

## THE STRUGGLE TO END FGM/C

Each year, two million young girls undergo female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C), according to the United Nations. Between 100 and 140 million girls and women globally have been subjected to some form of FGM/C, most of them in 28 African countries, though some live in Asia and the Middle East (World Health Organization). The practice is also found in Europe, Australia, Canada, and the United States, primarily among immigrants.

**F**GM/C, also referred to as female circumcision, describes longstanding traditional practices that range from light cutting to the removal, and sometimes the sewing up, of the external female genitalia. The possible repercussions of FGM/C are numerous, including psychological trauma, difficulties during childbirth, gynecological problems, and even death.

The Council has been active in the effort to end FGM/C for over a decade. Through its Frontiers in Reproductive Health program, the Council has conducted field-based research to document the extent of FGM/C, the types of cutting, and the resulting complications. Other projects study the meaning FGM/C has for its practitioners; test and evaluate programs designed to eradicate the practice; and provide training and technical assistance in research design, analysis, and application to partner organizations and governments. Publications about FGM/C are accessible at no charge from [www.popcouncil.org/frontiers/projects\\_pubs/topics/fgc/fgc\\_af.html](http://www.popcouncil.org/frontiers/projects_pubs/topics/fgc/fgc_af.html).

The Frontiers program helped to launch and continues to advise the International Network to Analyze, Communicate, and Transform the Campaign Against FGC/FGM/FC (INTACT Network), which uses evidence and analysis in working to end the practice. INTACT's monthly newsletter is available at <http://62.241.134.47/intactnetwork>.

One collaborative project with UNICEF and the Danish International Development Agency is set in the North Eastern Province of Kenya, where over 98 percent of girls are cut in the most severe form of FGM/C. The project aims to strengthen the capacity of local health systems to manage medical complications during antenatal care and delivery. In the Somali-dominated Wajir District of Kenya, this project also involves initiating culturally appropriate educational strategies to change the perception that Islam supports FGM/C.

For at least one Frontiers program officer working among the Wajir Somali, FGM/C is a personal issue. Maryam Sheikh Abdi, of the Council's Nairobi office, underwent the ordeal herself at the age of six.

"It's a deeply rooted practice and a strongly held belief among the Somalis," Abdi says. "Because the practice has been wrongly associated with Islam, we try to reach religious leaders who can declare FGM/C a harmful, un-Islamic act." Abdi holds meetings with Somali scholars and facilitators from other Muslim communities who do not practice FGM/C. Participants discuss positive Muslim religious guidelines known as shariahs that are violated by the practice, such as those that state that cutting healthy organs, causing any physical harm, and changing what has been created by God are all unlawful under Islam.

"A consensus is emerging in which the scholars have agreed that the practice has no strong basis in Islam and therefore cannot be regarded as a religious act," she says. "We are hoping this verdict can make it easier for community abandonment of the practice."

Not least of Abdi's contributions to the eradication of FGM/C is the brutally honest, graphic, and moving poem she has written about her experience. She has given the Council permission to use it to communicate the violence and trauma of female genital cutting (see reverse).

*USAID, UNICEF, and the United Nations Development Programme are among the funders of the Council's FGM/C activities. Collaborating organizations include CARE International, Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit, Macro International, UNFPA, UNICEF, and WHO.*

## The Cut

by Maryam Sheikh Abdi

I was only six years old  
when they led me to the bush.  
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 talked 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 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 began 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, 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 my self 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 quickly back 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,  
malma, 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 up.  
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 drop,  
while I lay 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 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 do's 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.

"The Cut" © 2006 Maryam Sheikh Abdi

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