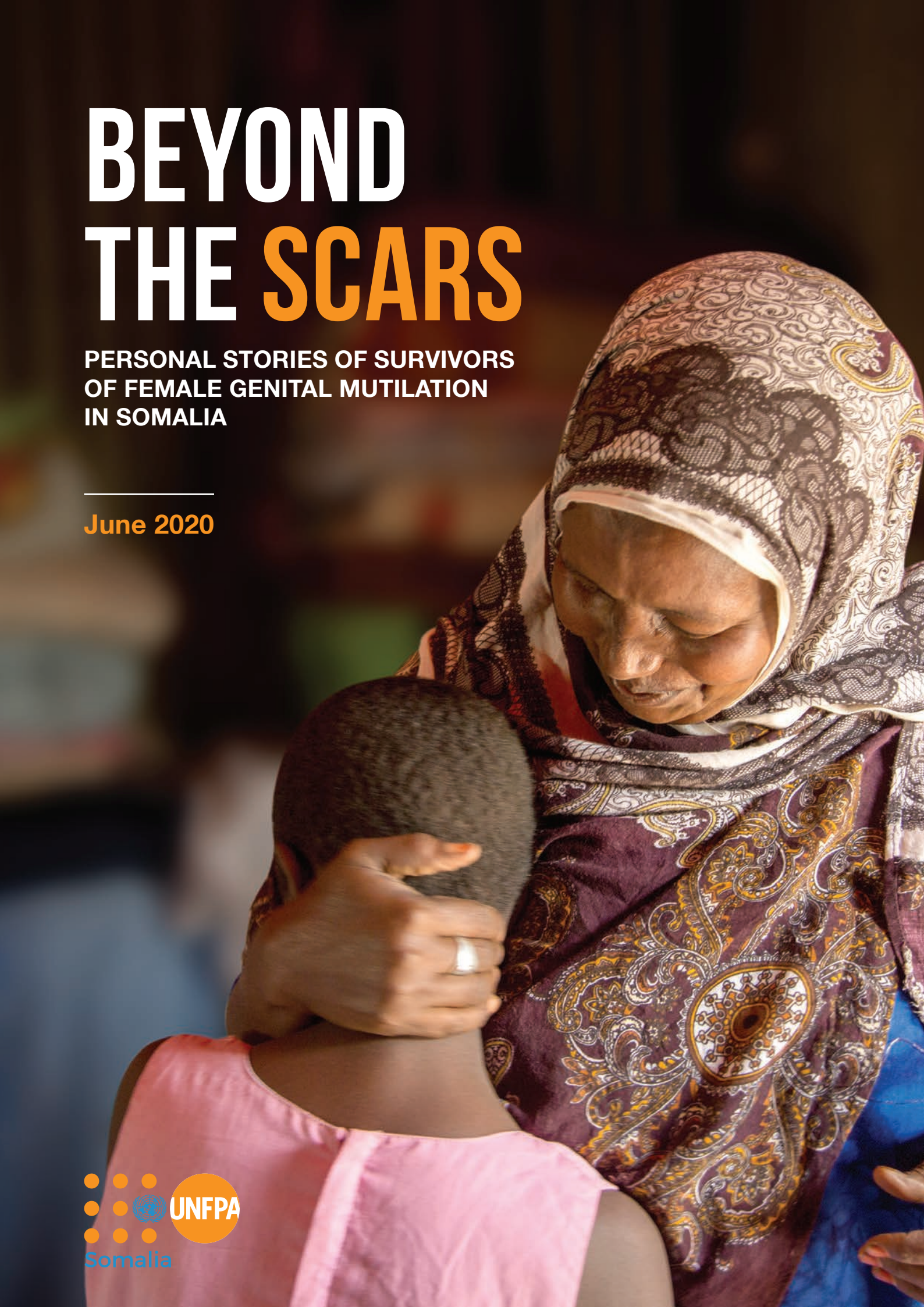


BEYOND THE SCARS

PERSONAL STORIES OF SURVIVORS
OF FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION
IN SOMALIA

June 2020



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Invest in health and dignity:

Hafsa's plea

Imagine having to hold your urine, and only letting out a little for seven days because you are experiencing unbearable pain in your private parts. This is not caused by an infection, but because your genitals have been cut deliberately. This is what I went through at the tender age of 11, when a child does not fully understand the ways of the world. My mother voluntarily took me to a circumciser.

My name is Hafsa Adan Hassan. I am 20 years old and this is my story. I grew up in Farjano, Kismayo, and like most children, I went to school with my brothers and sisters. One day, I woke up to prepare myself for school, but was surprised when my mother informed me that I was not allowed to attend school that day. She said I was going to get circumcised, just like all my agemates, who were already circumcised.

My mother told me I was transitioning into womanhood. I remember being taken aback, but I couldn't do anything about it. At around 10 am that morning, an old woman who was our neighbour, came and spoke to my mother. They talked about me. I grew more and more nervous because I heard them mentioning my name but did not really understand what the discussion was about. My mother took me to a room where I saw many other girls of my age. The old woman in the room spoke to us about the importance of circumcision and how it is an important symbol of a girl's virginity. After the pep talk, we were psyched up to undergo the "rite of passage", unaware of the intensity of the pain that we would go through and of what was in store for us.

I was the second girl to be circumcised. My legs were tied up and I felt the most excruciating pain I have ever felt in my life. I even felt a lot of pain urinating and I hardly urinated for seven days. After the seventh day, my legs were untied, but I could not walk. When I finally managed to walk, I experienced pain in my hips, which made it difficult for me to walk and run. As a result, I stopped playing with my friends.

When I had my first period, I felt even more excruciating pain. The blood trickled slowly, and I could feel pain in my abdomen, backbone, kidneys, and entire body. I had headaches. I could not open up to tell my mother about all this as I was embarrassed. Something as simple and natural as urinating had become so difficult. I skipped classes during my period for almost a week because I didn't have sanitary pads. Eventually, I dropped out of school because I was going through so much.

I believe everyone has a right to the highest available standards of health. The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action states that good health is necessary for the enjoyment of dignity and human rights, and that the importance of healthy populations to sustainable development is undeniable. Please make a commitment today at this ICPD event to ensure that girls like me do not undergo female genital mutilation (FGM), which is harmful to our health and affects every aspect of our lives.



Discussions by young people on how they can fight FGM

Looking at FGM through the eyes of a man

My name is Mohamed Arshad Ibrahim, and I am an executive member of the Youth Peer Education Network (Y-PEER) in Mogadishu. I joined this ever-growing network in 2014, and since then, I have acquired extensive knowledge about and advocacy skills to support people's rights and choices. I am currently involved in youth affairs, ranging from the empowerment of youth and women to raising awareness of adolescent sexual reproductive health and rights (ASRHR).

I am the first graduate in a family of nine. Having grown up in a community where women and girls are regarded as lesser human beings, I noted that almost all the ladies in the community have been victims of FGM. I remember when I was seven years, my sister and I had to go for circumcision, a practice that is regarded as an initiation period from childhood to adulthood.

One morning, we were preparing to go to school, when we were informed by our mother that we should stay at home. My sister and I, along with others in our neighborhood were to undergo the cut. The traditional circumcisers who were supposed to perform the procedure were ready for the exercise. The process was normal for boys, but a few metres from where we were, we could hear the unforgettably loud screams of the young girls. The pain of the ordeal was unbearable for them. While the boys could walk normally after the process, the girls had to be carried to their rooms by two to three women and had to have their legs tied together for seven days. Whenever my sister wanted to attend to nature's short call, she had to do it with the help of others and had to endure a lot of pain.

My sisters painfully narrated to me how the effects of FGM still cause complications during childbirth. What I had witnessed and heard led to me constantly questioning myself why women had to go through this painful experience. Having seen for myself the harrowing consequences of FGM that my loved ones had to live with, I strongly feel it is now time we join hands and promise not to subject our children and those in our community and neighbourhood to such practices.

Seven of my nieces are now enjoying life without FGM as a result of our joint family efforts of thwarting the evil practice. Young men have a lot to offer in the fight against FGM. Many are doing so through awareness raising and taking a stand that they will not allow this practice to be affect their immediate family members. Ending gender-based violence and harmful practices, including FGM, is one of the five themes of the Nairobi Summit on ICPD25 and I hope world leaders will commit to ending FGM.

Issues of human rights violations, such as gender inequality, are widespread in Somalia because the people's beliefs are influenced by strong cultural and religious stereotypes. The Somali society adheres to a strong ideology of patriarchy, which continues to support these negative narratives. I believe that as young people, we can overcome the challenges of FGM that we have experienced for so long. By collaborating with like-minded individuals with the shared purpose of abolishing these practices, we can forge a strong movement and engage in making a difference in the lives of those in our community. Together, we can achieve our main goal of building a healthy, happier and well-informed society free from violence, harmful practices and discrimination.



A publication Y-Peer uses to advocate against FGM



Spreading the word about the dangers of FGM

Despite the widespread efforts to combat the FGM in Somalia, it is still a popular practice across the country. In Somalia, male circumcision is known to be a religious duty, but female circumcision is considered a cultural practice. There is widespread misinformation about girls who are uncircumcised. This includes stereotypes, one of the most common ones being that uncircumcised girls have uncontrollable sexual desires and are therefore likely to commit immoral sexual acts. That is primarily why, in Somalia, most families ensure their daughters undergo inhumane circumcision, a procedure that totally blocks the entire vagina, leaving a small opening to pass urine. The blockage remains in place until the girl is ready to get married, which is when she is taken to a doctor who opens the blocked parts.

To address this misinformation and show that such stereotypes are unfounded and false, the Puntland Y-PEER Office conducts awareness campaigns on FGM in the course of our campaigns, we have come across stories that caught our attention. Some of them are in this publication.

Story 1 – Pre-wedding misery

Early in April 2017, I was really happy, as I was getting married. However, something very strange happened. One morning, I was called by my mother and other women who told me I needed to get prepared before my marriage. I got excited, as I thought it would be a happy day, but it turned out to be very horrible.

I was young, less than 10 years old, when I had undergone FGM—and had been mutilated in a terrible way. When I was cut, they sewed up my entire private part, leaving a small hole that barely allowed urine to pass through.

When my mother and the other women had told me that I needed to get prepared for my wedding, they meant opening up the sewed parts of my vagina, which they did. I could not understand the problems that such a procedure would bring me. When they opened the sewed part, I got infected, and the healing process took a long time—in fact, it took such a long time that I missed the designated day of my wedding. I eventually got married, but the experience made me very depressed, and I do not want my daughter to have the same horrible experience. But in this patriarchic culture, I am really powerless, and I fear that my daughter will eventually get mutilated.

Unfortunately, people think that if a girl is not mutilated, she will grow up and develop some uncontrollable sexual desires. But that is a myth that has no truthful basis, because there are many girls who have never undergone FGM and they are fine. As a society, we need to increase our awareness campaigns to debunk all the misconceptions and myths about FGM.

Story 2 – Blinded by harmful traditions

I am Asli Salad, from Garowe. My mother died when I was two years old and I was raised by my grandmother, who also died when I was 11. My aunt took on the responsibility of raising me and due to the change of my guardians, I was lucky enough not to undergo FGM. This was unusual, because most of the girls in our neighborhood were required to undergo this harmful traditional practice.

In August 2016, I got engaged, and was about to get married, but the mother of my fiancée demanded that before the wedding took place, I needed to be inspected to see if I was circumcised or not. I felt this was very odd behaviour, and actually I felt I was being disrespected. I had never heard of girls or women being inspected to verify if they had undergone the cut. This was an unexpected move for me. At first, I was unwilling to undergo the so-called inspection, but due to pressure, I was convinced to agree to this nonsensical behaviour.



During the 'inspection', the boy's mother discovered that I was not circumcised—she was shocked. She instantly started a campaign to disparage me and my character and informed her son that she will not allow him to marry me because I had not been circumcised. She forced him to cancel the wedding plans with immediate effect.

Desperate to save the wedding plans, I had to agree to be cut before the marriage, but my idea fell on deaf ears, as the boy's mother had already formed a preconceived opinion that since I was not cut, I used to have uncontrolled sexual desires that may have included having sex before marriage. This was completely incorrect—a narrative made up by the mother who eventually convinced her son not to marry me. When I look back, I realize that, in essence, this was a blessing in disguise for me, because I did not have to undergo the inhumane treatment of FGM.

Story 3 – Witness of pain caused by FGM

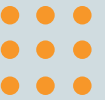
My name is Ahmed Elmi. During my first marriage, I went through a difficult experience, because I rushed into getting married while I was still young. I did not have the economic means to sustain a family, but eventually I moved on with my plans about marriage. My wife was a victim of FGM, and I discovered that this harmful practice has a wider effect on the health and well-being of girls and women than just a cut.

There are widespread myths in our community that circumcised girls will not have sexual desires and this will limit their ability to have unwanted sexual encounters before marriage. This is a myth that has been debunked and it is our responsibility as youth to make sure we raise awareness and fight FGM.

At the ICPD conference to be held in Nairobi, I expect religious leaders and traditional community leaders to affirm they will take the lead in ensuring that FGM is eradicated. FGM has no health benefits for girls and women and is a violation of human rights. The traditional circumcisers who have a big say in the community should be informed about the health complications of this practice that they are performing on young girls and women. They should be sensitized and trained about the negative effects of FGM so that they never perform this procedure on any girl again.

It is unfortunate that in this modern age, with all the information available on FGM, we are still performing this harmful practice on our girls. This must stop! FGM is recognized internationally as a violation of the human rights of girls and women and shows deep inequality between sexes. I consider it to be discrimination against women. This practice violates a person's rights to health and physical integrity. It is inhumane and a degrading treatment, that is torture, and a cruel behaviour that must be eliminated at all costs.

I hope that the government of Somalia will take a stand on FGM during the ICPD Summit in Nairobi and commit to putting an end to this menace that has resulted in the deaths of so many of our young girls, due to unhygienic procedures that traditional circumcisers perform on them.



Story 4 – Leading by example

I am married to lady who has not been circumcised. My name is Abdalla Ahmed, and I am from Garowe.

I have to admit getting married to an uncircumcised lady was not easy for me, as it put me in a confrontational situation with my family. In our community at large, there are many unfounded myths and stereotypes that are peddled around that state that uncircumcised girls will have uncontrolled sexual desires. I still struggle with this type of nonsensical stereotypes. Five years ago, when I was 20 years old, I had an agreement with the girl I loved about our plans to marry each other. We eventually got married secretly, because I did not have the financial means to conduct the traditional marriage process.

At first, when my family heard about my marriage, they were happy. But soon rumours spread in our village, claiming that my new wife was not circumcised. When my family members heard about the rumour, they requested me to cancel the marriage. This really troubled me because I loved the girl and she was already my wife. It was my responsibility to ensure that I protected her whether the rumour was true or not—and at all costs.

I insisted to my family that I would not divorce her. My family were furious with me and informed me that it would bring the family shame if I kept the marriage to an uncircumcised lady and that they would disown me if I did not divorce her. This was a very stressful moment for me because I had to choose between my lovely wife and my family. Eventually, I decided not to follow the wishes of my family and not to divorce from my wife. This matter has strained my relationship with my family for over five years now. During the upcoming ICPD Conference, I expect world leaders to accelerate efforts to end FGM, by ensuring young women, girls and the community stand united in the fight against FGM.



Some boys are involved in the fight against FGM



Converting from circumcising to joining the fight against FGM

Shamis Ali Muhumed, a Somali mother living in the Istanbul, Hargeisa, is a well-known female circumciser in her city. She has been conducting FGM on girls for over thirty years. She believed that FGM is an important aspect of womanhood, which is why she had been circumcising girls. This was also a way of generating income for her.

Several members of the community came to Shamis to have their child circumcised because of her reputation in the society as a well-known female circumciser. She would circumcise five girls per day.

“It was a norm in our culture to circumcise girls to keep them clean,” says Shamis, “so I was performing circumcision for a long time.”

Shamis is not educated. She did not have knowledge about Islam, science, and the health-related consequences of FGM on girls and women. She had never participated in any awareness campaigns on FGM either. She admits that the lack of knowledge enabled her to perform this harmful practice on girls.

However, after gaining intense knowledge and an understanding about the complications of FGM that girls endure, Shamis quit her job. She now understands that girls experience severe pain and bleeding as a result of FGM and that the pain does not stop in the initial procedure but often continues throughout a woman's life.

Mama Shamis is ready to take the lead in the campaign to eradicate FGM in Somaliland and to raise awareness in order to stop the harmful practices of FGM. She regrets her past and has now reformed. FGM is a human violation that must not be accepted. Speaking on behalf of Somaliland Y-PEER, we can confirm that we will continue with our awareness campaign and aim to reach every household in Somaliland to ensure our people understand the health complications that this harmful traditional practice has on our girls and women.



A cutter who has abandoned the practice

Promotion of Zero tolerance to FGM practice in Somaliland

Nimao Mohamed Abdirahman is a 23-year-old, who earned her undergraduate degree in Business Administration from the University of Hargeisa. Her goal is to eradicate FGM in Somaliland. She believes that FGM is a violation of human rights that must be abolished throughout the world.

Nimao's dream is to become a writer, so that she can highlight the effects of FGM through her writings. She understands that FGM has no health benefits for girls and women, and that the immediate consequences of FGM are severe pain and bleeding, shock, infection, difficulty in passing urine and, sometimes, death. These are the consequences that Nimao wants to highlight within the community. She wants to inform her community that these traditional harmful practices have no place in a civilized world. On many occasions, she questions the impact her writings will have on the community, due to their limited knowledge and the general lack of interest that traditional elders have in stories about FGM. Nonetheless, she is determined to make a big impact, using awareness campaigns, through writing, and community engagement on the consequences that the practice of FGM has on girls and women.

Nimao is an outgoing person, who enjoys being around people, so she can hear their stories and the challenges they face, particularly regarding the issue of FGM. She is affable, can make friends easily, and is also able to get people to feel comfortable enough to share their ideas, plans, or even secrets sometimes, with her. She is very passionate about women's empowerment and believes that women must be given the opportunity to take the lead in all matters in life.

Nimao worked as a volunteer in camps for internally displaced persons (IDP), as part of a mandatory requirement during her studies at the University of Hargeisa. She gained knowledge and experience working with vulnerable members of the community who needed key services, such as water, sanitation, food and basic essentials in life. She also attended the University of Hargeisa's sensitization on FGM conducted by the Somaliland Y-PEER in 2016. Following this, Nimao conducted small interpersonal sessions on zero tolerance to FGM and sessions on educating people about their reproductive rights at IDP camps, universities and schools.

"FGM is the most harmful practice in our community, where 80% of mothers are suffering from complications related to FGM. I would like to take a role to commit myself to zero tolerance of FGM in Somaliland. I wish we achieve our dreams in the coming years," said Nimao.

During her career, Nimao attended several training and fellowship programmes on reproductive health, human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), early marriage, FGM, and the Tuwezeshe Fellowship on women's empowerment. Currently, Nimao is an educator at the Somaliland Y-PEER. She leads small interpersonal sessions on zero tolerance to FGM in IDP camps and schools.



Using photography to raise awareness

Yacquub Seed Mohamed was born in Hargeisa in 1994. He completed his primary schooling at Hussein Gire and attended The Farah Omar School for secondary education. He is currently studying Software Engineering at The Abaarso Tech University.

Yacquub has been a volunteer at the Somaliland Y-PEER since he participated in a social media and photography training conducted by the Somaliland Y-PEER, and supported by The Girl Generation (TGG). He has also participated in several trainings on journalism.

He is a communications specialist and wants to contribute to change Somaliland by sharing his photography skills, by sharing photographs related to sexual reproductive health rights, HIV, FGM and gender-based violence (GBV) as a means to raise awareness on these important topics. He believes photography is an important tool that can be used to achieve specific and positive outcomes in the prevention and end of child marriages, FGM and other traditional harmful practices.



Taking iconic photography goes beyond just using a camera to capture a moment. A professional photographer is in the business of using cameras to take key photos to portray a specific message, whether it is advocating for peace or raising awareness on harmful practices, and photography is an important tool in information sharing.

Along these lines, Yacquub would like to use his photos to enable people in powerful positions to realize the situation, and importance of solving

problems such as war, economic inequality, FGM, HIV/AIDS, and other social problems that the world is facing.

“I would like to take photos that inform people in changing their behaviours and committing themselves to ending all forms of GBV,” says Yacquub.

In the future, he would like to work on social development issues, related to youth and women, by sharing photos to raise awareness.



Honored for fighting FGM

Somaliland Y-PEER announced Khaddar Mohamed Ismail as the peer of the month for October 2019. Khaddar lives in Hargeisa, and has completed his primary and secondary school at the Al-huda Schools. He is currently studying Accounting and Finance at the Civil Service Institute.



Khaddar has been one of the volunteers of the Somaliland Y-PEER since he participated in peer-to-peer sessions at the Vamos Life Skills Training School, conducted by Somaliland Y-PEER and Helsinki Deaconess Institute in September. He was the most active organizer in a recent campaign against GBV/FGM, conducted by Somaliland Y-PEER and supported by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). Khaddar served the Y-PEER as a volunteer until December. In the future, he would like to work on social development issues related to youth and women after he finishes his degree in 2021.



Young people discuss how they can fight FGM



Poem: The Cut

I was only six years old
when they led me to the bush, to my
slaughterhouse.
Too young to know what it all entailed,
I walked lazily towards the waiting women.
Deep within me was the desire to be cut,
as pain was my destiny:
it is the burden of femininity,
so I was told.
Still, I was scared to death...
but I was not to raise an alarm.

The women spoke in low tones,
each trying to do her tasks the best.
There was the torso holder
she had to be strong to hold you down.
Legs and hands each had their own woman,
who needed to know her task
lest you free yourself and flee for life.

The cutting began with the eldest girl
and on went the list.
Known to be timid, I was the last among the six.
I shivered and shook all over;
butterflies beat madly in my stomach.
I wanted to vomit, the waiting was long,
the expectation of pain too sharp,
but I had to wait my turn.
My heart pounded, my ears blocked;
the only sound I understood
was the wails from the girls,
for that was my destiny as well.

Finally it was my turn, and one of the women
winked at me:
Come here, girl, she said, smiling unkindly.
You won't be the first nor the last,
but you have only this once to prove you are
brave!
She stripped me naked. I got goose pimples.
A cold wind blew, and it sent warning signs

all over me. I choked, and my head
went round in circles as I was led.
Obediently, I sat between the legs of the woman
who would hold my upper abdomen,
and each of the other four women grasped my
legs and hands.
I was stretched apart and each limb firmly held.
And under the shade of a tree . . .
The cutter begun her work . . .
the pain . . . is so vivid to this day,
decades after it was done.
God, it was awful!
I cried and wailed until I could cry no more.
My voice grew hoarse, and the cries could not
come out,
I wriggled as the excruciating pain ate into my
tender flesh.
Hold her down! cried the cursed cutter,
and the biggest female jumbo sat on my chest.
I could not breathe, but there was nobody
to listen to me.

Then my cries died down, and everything was
dark.
As I drifted, I could hear the women laughing,
joking at my cowardice.
It must have been hours later when I woke up
to the most horrendous reality.
The agonizing pain was unbearable!
It was eating into me, every inch of my girlish
body was aching.
The women kept exchanging glances
and talked loudly of how I would go down in
history,
to be such a coward, until I fainted in the
process.
Allahu Akbar! they exclaimed as they criticized
me.
I looked down at myself and got a slap across
my face.
Don't look, you coward, came the cutter's words;
then she ordered the women to pour hot sand on
my cut genitals.



My precious blood gushed out and foamed.
Open up, snarled the jumbo woman, as she
poured the sand on me.
Nothing they did eased the pain.
Ha! How will you give birth? taunted the one with
the smile.
I was shaking and biting my lower lip.
I kept moving front, back, and sideways as I
writhed in pain.
This one will just shame me! cried the cutter.
Look how far she has moved, how will she heal?
My sister was embarrassed, but I could see pain
in her eyes . . .
maybe she was recalling her own ordeal.
She pulled me back quickly to the shed.
The blood oozed and flowed. Scavenger birds
were moving in circles and perching on nearby
trees.
Ish ish, the women shooed the birds.
All this time the pain kept coming in waves,
each wave more pronounced than the one
before it.

The women stood us up but warned us not to
move our legs apart.
They scrubbed the bloody sand off our thighs
and small buttocks,
then sat us back down.
A hole was dug,
malmal, the stick herb, was pounded;
The ropes for tying our legs were ready.
Charcoal was brought and put in the hole,
where there was dried donkey waste and many
herbs—
these were the cutter's paraphernalia.
The herbs were placed on the charcoal,
and we were ordered to sit on the hole.
As I sat with smoke rising around me,
I could hear the blood dropping on the charcoal,
and more smoke rose.
The pain was somehow dwindling but I felt weak
and nauseated.

Maybe she is losing blood? my sister asked
worriedly.
No, no. It will stop once I place the herbs, cried
the cutter impatiently.
The malmal was pasted where my severed
vaginal lips had been,
and then I was tied from my thighs to my toes
with very strong ropes from camel hide.
A long stick was brought and the women took
turns
showing us how to walk, sit, and stand.
They told us not to bend or move apart our
legs—
This will make you heal faster, they said,
but it was meant to seal up that place.

The drop of the first urine,
more burning than the aftermath of the razor,
passed slowly, bit by bit,
one drop after another,
while lying on my side.
There was no washing, no drying,
and the burning kept on for hours later.
But there was no stool . . .
at least, I don't remember.

For the next month this was my routine.
There was no feeding on anything with oil,
or anything with vegetables or meat.
Only milk and ugali formed my daily ration.
I was given only sips of water:
This avoids "wetting" the wound and delaying
healing, they said.
We would stay in the bush the whole day.
The journey from the bush back home began at
around four and ended sometimes at seven.
All this time we had to face the heat
and bare-footedly slide towards home . . .
with no water, of course.



We were not to bend if a thorn stuck us,
never to call for help loudly
as this would “open” us up and the cutter
would be called again.

Everything was about scary dos and don'ts.
I stayed on with the other five
for the next four weeks. None of us bathed;
lice developed between the ropes and our skin,
biting and itching the whole day and night.
There was no way to remove them,
at least not until we healed.
The river was only a kilometer away.
Every morning, the breeze carried the sweet
scent of its waters to us,
making our thirst more real.

The day the cutter was called back
each of us shivered and prayed silently,
each hoping we had healed and there would be
no cutting again.

Thank God we were all done
except one unlucky girl
who had to undergo it all again,
and took months to heal.
Our heads were shaved clean.
The ropes untied, lice dropped at last.
We were showered and oiled,
but most important was the drinking of water.
I drank until my stomach was full,
but the mouth and throat yearned for more.
It was over.

All over my thighs were marks from the ropes,
dotted with patches from the lice wounds.
Now I was to look after myself,
to ensure that everything remained intact
until the day I married.

Maryam Sheikh Abdi



Religious leaders are working with UNFPA to advocate against FGM





**UNFPA Somalia, Ocean Plot, Next to the Embassy of China, IOM Compound - MIA
(AMISOM Protected Area, Mogadishu, Somalia)**

<https://somalia.unfpa.org/en>

