating theatre a challenge.



When I complete a fistula surgery, and see the woman coming to life again, I feel that I am living a meaningful life because I have changed a threatened life.



I hope that future generations of Ethiopian women will be empowered and will be part of the vision to make Ethiopia free from fistula.



My great career goal is simply to serve the women of Ethiopia with up-to-date, high quality care.