

## WOMEN OF AFRICA: DEAF-BLIND LAWYER ON TYPING TO OBAMA

Source: BBC

<http://bbc.in/1WZxdvu>

November 18, 2015 — Haben Girma was the first deaf-blind student to graduate from Harvard Law School. Today the Eritrean-American fights for better education for deaf-blind people worldwide.

Ms Girma was born in California after her mother fled Eritrea in the early 1980s.

Growing up in the US school system, she benefited from accessible technology, such as a digital Braille device - something her elder brother, who is also deaf-blind, was denied in Eritrea.

Now she is working as a lawyer to try to improve access to this technology and challenge expectations of people with disabilities.

Earlier this year, she met US President Barack Obama.

Haben says: "I am an attorney here and I grew up facing access barriers as a deaf-blind person, and that inspired me to become a lawyer.

"And when I first started at Harvard



Haben Girma posing with U.S. President Barack Obama while holding digital braille device

Law School, there were very few deaf-blind attorneys. I couldn't turn to older deaf-blind individuals and ask. I had to figure it out a lot on my own. So graduating from Harvard Law School says a lot about what can be done when people have the right attitude."

One of Haben's priorities is to help deaf-blind people communicate through better access to technology.

Haben says: "There are so many forms of communicating information. And if we're creative and open-minded, we'll find those forums. I use a digital braille display and QWERTY keyboard for

communication. The braille display shows in digital braille, mechanical dots pop up to form braille letters. And, as I am reading, my assistant Chris types on a QWERTY keyboard when there are conversations going on."

Haben met President Obama at the White House to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Haben says: "At the White House celebration of the 25th Anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act, President Obama met with me and he used alternative technologies to communicate with me. That sends a very empowering message. It reminds the rest of the United States and the rest of the world that having an inclusive attitude ensures that people with disabilities can contribute their talents to society."

Women of Africa is a BBC season recognising inspiring women across the continent. The first series, *Africa's Unsung Heroes*, introduces eight women who are making a difference in their country - and beyond.