

Female Genital Mutilation is Canada's issue too

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Photo: Maryan Abdikadir

Maryan Abdikadir, now a Canadian resident and survivor of Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C) grew up in a community in Kenya where, in order for females to be considered to be “good” Muslims, they had to undergo FGM/C.

But Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting is not mentioned anywhere in the Qur'an. The Organization of Islamic Cooperation, which represents close to 53 Muslim-majority nations, has declared that FGM/C is unacceptable.

In Abdikadir's community FGM/C is done to ensure a girl's purity and in preparation for marriage.

“I was six years old when they led me to the bush,” Abdikadir said regretfully. “Too young to know what it all entailed.”

She walked lazily towards the waiting women with the rest of the girls knowing that pain was her destiny. To her community it was the burden of femininity. She was the last to be cut.

“I watched as they wailed,” Abdikadir said. “When it was my turn, I sat obediently between the legs of the woman to hold my upper abdomen.”

She was pinned down and stretched apart under the tree behind the administration police camp in her village.

Abdikadir suffered from a version of [type three FGM/C](#). Her clitoris, labia minora and parts of her labia majora were cut off, and her legs were tied together for two weeks.

“When two wounds are conjoined, they hold together to form a covering over the vulva and urethra. That is what is called infibulation,” Abdikadir said.

The cutting was painful, but that is not what she recalls the most; it was the sensation immediately after. In her community the sensation is called *xanfafa*, when the nerves start to “pick up the pain.” She said it felt like “a million insects” crawling through her.

Abdikadir's community considered it sacred to bury human parts like hair and nails. But for the parts of her genitalia, there was no decent burial.

"They left the precious parts of my body for the ants to eat," she said.

It wasn't until 1997, when she was 27, that she found out that a normal vagina had an opening for the urethra.

Abdikadir made the decision to move to Canada in 2019. She decided it was best for her daughter to grow up in a community where she wouldn't feel pressured to undergo FGM/C. When Abdikadir arrived, she was shocked to find a lack of support for women and girls who have undergone FGM/C.

Abdikadir's story is just one among the estimated 100,000 survivors in Canada.

So, what is FGMC?

The term FGMC defines all non-medical practices that involve partial or total removal of external female genitalia, or other injury to female genital organs. The practice is usually done by people who are not doctors, however there are cases where health care providers perform FGM/C.

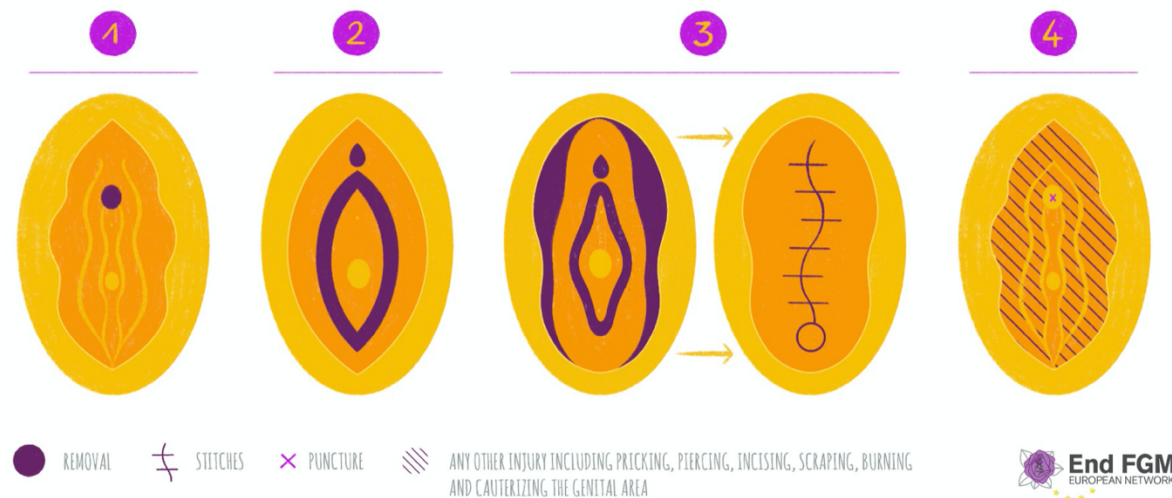


Illustration of types of FGM. Provided by the End FGM European Network.

The practice is considered internationally to be a violation of human rights and a form of gender-based violence.

In 1997 the Canadian Criminal Code was amended to include FGM/C as a form of aggravated assault. The Criminal Code can subject any person who conducts FGM/C to up to 14 years in prison.

The Criminal Code also prohibits taking a minor outside the country for FGM/C, a practice typically known as “vacation cutting”.

Since the legislation was enacted, there has not been a single criminal prosecution for FGM in Canada.

Not just an issue in Africa

The largest misunderstanding of FGMC is that it only occurs in Africa. FGM/C is practice that occurs in over 90 countries, with over 200 million survivors.

Giselle Portenier is a co-founder of the End FGM Canada Network and a documentary filmmaker.

According to Portenier’s research, Canada has “diaspora communities from at least 50 countries where female genital mutilation is a traditional practice.”

FGM/C happens in places like Malaysia, Singapore, India, Colombia, Russia, Iran, Iraq and even in the United States and Canada.

In the United States, FGM/C was covered under health insurance by the BlueCross until 1977. It was thought that removing the outer part of the clitoris could cure epilepsy and hysteria, based on studies by Sigmund Freud.

FGM/C is still occurring in the United States among Christian fundamentalist communities.

“Several white women have come out and spoken about it,” Portenier said. “The last one is a woman named Jenny.”

[Jenny's story](#) is featured on the Equality Now website. She spoke of how FGM/C happened to her and how it is happening in her community.

The survivor's perspective

There are not many resources available for survivors in Canada.

Many women in Canada do not know how to reach out for help and when they do, they find that health professionals are unfamiliar with FGM/C.

Abdikadir has openly shared her story and is an anti-FGM/C activist, but she said that she has struggled with her healing journey because she doesn't know where to go.

“I am aware that I have gone through a traumatic experience,” she said. “I don't want to say if you ask me. Who do you go to? I don't know.”

It is also common for women not to know that they have undergone FGM/C, or that FGM/C is a bad thing.

“I would love to see service providers who are so informed, and so supportive that they are the ones who will dig for information,” Abdikadir said.

Like other anti-FGM/C activists, Abdikadir is urging Canada to break the silence around this issue.

“My goal is for people to be able to know that this is actually an existing global issue, and Canada is not immune to it,” she said.



[Photo of Giselle Portenier, Farzana Doctor, Malaika Somji and Klara Hillman at a Vancouver Coffee shop on Feb. 15, 2019. Provided by Giselle Portenier](#)

Working towards Change

Farzana Doctor is the lead in Canada for We Speak Out and one of the Co-Founders of the End FGM Canada Network. She said that a few years ago while working for We Speak Out, she couldn't find information on FGMC in Canada.

After reading an article Portenier published in the Globe and Mail about FGM/C in Canada, Doctor decided that it was time to meet Portenier.

They sat together at a Vancouver coffee shop with Klara Hillman, a public policy analyst, and 16-year-old Malaika Somji, a schoolgirl, to talk about creating an anti-FGM/C advocacy network in Canada.

On Feb. 15, the network celebrated its three-year anniversary.

The End FGM Canada Network focuses on raising global awareness about FGM/C. Over the last few months, the network released a campaign called “Miss Klitty.”



Illustration of Miss Kitty. Drawing by Sofia Gutierrez. Provided by Giselle Portenier

The goal of the campaign is to break the silence around speaking about the clitoris.

“It’s only when we can talk about the clitoris that we can start talking about saving it,” said Abdikadir.

On Feb. 6, the International Day of Zero

Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau released a statement saying that “Canada firmly and unequivocally denounces female genital mutilation. No woman or girl - anywhere in the world - should ever live in fear of physical or psychological harm.”

Along with his initial statement, he announced that the Women and Gender Equality Department has given \$530,000 in funding towards End FGM Canada’s [Joining Hands Project](#).

The Network is using the funding to create interactive education modules for professionals according to Portenier.

“The plan is to have four interactive education modules for health professionals, mental health professionals, child protection professionals and education professionals,” Portenier said.

Their goal is to reach thousands of people across the country in a short period of time.

“Our dream is that these modules will be accepted and will become mandatory in different professions, including potentially medical schools, midwifery schools, nursing schools, and among the RCMP,” Portenier said.

The responsibility of the Canadian government

This is not the first time the government has acknowledged FGM/C as an issue in Canada.

In 1994, the Canadian government formed a Federal Interdepartmental Working group to address the issue of FGM/C. After six years of gathering statistics and information, the group issued a report with a list of recommendations.

Shortly after the release of the report, it was set aside and not much has happened since according to Portenier.

“The fact that they spent several years in these consultations, came up with the report and then did nothing is a complete travesty of justice,” said Portenier.

Sen. Mobina Jaffer of British Columbia, stood in front of Canada’s senators on Feb. 6 to educate them about FGM/C.

“I’m truly disappointed to inform you that Canada's record on prosecuting this horrific and excruciating practice is dismal,” Jaffer said. “There remains a complete wall of silence.”

She urged her fellow senators to look out for vulnerable girls in their communities.

“They are our girls and I ask you to support me to get the issue of FGM prosecuted in Canada,” she said.

#FGMismyissuetoo

If you are reading this and wondering “What can I do?” the answer is simple: use your voice and your platform to create more conversation about FGM/C.

You can show your support for the End FGM Canada Network by taking a photo of yourself with one of the Miss Klitty drawings and hashtag your post #FGMismyissuetoo. The more people who use this hashtag across various platforms, the more this issue gets talked about.

Maryan Abdikadir, who is now the Co-chair of the End FGM Canada Network, urges Canadians to get over what she calls the “four excuses”: not wanting to be seen as colonial, not wanting to be perceived as racist, not wanting to seem interfering, and not wanting to impose on people’s cultures.

Only after that can Canada start to see real change, according to Abdikadir.

“Culture is not an excuse, it was used as the chain to tie me,” she said. “It is not true that suffering and pain is part of my culture.”

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