

Produced by
Think Young Women
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VOICES



A Collection of stories on
Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)



Foreword

With support from UNFPA The Gambia, Think Young Women brought together 15 young Gambian women for a storytelling project focusing on Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). The project commenced with a residential training where the 15 participants were educated on facts around the practice of FGM, as well as basic storytelling and photography techniques.

Each storyteller was then provided with a small grant to produce at least one story addressing a specific angle linked to FGM including personal narratives from victims/survivors of the practice, testimonies from ex-circumcisers, health professionals, activists etc. These stories were sourced from different regions of The Gambia, reflecting the diversity of experiences across the country.

In this publication, we humbly share these stories as reviewed and edited for final dissemination by the project's co-facilitators Jama Jack and Isatou Jallow, and our Co-National Coordinators Musu Bakoto Sawo and Haddy Jonga. The production process has been an enriching one, and a humble reminder of the work that still needs to be done to ensure that girls are protected from FGM, families and communities are sensitised on its dangers, the duty-bearers are compelled to fulfil their responsibilities... and that survivors are supported with the needed resources and facilities for their healing and rehabilitation.

We thank UNFPA The Gambia for supporting us to document these stories of real people in real communities in The Gambia, and we hope that these narratives will serve as a catalyst for even more sustainable results in our collective efforts to end the practice of FGM.

We congratulate our storytellers for the excellent work, even with the triggering experiences for some. We also thank the many women who opened themselves up to the storytellers and shared their powerful stories with us... and with the world. For you, we will continue to fight FGM and ensure the next generation is protected.

**With gratitude,
Think Young Women**

Trigger Warning

Some of the stories in this collection may contain graphic details and can be triggering for the reader. We encourage you to take a moment to decide if you want to keep reading. If you proceed, we encourage you to focus on your well-being and stop reading at any point if you need to.

FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION AND VIRGINITY | Aminata Jaiteh

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Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is a global health challenger and a form of violence against women and girls. It is a gross violation of women's rights. According to (source)FGM affects at least 200 million women and girls across 30 countries and more than 3 million new cases occur every year. In the Gambia statistics show that female genital mutilation is prominent among women between the ages 15 to 49. About 54.8% of these women were circumcised before the age of five, 28.1% between the ages five and nine years, about 7% between the ages of 10 and 14, and 1% from 15 years above.

What might seem like a rack of statistics and numbers is an unsettling reality of millions of women and girls around the world.

In The Gambia, specifically, the practice of FGM is highly motivated as an act to prevent promiscuity and preserve the virginity of women and girls. Cultural, religious and traditions values place a high significance on the virginity, which is often associated with notions of purity, honor and worth. With the belief that circumcision will limit the sexual desires of women and girls, families and communities practice FGM as a way to preserve the family honor and prestige in society.

However, knowledge, research and dialogues over the years have confirmed that FGM does not prevent promiscuity, neither does it preserve virginity. It has exposed, beyond the harm FGM presents, the complexity of the subject of virginity and the importance to create a holistic space that enables women and girls to make informed choices about their bodies and sexual encounters.

In this story, FGM survivors and an activist relate their experience of FGM, a correlation to virginity and why no women should be subjected to such harm. Kadija, now 27, was subjected to FGM as a little girl by her grandmother.

The details of the practice and what she went through, wildly vague to her as a little girl, only became clear on the first night with her husband. Kadija has knowledge of the harm FGM presents, she acknowledges FGM as a harmful practice and this dates back to times before she came into full realisation of her predicament, Remembering the first night with her husband and how she found out she was sealed in addition to being cut, Kadijah shared: "I found out when I was taken to my husband the night of my wedding, it was the most painful thing I had ever experience as an adult".

With teary eyes she narrated: "my husband and I made several attempts to consummate the marriage. After several hours of trying, with unbearable pain and bruises, my husband gave up. I encouraged him to keep trying because I did not have the words to explain what was happening to the older women when they come back for the white cloth in the morning. Our attempts were futile, so we agreed to share our challenge in the morning. I called my sister in morning and she confirmed that I was sealed."



In this story, FGM survivors and an activist relate their experience of FGM, a correlation to virginity and why no women should be subjected to such harm. Kadija, now 27, was subjected to FGM as a little girl by her grandmother. The details of the practice and what she went through, wildly vague to her as a little girl, only became clear on the first night with her husband. Kadija has knowledge of the harm FGM presents, she acknowledges FGM as a harmful practice and this dates back to times before she came into full realisation of her predicament, Remembering the first night with her husband and how she found out she was sealed in addition to being cut, Kadijah shared: “I found out when I was taken to my husband the night of my wedding, it was the most painful thing I had ever experience as an adult”. With teary eyes she narrated: “my husband and I made several attempts to consummate the marriage. After several hours of trying, with unbearable pain and bruises, my husband gave up. I encouraged him to keep trying because I did not have the words to explain what was happening to the older women when they come back for the white cloth in the morning. Our attempts were futile, so we agreed to share our challenge in the morning. I called my sister in morning and she confirmed that I was sealed.”

Kadija visited the hospital with her sister where a nurse reconfirmed that she was sealed. Beyond her imagination, she was informed that the unsealing should be followed by an immediate sexual intercourse with her husband. With unbearable pain from the previous night, Kadija knew her body could not go through this procedure. She decided to give her body some rest and return later in the evening. Recounting this experience, she could not hold back her tears. She shared “at the hospital the nurse asked me removed my pants, laid on my back and open my legs. I was injected to minimise the pain and the nurse carried on with the procedure. A lot of blood clot came out of the sealed placed, the nurse put some cotton to stop the bleeding and she also gave me some lubricant to use for easy penetration.”

This, according to Kadija, was immediately followed by her first sexual experience with her husband. Beyond the pain and trauma from this experience, she developed a terrible infection which equally added to the load she was already dealing with. Kadija, from this experience, has committed to never subject her girls to FGM and commits to go beyond and above to protect them. B Sariba Ceesay, a survivor of FGM and a mother of five highlighted that the primary reason for sealing women, like other acts of FGM, is to prevent pregnancy out of wedlock. From her experience, she underscores that women and girls experience complications especially after their first sexual encounters.

Sariba believes that with the involvement of government and the enforcement of the anti-FGM law, this practice will become a thing of the past. Kadija wants everyone who comes across this story to understand that women and girls live through unbearable pain and trauma in honour of this cultural practice. Virginity, she highlights, is a choice no one should make for anyone.

AFTER THE CUT | Alima Taal

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The festival was a facade of celebration; drums beating, people dancing. Yet, it marked a true horror: Our mutilation. Although I was very young, the trauma remains vivid. Our neighbours brought us to this ritual, and even then, I sensed something was horribly wrong. We were wrapped in cloths and isolated from the girls who had already been cut. I watched my younger sister endure the pain with surprising fortitude. But when it was my turn, I was held down, my eyes covered, and the pain was excruciating. I screamed, unable to understand why this was happening.

I was the most vulnerable, bleeding heavily and enduring a slow painful recovery. It took a month for my wound to heal. During this time, simple actions like standing, sitting or walking became unbearable. My mom helped me to the toilet and we avoided the shower for a week to keep the wounds dry. Instead of proper medical care, we were treated with traditional herbs.

The worst pain came from irritations while passing urine. We were told to hold our urine to avoid more pain worsening our distress and health.

This experience is a haunting reminder of the dangers of such practice. We must come together and end these harmful traditions. Every girl deserves to grow up free from pain and suffering.

Join us in advocating for an end to these practices and support those working towards a future without mutilation.



THE UNSPOKEN STRUGGLES:

Maya Jabbie's Story of FGM

Ndey Fatou Nying

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Maya Jabbie, a 24-year-old woman from Basse Librass Karantaba, shares her story. During my interview with her, she spoke candidly about how FGM continues to impact her daily life. She opened up about the lasting effects of the practice, emphasising how it has shaped her experiences. In her own words, she beautifully describes the clitoris as a piece of art, reflecting on its significance and the painful reality of having it altered.

I was between the ages of 5 and 7 when I was taken to my aunt's house in Sukuta. It was early in the morning, and I clearly remember holding an apple in my hand. I was very young and naive, and my mom was proud, believing she was doing the right thing out of love for me. When we arrived, my mom handed me over to an elderly woman named Bambo. We used to call her 'Bambo Cement' because it was fun. I would later realize that Bambo was a cutter, and I was terrified.

A girl my age was in a room with an unknown woman, surrounded by knives and blades. Before they took me, I heard a girl scream as they entered the room, and I was confused. When it was my turn, I remember seeing my mom run away after handing me over to Bambo. I screamed for help with all my might when I felt a sharp pain in my vagina, and then I saw blood flooding around me. I was terrified and confused because no one explained what was happening.

As I grow into adulthood, I become curious about my body and sexuality. But the more I learn, the more I feel that something is missing within me. I feel so incomplete because I would've loved to have my clitoris and see my vagina complete. But growing up without one hurts really bad."

I'm sorry all this happened to you, I said. Do you believe the clitoris is beautiful?

"The clitoris is a beautiful part of the female genitalia. I didn't have the opportunity to see mine but from the internet, I'd say it's a beautiful piece of artwork from God. He created it for a reason and for that, every woman should grow up with theirs untouched. I still have the fear of exploring my vagina, I sometimes wonder if I'd ever have pleasure during sexual intimacy when I get married. I don't blame people who use other products to enhance their sexual urges because a part of the vagina is missing. Trust me, when I see pictures of a complete vagina with the clitoris in place, I cry. But life goes on, and for my children, they shall grow up with their bodies complete."

The name of the character in this story has been changed in order to protect her identity.



FIGHTING FGM ONE CLASSROOM AT A TIME | Binta D Bojang



Her experience like many survivors is not a simple one but she is able to pull through. When one is faced with complications of irregular menstrual cycle, menstrual cramps and series of infections as a result of Female genital mutilation, it is only humane that they educate the younger generation on the untold truth about FGM.

Fatou Darboe is a woman in her 30s who shares her journey as a survivor and how she is using her experience to enlighten her students about the dangers of FGM.. Fatou, like many survivors, was mutilated at a very early age.. Her grandmother told her she was taking her to go see the crocodiles. Delighted, young Fatou was excited without second thoughts on the horror she was about to face.

Even as a young girl, the betrayal stung deep and she could not trust her grandmother again. After explanations from her grandmother on why she had to follow cultural practices, she has learnt to live with this.

Inspired by this difficult experience, Fatou has made a vow to fight against this harmful practice, starting in her classroom. She has been teaching for more than a decade. FGM is not a part of the curriculum,, but she has learnt to fuse this in her reproductive health lessons as a General Science teacher. She affirms that FGM normally happens during the summer holidays and when she was teaching in a primary school at Basse (Upper River Region), there was usually a change of students every academic and it was difficult to tell a change of demeanour in the students.

As a junior and senior teacher currently, she has a lot of students who confide in her and open up about various challenges, including FGM. This is her channel to contribute to the fight against FGM and impart the future generation. Over the years, she has kindled revolutionary spirit in her students who are set on the path to fight FGM like her.

BANNED BUT STILL PRACTICED | Tala Camara

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The Gambia is known as the smiling coast of Africa. Gambians are accommodative, friendly, kind, and welcoming, but these qualities have turned out to be a curse in a certain way. The “maslaha” syndrome (preserving relationships before anything else) has compromised work ethics in our daily lives. Will you believe me, if I say perpetrators of violence against women and girls are walking the streets freely because of this “maslaha” syndrome? Survivors are not getting justice because of law enforcement officers failing to execute their jobs with due diligence. Just imagine that. The job they swore to do without fear or favour. Well, that is a story for another day...

Unlike other police officers, Matar Saidykhan working in the Gender and Child Welfare Unit of the Gambia Police Force, is one of few police officers we are proud of. Matar, also a child welfare and youth activist, was posted to the Upper River in 2019. He would go the extra mile to visit schools and communities to sensitise them on issues affecting children and women. He believes that there are people who still secretly practice FGM, despite it being prohibited by law since 2015. For him, it is not just about justice not being served or police officers not doing their job but also about cases of FGM not being reported. This he believes is due to the closely knit relationships and family ties in communities, making his work even more difficult.

To avoid being caught, Saidykhan was informed that some families go all the way out of the country to Cassamance in Senegal and other places to subject their girls to the practice secretly. In his quest to ensure that these innocent girls are not exposed to the heinous practice of FGM, he set up surveillance committees in border communities to receive firsthand information about such happenings.

Matar believes that everyone needs to come on board to ensure that the practice of FGM becomes history in URR and The Gambia at large. He continues to call for collective action to eradicate the practice.



As narrated by ex-circumcisers

| Fanta Darboe

“ I have been practicing FGM for over 45 years ” Kaddy Jammeh

Before I stopped practicing FGM, in my 45 years in the act, I strongly believed it was a cultural and religious practice. I took up this responsibility after my mother's death, who use to cut girls in the community .

People from all parts the country trusted me with this responsibility and will bring their girls to me for circumcision. In the entirety of my practice, I mostly used razor blade, where sometimes, a blade is used on multiple girls. I made sure to boil the blades after every cut and put them back in the packets. In my practice, I take these girls to the bush where I get the weed commonly called Nieci-kumbaling ong” in Mandinka to use on their vaginas after circumcision to enable faster healing and minimise the pain.

Circumcision has been my source of income and my contribution to preserve my culture and preparing our young women for the journey of life. I never knew that I was endangering the lives of the girls until I attended a program on FGM for women leaders. I was adamant at the beginning but eventually decided to attend. The program shaped my understanding of the subject and inspired me to drop the knife. During that training, I was exposed to the implication of FGM and the havoc it causes in the lives of our young girls and women. When the health practitioner expressed that FGM has no benefits and the environment girls are circumcised presents further harm, I got scared. Our intentions were clean and pure, however, my lack of knowledge and background has affected the lives of women and girls.

Now, I consider myself a proud activist and sensitise people on the health implications of FGM. I am not a circumciser anymore and do not endanger anyone's life. I have stopped the practice and implore others to do the same.



“ I am now an activist ” Binta Njie

When I was first introduced to the impacts of FGM I couldn't believe my eyes. I could not bare the pain and suffering when the facilitators went through different aspects and folds of the implications of the practice. When I went back home, I reflected with a friend of mine and connected what was shared to our experiences. This was when I decided that I will never circumcise girls again and committed to support the fight to end FGM.

I have experienced a lot of challenges because of this decision. People label me a betrayer of the existing culture and that I have been brainwashed by feminist and the government.

With my recent realisation, I try to make them understand that every young girls is clean and every organ in the human body is important and that cutting the clitoris will only result to other problems. Now, I use my role as a community traditional group leader to advocate for the rights of women and girls.



FGM and SEX | Lawkadinch Silvia Gomez

Love is a feeling a lot of us find hard to express. It arguably concurs barriers and obstacles that make it hard to exist and flourish... People find love in different places, get attached to people from different settings, beliefs and just experience the beauty and hope it exudes between people. This feeling is expected to grow and blossom into marriage, which brings to light sex – a very uncomfortable subject in Gambian discourses.

In The Gambia, women are expected to find a partner and get married in their 20s and fulfil a step to womanhood. This should be a joyous feeling, a great expectation one might say but it brings with it a strange and weird feeling of fear and doubt, especially for women who have undergone FGM.

Bintou, a survivor of FGM ponders on what will happen to her in the future: *“When I think about my future and marriage, I always wonder what sex will be like for me. The stories I have heard from other survivors of FGM on the lack of sexual pleasure in their marriages scares me. Will I just be pounced on and not be pleased?” “I don’t know how to really express myself when it comes to these subjects. I know that when it is time for me to get married, it will be a bitter-sweet experience. Will I marry someone I love?., I do not know a lot about sex, will my husband teach me?”*

These are some of the compound questions and thoughts that linger in Mariama’s mind.

Beyond sexual pleasure, Bintou is equally hunted by the pain she has witnessed her sister’s go through. She is quite convinced that getting married will only add to her already existing nightmares. Bintou is a beautiful young lady with many suitors but this decision could affect her relationship with her family members and the entire society.

She added: *“This is the reason I do not want to get married now, I am scared of the pain. I have witnessed my sisters cry and they have shared how painful it was for them. I do not want to go through the same pain of being unsealed and sex right after. I will rather stick to the pain I go through during menstruation. I am not ready for society’s reaction, but I am equally not ready to experience such pain.”*

Sex remains a taboo subject in Gambian homes and communities. It is the elephant in the room no one dares touch or point at. In instances where it is let loose for conversation, it is hushed in closed rooms or shrouded with so much fear and shame. With no one to speak to, navigating the subject of sex and marriage especially for survivors of FGM can be daunting in The Gambia. For a lot of young women, like Emily Mendy, the first time they hear an open discussion on sex is on their wedding night. Going back to this night, she shared:

“The first time I heard statements on this subject from the women in my family was on my wedding night. The old women gave me waist beads, local incense, and lingerie to seduce my husband. They kept uttering sexual terms that left me shocked. I never expected to hear them openly discuss it. It was so weird.”

Beyond the persistent thoughts, confusion and the need for answers amongst young women, sex is a heavy subject for young married couples too. With no prior knowledge, no conversations, they are expected to figure out pleasure for each other when the lights are turned off at night. Even for men, sexual education is lacking. Everyone expects marriages to be consummated on wedding nights and the onus is on them to take the lead. Pa Saikou, still hunted by his wife's reactions during sex shared:

"I married my wife in 2017. In that year, we had several sexual encounters. Unknown to us, we were not really having sex there was no penetration. We did not know anything about sex and were both quite shy to discuss this with anyone. We are expected to figure this out and know what to do. It Was until we had an encounter with a doctor when we had to do tests to ensure we were fertile that we realized we were not really having intercourse".

Pa Saikou is a husband who was so worried about the wife's reactions during sex.

"The first night they brought my wife, she already had tears in her eyes. I was confused, but instructions were given to have continuous sex with her for a week and I had to obey. It was a painful experience for her."

Forming a fist with his hand, Saikou continued *" Sometimes, I had to give her pain killers before or right after the intercourse. I looked like a beast watching my wife cry during sex. But, I had no option. To date, this hurts me, but who do I open up to? Who do I speak to? FGM is inhumane."*

For Abdoulie*, a young husband to Amie* they decided to try another method of sex for the first few months of their marriage which had an effect in their lives. *"I couldn't stop being traumatized, we are both young and we have heard and seen other methods being tried. So as a couple we decided to try anal sex since vaginal sex is painful and traumatizing. It was weird and also painful at first but we did try, for a start it was better than the normal sex we knew of, since I wasn't also ready to have a child it was safe for us. But we encountered a problem that was exposed to us by a nurse friend of ours. I had an infection and when asked questions I explained clearly to her why I and my husband decided on Anal sex, she did mention that it was a risky thing to do as it could have a lot of effects, some of which I was already experiencing. My butt hole was becoming enlarged and that alone is a problem".*

"When Amie came home to explain these to me I had my doubts, so I had to really do some research and came to a conclusion that we had to stop it. But for that month, it was difficult for us to have "Normal" sex again.*

We had to go see a doctor for help because my wife will be in tears again and that scares me."

Abdoulie is still concerned about his wife's health and is scared it will get worst with child birth and pregnancy so he supports the idea for his wife to wait until they are both psychologically ready to have children despite the society's pressures.

Fatou and Buba are happily married even though they have been through challenges especially with childbearing. Fatou now openly discusses sex and safe practices. . She has grown to understand that the more mentally prepared survivors of FGM are, the better it is to deal with the discomforts of sex, it is better to be prepared than being surprised unpleasantly.

"Growing up, as a survivor of FGM, I did not think a lot about FGM. I believed that sex is for married couples and older people. I always thought that it would be painful and unpleasant because I had no clue.. Now that I am a grown, I have realized that it is important to talk about sex in order to prepare young people and prevent some of the issues young couples face."

Vaginal Fistula

| Aminata Jaiteh

Vaginal fistula is an abnormal opening between the vagina and other nearby organs in the pelvis, including the bladder or rectum. Vaginal fistula can cause many complications, such as urinary and fecal leakage, abnormal vaginal discharge, tissue damage, kidney infection and other irritative symptoms. One of the leading causes of fistula is childbirth, especially prolonged or obstructed childbirth. Vaginal fistula can be difficult for women. Globally more than 50,000 women develop a vaginal fistula according to the World Health Organization (WHO). It affects women in developing countries, where access to healthcare and reproductive health education and services is limited.

Fatou Touray, a 27 year woman, a survivor of Female Genital Mutilation and vaginal fistula. She is a mother to a five year old boy and a teacher who lives in Serekunda with her family.. Fatou underwent FGM when she was a child, got sealed and was unaware until the first intimate night with her husband.. Remembering her experience, she recollects...

“It was a very painful experience for me as a young girl at my age and that was when all the problems, trauma, pain and distressed of my life begun. The first night with my husband was not pleasant. I found out I was sealed. When I was taken to the hospital, the doctor confirmed that I was subjected to type 3 FGM and it was the cause of my pain. I was in pain and bleeding for two days. I went back to hospital again and the doctor told me I have vaginal fistula. I was admitted and told I had to go through surgery. Three days later, I had my surgery. I was in lot of pain because the surgery was not done properly because the sickness was fairly new to doctors here and they had limited knowledge on how to manage it. Two days after the repairing surgery the pain persisted, I was taken back to the health center and readmitted again by the doctor at Brikama health center because my wounds became infected. I spent some time at the health center and then I was released. The doctor advised me on how to take care of myself at home to avoid further infection. During this time I was always at home, I could not do anything meaningful on my own because I have fluid coming from my private part which wasn't smelling good at all. After about 2 months, I started to heal but the tear from my vagina to anus was still there. It was during this time that I got pregnant with my first child. My pregnancy was not easy at all. During my antenatal visits, my previous doctor gave me a paper that detailed out my history. I got the necessary support from the nurses at the hospital but the doctor told me I could have a normal child birth. After nine months I was due to deliver and I delivered my boy.

With tears running down her cheeks Fatou continues her narration... After delivering, the worst happened.; The pain started all over again, I could not go out because of the psychological trauma I was going through. I was so depressed that I always sat alone by myself, the pain was overwhelming. It was very uncomfortable for me to be in the midst of people. A funny sound kept coming out of my vagina as if I was farting, it went to the extent that even when people came visiting I sat at one place to avoid embarrassing myself because of that frequent sound. † For five months, I stayed in my house. With everything that was happening, my husband was always by my side helping and encouraging me.

After five months of depression, pain and psychological trauma I got a call from one Abdoukarem, a staff of UNDP. He asked me to come to Edward Francis Small General Hospital at Banjul. I went to the hospital with my husband, upon arrival Abdoukarem informed us that he got my medical file from the Bundung Maternal and Child health Hospital and that UNDP are going to sponsor me to do another repairing surgery. I did the surgery which was successful. The pain, fluid, stench and funny sound all stopped. My life was back to normal. I am doing well now. I never knew there was a sickness called fistula that affect women until I became survivor. f After a successful surgery the doctor advised me to be always clean and tidy and take my medication regularly to prevent infections and complications and also be punctual with my medical checkups too. I was given lot of medicine both pills to drink and cream which I was applying on my wound. My doctor also advised me to do birth spacing.

I thank my husband for always being by my side throughout my ordeal. He has never for once got tired or frustrated by my condition; he was with me from the beginning until the end. A very big thank you to UNDP for the financial support that they gave me, a second chance to a normal life.

A JOURNEY TO HER LIBERATION

| **Binta D Bojang**

Aminata Bojang, now 24 years old was mutilated when she was about 5 during the yearly circumcision ceremony with her siblings and young girls from her community. This incident from years ago still haunts Aminata, she remembers the excruciating pain she underwent during this period.

In 2021, Aminata started bleeding outside her monthly menstrual flow and pain when she was urinating. When the bleeding persisted, after her long silence about this experience, she visited a gynecologist and seek professional help. Following series of tests with the gynaecologists, she was informed that her uterus was invisible because she had been sealed. In shock, Aminata could not hold her tears, she became angry and resented everyone that participated in mutilating her.

She confronted her mother, who claims the whole process was facilitated by her namesake, who is also her grandmother. It has been a year since this incident but she still is limbo.

Aminata does not share her FGM experience, because it reminds her of her broken parts. Speaking up in this story is her freedom from the bondage and gives her the confidence to go through life, whole.



HOW MANY MORE CAN ESCAPE? | Tala Camara

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Meet Fatou Camara, a teenager who hails from Basse Kabakama, a community with a high prevalence of FGM. She is born to a Fula father and a Sarahule mother. It is widely believed that the Fula and Sarahuleh ethnic groups in that part of the country, the Upper River Region, support and practice FGM due to their strong cultural and traditional beliefs. It is considered taboo and abnormal for a girl born into these ethnic groups, to escape being cut. However, Fatou's story is unlike the everyday survivor story you hear or read about. Despite being born into a practicing community, she did not undergo FGM.

Surprised? Here's more. She is the only girl among her siblings that escaped this practice. This is her story. Born into a nuclear family in 2008, her father who was the family's breadwinner suffered from ill-health when she was still an infant, forcing her mother to take up the responsibility of fending for the family and taking care of Fatou's father. Sadly, he passed away when Fatou was 6 months old. She and her five siblings were single-handedly raised by their mother. Her father's death took a heavy toll on her family. The light that brightened their home was no more. Things became difficult and unusual. Faced with financial difficulties, it became difficult for Fatou's mother to continue taking care of her children. Her family was separated. Her two elder brothers were sent to a Quranic memorisation center in a village called Julangel and her eldest brother was sent to Senegal to train as an auto mechanic. Her eldest sister was taken to one of her aunts for upbringing and little Fatou was left alone with her mother and elder sister. Imagine the loneliness and growing up without your siblings. Fatou grew up to be a timid child, always anxious and with little self-esteem. Often, she returned from school in tears over bullying and being mocked by her peers for not having a living father. This always made her mother emotional and made her sister extremely protective of her. Given the difficulties they were faced with, her mother remarried when Fatou was four years old. She believed that this would give her children a man they could call a father. She grew up to call another man father and things became better for her and her family. Her mother started smiling again.

Meanwhile, her elder sister is bolder, more opinionated, and always concerned about the well-being and welfare of her family. She was the only other lucky sibling to continue going to school after the death of their father. She was a brilliant student, always appreciated by her teachers for her excellent performance and boldness. Her confidence was like a wildfire that couldn't go unnoticed. She started her advocacy against FGM at the age of 13 when she was just in grade seven. She was fortunate to join clubs in her school through which she attended workshops and summer camps where she was trained on harmful traditional practices including FGM. Because of this, she vowed that nobody would cut her sister, Fatou. When she turned seven, Fatou's mother was planning to have her undergo the practice. "My sister was my keeper and support system. By the time I turned seven, the age at which most girls undergo FGM, my sister had already prepared me. She warned me against ever following my mum to her village, especially during the summer holidays. She told me, if I go, something bad will happen to me. Although I never bothered to ask her what the bad thing was, I heeded her advice because she always fought for me and protected me. I understood she meant well to me. So whenever my mother proposed following her to visit her family in the village, I pretended to be sick and my sister would back me up and tell her to go without me, Fatou recounted.

Her mother eventually stopped talking to her about going to the village because her elder sister continuously engaged her on the harmful implications of FGM. I was very fortunate to always be hanging around my sister. She always went with me to the activities they organised at school and in communities where they had dramas on the practice and other issues such as teenage pregnancy. That was when I learned that FGM is indeed a bad practice and I felt lucky that I have a sister like her protecting me from it. She motivated me to inspired me to dream big. I always wanted to be like her, to fight social injustice in my community, and to speak for other girls who are not fortunate to have the kind of support I have. She drew inspiration from her sister. She joined her school's press club and started asking her sister to write short speeches and poems for her on FGM that she could read at assembly. That was how she also joined in the campaign against FGM. She grew to understand the power of her voice and was happy that she was doing something for girls in her school and community. "I was the only one among my friends who was not cut, but it never made me feel different in a negative way about myself. I felt lucky that I escaped the heinous practice. Though sometimes I am bullied around the neighborhood because I am not cut, it did not bother me because my sister had prepared me to deal with it" she said.

In wanting to be just like her sister, Fatou continues to act drama and read speeches about FGM and other social injustices during school activities. She is now a powerful voice for change. But, her concern remains the other girls who may not as lucky as her. "It is never over until it is over" said Fatou. My dear readers, it will interest you to know that, Fatou's mother has now joined her daughters in the fight against FGM. A girl educated her family and now her family is educating her community. Indeed, change is possible.

As narrated by a survivor

“ I was tricked with a banana at five ”

| Binta D Bojang

I was just five years when I was cut. I have been staying with mum and dad when my aunt from Serekunda came to visit with two of her girls. I was excited to meet my cousins. According to her they came for a visit and will go back home in three weeks.

On the day of the circumcision, I still fully recall this day, my mum said there will be an event and all the girls should attend. She gave me a banana and asked me to go to the backyard. At this point, some of my friends were already there and all I could hear was them crying. When I enquired, my mum said it was nothing to worry about. I resisted at the beginning but my aunty overpowered me, tied my eyes with a cotton and the instruction “remove your wrapper and open your legs” followed. I did as I was told and my clitoris was cut.

I shouted for help, but no one came to my rescue. When the Nyansiba was done, I was led to the other girls. Every morning my Aunt and the other women will bath us and put some local medicine on our wounds.

This experience left me devastated, I was traumatized. I hated my mother, aunty and all the women that were involved. If I am given another chance to start over, I will never be cut again.

“My mum said we were going to a nice place” Mariam sanyang ‘I was cut at the age of nine by an old woman.. No one told me this was going to happen, I was deceived by my parents. They told me they were taking me to a nice and amazing place, but this was a lie.

When I arrived at the place I saw three old women. One of them took me into a room and tie my face with a scarf. Two of them held my legs and one did the cutting.

This incident has left a scar and an infection I am still battling with.



ENDING THE PAIN OF FGM

| Alima Taal

My name is Oumie Jatta from Brikama. In my Jola tribe, nearly every girl undergoes FGM. My own experience is a haunting memory that drives my fight against this practice.

I vividly recall being forced down by a group of women. My mouth was covered, my legs pulled apart, and a razor blade was used to cut me. At just twelve years old, I bled more than the others, an image of blood still flashes in my mind. My mother was absent during this ordeal, and I felt betrayed and abandoned.

As I grew older and started menstruating, I experienced pain that reminded me of the mutilation. This suffering continued into my marriage, where painful intercourse and limited sexual satisfaction added to my distress. The thought that my partner might prefer someone who hasn't undergone FGM only intensified my fears.

The tools used during the mutilation; knives, blades, still disturb me. The intense pain, severe blood loss without medical care, and the emotional trauma have left deep scars. The nightmares, sleepless nights, and feelings of betrayal have led to anxiety and depression. FGM has brought nothing but suffering and problems into my life. It serves no beneficial purpose and only inflicts harm. I am determined that my daughter will never endure what I did.

We must unite to end female genital mutilation. No child should have to suffer this way. Join me in advocating for an end to this cruel practice, and work towards a future where every girl can live free from pain and fear.



For some survivors of Female Genital Mutilation, it is the sting of pain during the act or their first pee after the act that they mostly remember about their experience. For others, the memory is locked at the back of their minds until their first sexual experience. And then there are those who cannot seem to fathom if the incident is a reality or an illusion. Sainabou, an excellent cyber security specialist, is in the latter category.

As she juggles the dynamics of her job and the many open tabs in her brain, one thing she cannot decipher is that one core memory that is controlling her life in so many ways.

Do You know how annoying it is to be poked by a thorn? Well, something else beats that, knowing that you are being poked but cannot figure out where it is coming from. Life has taken Sainabou on a roller-coaster, but now that she feels in control of how high or low the ride goes, is she ready to conform to an identity? Find out with me...

When you think of your childhood, what memory stands out the most for you?

The funny thing about this question is the memory that seems to loop around my brain is a particular one I cannot remember. I keep thinking about it but I always come back to the conclusion that my mind is playing tricks. This memory keeps taunting me because it is not a very pleasant one. Sometimes to make sense of it I question myself that what if it is not just my imagination and I actually lived it.

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Would you like to share what that memory is?

I have always had this uncertainty, of whether I was subjected to FGM or not. I find myself trying to recall the moment it happened, but I always come back to a blur between reality and imagination. For me, this is big because I have had these moments where I see vivid images of when it happened and how, but they always feel so unreal. I spend a lot of time thinking of the possibilities. Other times I spend it thinking if I really want my questions answered or for my suspicions to be true.

**BEYOND A LABEL:
THE BLURRY LINES OF
REALITY AND ILLUSION
| Fatoumatta Joof**

What has made you want to connect the possibility of being a victim of FGM to yourself?

My mother is Wolof, so FGM is not their culture. They neither practice nor condone the act. My father on the other hand is Fula from Kedougou, in Senegal. . When I was around 2 years old, I visited my grandparents. That was my first time there and I was accompanied by my father. My parents were separated at the time. That visit is the anchor to my assumptions. I visited again when I got a bit older with a lot of questions. I did not have the courage to ask directly, however it was brought up in a conversation I had with my stepmother. I had another revelation that kind of raised my suspicions a bit higher.

If I were to rate it, it probably went from 50% to a solid 75%. My stepmother revealed to me that my stepsister was subjected to it.. Questions were swirling in my brain. “If they did it to my sister, then the same must have happened to me”. Before my second visit to Kedougou, I asked my mother about it, she told me she was not sure because she was not there. I made light of the situation because I did not want her to know I was bothered by the conversation, so we moved passed it.

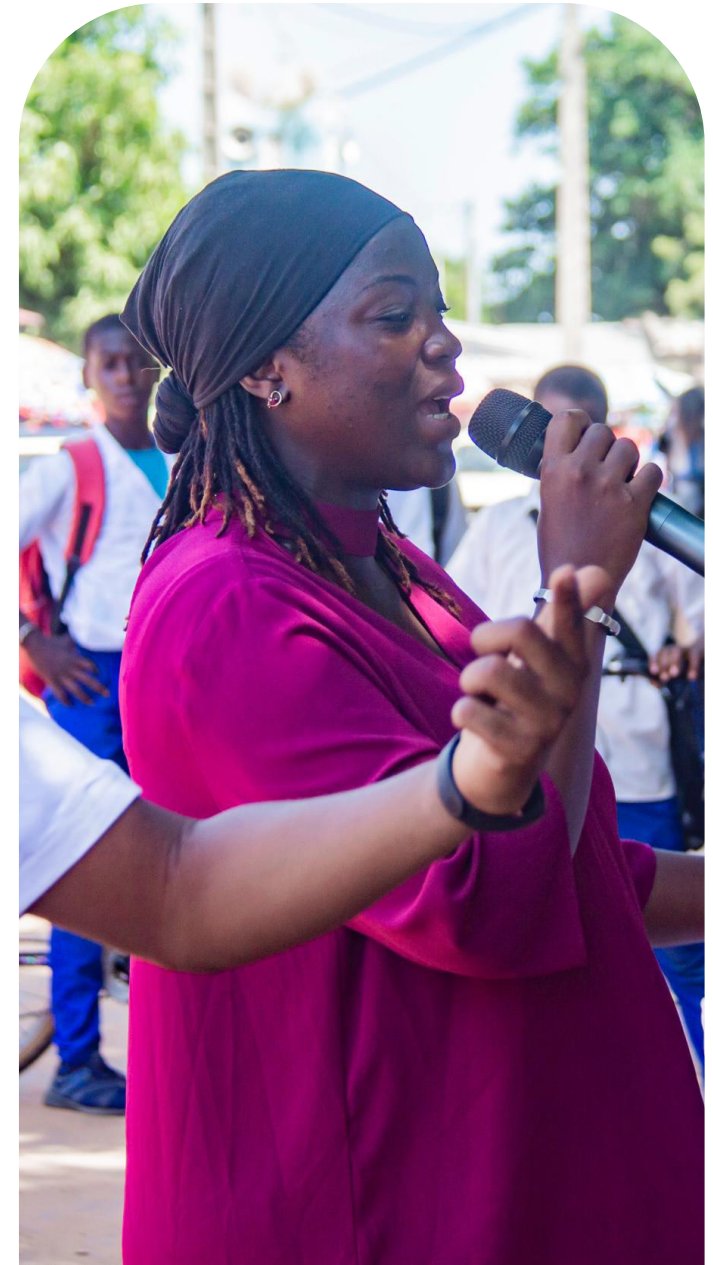
I knew I could not ask my father about it. My mother could not also approach him with it because they were not on good terms. She has her own suspicions too. We tiptoe around the subject, but I know from observation that she is bothered, especially about not knowing.

I know how very young you were on your first trip to Kedougou, however, I would really like to go out on a limb here and ask if there is anything specific that you remember from that trip?

Honestly, aside from being on the ferry that day, I cannot remember anything else. I cannot even remember speaking to anyone or playing with cousins or even other basic interactions. For Sainabou, it is like that chunk of her memory has been erased from her brain and she is trying to put the pieces back together, but how can you put together an image when you cannot find the missing pieces? Is she ready to start searching?

Has she made any effort; from the moment she knew that her father’s family heavily believed in the practice?

Well yeah, to an extent, I have. I have done online research about FGM. I have looked through to see what a normal vagina looks like. I have looked at the differences, and in some of those times, I saw similarities and in others I was thrown off because the response I would get is that my type is normal too.





What answers are you truly looking for?

I would love to know. I would like to be free from this uncertainty, but I don't know where to start. For me google could not provide me with the answers I am looking for and I have accepted that. I could get answers from the actual people I am meant to ask, like my father. How can I come up to him with something like this now that I am 18. My father is not one to have these types of conversations with. He is a bit or shall I dare say very conservative. We rarely see eye to eye on because of his ideologies. I have picked this up from him and let me tell you, he is not about to change any of them. This has made me believe that he would make a big deal out of my question and assume I am up to something. . He will try to justify that one of the reasons of FGM is to prevent promiscuity. . He is always cautioning me to stay away from boys. . He will surely make an issue out of it.

I could also ask my grandmother, but then again, she will also take it out of proportion. She will deflect and assume that I want to indulge in something, as in sexually, hence my questions. I do not have a husband or about to get married, so it will be off for them.

Could you please talk more about your conversation with your stepmother?

My stepmother comes from the same village as my father. However, I found out that they did not share the same beliefs. She has been through FGM because she explained the whole process to me. I also learnt that my stepsister was subjected to FGM without her permission and she was very angry.. The moment she was brought back, she knew. She confirmed when she was giving her a bath and she reacted immediately. She removed the sealant. She explained that there was blood all over. That was how she was able to lessen the damage. As if I could not be repelled enough, she showed me the picture of the woman that does it. I felt something in the pit of my stomach. Was it recognition? Was it familiarity? Was it repulsion? I could not answer that. One thing I could not utterly deny was that I felt like I had seen that woman before, in my dreams and in all the times I pictured myself in that place.

Are you more afraid to ask your father and have him question your morals or are you more afraid to find out the actual truth?

I am more afraid to find out that I underwent FGM. I have been seeing and reading things about FGM. I have seen some very troubling things and they have gotten to me. All of it terrifies me. The one that terrifies me the most is childbirth experiences of survivors of FGM – the life and death cases. . I cannot see the silver lining with that. I have a fear of getting pregnant. I also think of my first night with my husband and get devastated. , Again, nothing beats my fear of getting pregnant and not being there to see my child because I ended up dead during delivery. . Do you know this is the first time I have ever said that out loud, and that you are the first person I told? Everything I have said here is coming out for the first time. I have never engaged with anyone on the possibility of me being a victim, not to my best friends, or family members who I trust very much.

It must have taken a lot for you to sit with me, does this mean you are slowly coming to terms with the possibility that you may have gone through it?

Yes, I have grown so much from the time I started having these unclear memories. From all the questions I had growing up, and with my second visit to my father's village and the talk with my stepmother. . I have slowly gotten accustomed to the reality that I may have been subjected to FGM. . I never had the courage to share anything about myself to anyone regarding what I am going through, but the shift from a 50% to the 75% had created that urge in me to explore some more about myself. So yes, I may be leaning towards the reality, but it still has not sealed the deal for me. I am yet to accept that I am a victim of FGM. I have had conversations with my friends about FGM, its mostly me asking them questions about it though. I always respond no to their questions however, when they ask me if I have gone through it? I tell them no, because for me that is the answer I choose to side with.

What do you think will change in your life once you find out that you truly underwent FGM? Have you made the decision to not go further with finding out?

There will be major life changes. First, I would rethink my choice to have children. I want to have kids, I dream of having them. Everything will be so real, and I will have to make that choice, which I do not really want to make. I have the freedom of making that choice now that I don't know, but the idea of everything changing, I don't know but it is one of the reasons why I would rather not. At some point in my life, I wanted to find out, physically, if I had been through it. I was closer to doing that than asking my father or grandmother. I was ready to sacrifice my virginity, to get answers. For me that was easier. Thinking of it now, none of the options seemed easy. I have not made any final decision as to whether I will do more digging or if I will stop where I am - at 75%.

Do you think you would have been spared from your current turmoil if both your parents stayed together? How has their separation impacted your life?

You know, if they were not already separated, the whole FGM thing would have spiked it. My father's family had their vendetta with my mother from the beginning. She was not from there and she did not succumb to their way of life. My father is very family oriented, and he made decisions that they would accept. My mother would never have allowed any of them to touch me if it got to that, but he still would have made a way for that visit. . For some reason I don't think it would have made any difference if they stayed together or not. Even if they had been together, that FGM debacle would have been the last thing to send them over the edge.

Your father's culture and traditions are one of the prominent reasons why your parents separated, FGM being one of them, how does that make you feel?

Sometimes, when I am going through hard times or just being in my head, I think about my father's family and blame them so much for everything. Sometimes, I hate them, and I can't help but hate him too. I feel weak, because sometimes I look at our situation and feel very helpless. I also feel unfortunate sometimes, especially when I see some of my friends with their parents.

Do you wish your father had made more effort in protecting you?

My father had his own problems that overshadowed his ability to take full control of his life. I don't entirely blame him, the people around him had a lot to contribute to who he is and his actions. However, I wish that he valued my peace first, but what does he know? If you are around people that make you believe certain harmful things should be done to ensure the safety of your child, I guess that puts him in a box labeled "it is not entirely his fault". Not blaming him does not take away the fact that I still wish he fought harder for my safety.



People close to Sainabou, or anyone that has had the chance to be around her, understand how closed off she is about her private life. People with FGM do not have a mark on their foreheads identifying them as victims/survivors, however, no one around her could guess or assume that she may be one. I had been talking to her about this whole project, as a friend, but I never would have imagined that she is someone with a story ready to let the world in her little bubble. I asked her, why now? How did you find the balance of going out of your comfort zone, to saying I am ready to let the world know something personal about me.

If you know me, you know I keep my business to myself. When we spoke the other day about your project, it woke something in me. I have mentioned this earlier, I have never had this conversation with anyone, not even my mother. At first, I used to believe that coming out with my story will make me look weak, that people will start looking at me differently, that I will become vulnerable under their scrutiny. However, I am grateful for the community I grew up in. The women in my life, the safe spaces I have been to, the testimonies of victims I have heard, and people close to me that have been through the difficulties, this whole village woke this courage in me to come forward with my own story. Their influence of self-awareness and open-mindedness grounded me to take control of my narrative. My interactions with some victims/survivors have touched me in ways I cannot explain, and I want to offer the same grace to other people who may be going through something similar to my situation in that you hold the power to your story. I hope someone reads it and realizes that they are not alone with whatever their circumstances are, I am with you. I am here to virtually offer support, that is the least I can do but I hope it makes a big difference in their lives.

Right now, how do you feel?

Chuckles Honestly, I am having mixed feelings. My heart is beating really fast, and I feel that I have shared a part of me, which is really huge by the way, but I can tell you one thing and that is I don't feel vulnerable. I feel confident. That is the most I am feeling.

The question still lingers, the blurry lines are still thick but Sainabou has embraced her story and that is anything she wishes it to be.

[Reader discretion is advised. This story portrays a very graphic recount of Female Genital Mutilation, unsealing and painful sexual experience. If this will in any way harm you or prick old wounds, we suggest you go read your favourite light hearted book.]

Ma'nyor feleh – The daunting wedding night of infibulated brides

| Lawkadinch Silvia Gomez

In The Gambia, weddings are very well celebrated – they are a big deal. Family members' friends and loved ones from everywhere join in the joyous occasion, to celebrate love, unionism and happy beginnings. In certain cultures, wedding celebrations can take more than a day, with each dawn presenting new experiences. From the Sabarr, Tama, Halam; the benachin, and Ashobee, all eye marking elements that add vibrance to the day, give people a blanket to shroud their worries and live life with a little more joy. The day in so many ways is marked by broad smiles, elders mouthing prayers for blessed children, a peaceful home and a beautiful marriage. All of these are thrown with cautionary advice to the women – to be patient, to live by the desires of her husband, love and respect him through all weathers for blessed prodigies. Cautions I do not necessarily agree with, but this is for another story.

Weddings, as beautiful as they seemingly spring out from these words, are not always a story of laughter, hope and joy. For women who have undergone infibulation, like you will come to learn in this story, the wedding night is pain covered with smiles, it is a chapter of betrayal for some and a sacrifice too heavy to carry.

According to the World Health Organisation, Infibulation is a form of FGM, where the virginal opening is narrowed through the creation of a covering seal. The seal is formed by cutting and repositioning the labia minora, or labia majora, sometimes through stitching, with or without removal of the clitoral prepuce/clitoral hood and glans. This very harmful practice is usually done on girls in their early years to prevent promiscuity and preserve the virginity of the woman. In The Gambia, through the varying beliefs and cultures, virginity is still considered the pride of the woman and the dignity of her family.

This practice has caused Amie*, Ida* and many women around the world unbearable pain and tucked the experience of sexual pleasure far from their reach.

[Amie's* experience]

Remembering the early hours of the wedding, Amie shared:

"I was quite excited about my wedding. I invited my colleagues at work and my friends and everyone I could think of. I had everything figured out. On the wedding day, as expected, I was not left alone. I felt celebrated." At night...

" I had had enough of the celebrations. I showered and changed into my traditional outfit prepared by the elderly women in the family. I was covered with a white veil, finally becoming a married woman. I could not have been any happier. The women took turns to fill me up with words of wisdom, as I start my journey of womanhood. We finally set out for my husband's house, with drums, singing and a lot of excitement. "

The stretching of the night...

The car I was in stopped earlier than I expected. My entire head was covered so I did not know what was happening. An elderly woman helped me out of the car, , took me in and uncovered my head. I sat in front of a woman, probably in her 70s still struggling to make out what was happening. I was asked to lay down and open my legs. I did as I was told and held my breath. No one ever told me I was sealed.

Staring at her thighs with hands crossed, Amie* goes further into the night...

During the whole process, I did not know what to think or how to feel. I did not feel any pain at first because I was deep in my thoughts. I got a directive to stand up and the pain shot through, pushing me to a scream point. I walked in pain that night, but the celebrations continued. I could not believe it, my own family celebrating when I was in pain.

***Ma'nyor feleh is a mandinka phrase for "here comes the bride"**



The never ending pain...

I was accompanied to my husband right after I was unsealed to consummate the marriage. The pain was unbearable. I screamed and bled but my husband had to go through with it to be recognised as a man. This continued for days to prevent my vagina from closing up again - as directed by popular believe.

Every single night to follow, I laid on the bed like a log and watched my husband have his way with me. I had no sexual pleasure. All I experienced was pain - the one that felt like someone is stretching a wound on your body.



[Ida's* experience]

Ida* a young mother of three also shares how her mum did not remember that she was cut and sealed...

I was not expecting to be taken to my husband's house on my wedding night. Well, most times, we have the option to go later.

After the celebrations, I showered and slept off. However, my Aunts and other elderly women woke me up and took me to my husband's house. We had to consummate the marriage and it was a very painful experience for me. He pushed a lot but could not penetrate. I screamed a lot. My husband stepped outside after so many tries but he too was met with the expectations to prove his manhood. He came back, wiped my tears and tried again. It was extremely painful. I was totally sealed, my clitoris was cut off, leaving a hole for pee and menstruation. My husband and I tried to have painless sex several times but that never happened. I had to go through this unbearable experience because my mum forgot I was sealed.

The aftermath...

After a few months, I started having blood spots all the time. We tried different hospitals and visited a renowned Doctor in the country but he said there was nothing wrong with what happened to me. To date, I wonder how a Doctor will think that way. I eventually got treated by a Medical Doctor and the bleeding stopped.

My pain did not stop there. In all three deliveries I have had, I had to be torn to create space for the baby to come out because my clitoris, which should have aided that enlargement was removed. The stitching, removal of those stitches, pain from sex and itchiness of these come with - it is pain all through life. I have never experienced sexual pleasure, safe to say they have achieved their goal. Sometimes, I feel a lot of anger for my mum. To think she gave me to an old lady to cut and seal me just to forget. How???

Voices of Hope: Young Advocates Leading the Fight Against FGM in Communities

| Story by Ndey Fatou Nyng

This story captures the inspiring work of three adolescent girls from rural Gambia, who, despite facing challenges in their campaign to end FGM, have risen as powerful advocates for change. Through their personal experiences and unwavering commitment, Aisha Kabba, Elizabeth Camara, and Fatoumata Joof are leading a movement to protect girls in their communities from this harmful practice. Their courage, resilience, and activism are transforming their communities and inspiring a generation to stand up against FGM. Each of these young women is a force for positive change, determined to create a future free from FGM for every girl. Each of these young women is turning their struggles of undergoing this harmful practice into a force for positive change, determined to create a future free from FGM for every girl.

GAM-ADVOCATE: Aisha Kabba's Fight Against Female Genital Mutilation

In the heart of Basse, URR, the fight to end FGM is far from over. Despite significant efforts to end this harmful practice, many girls continue to face the threat of being mutilated. Aisha Kabba, an 18-year-old advocate from Allunhareh, Basse URR, stands as a beacon of hope and resilience in this campaign.

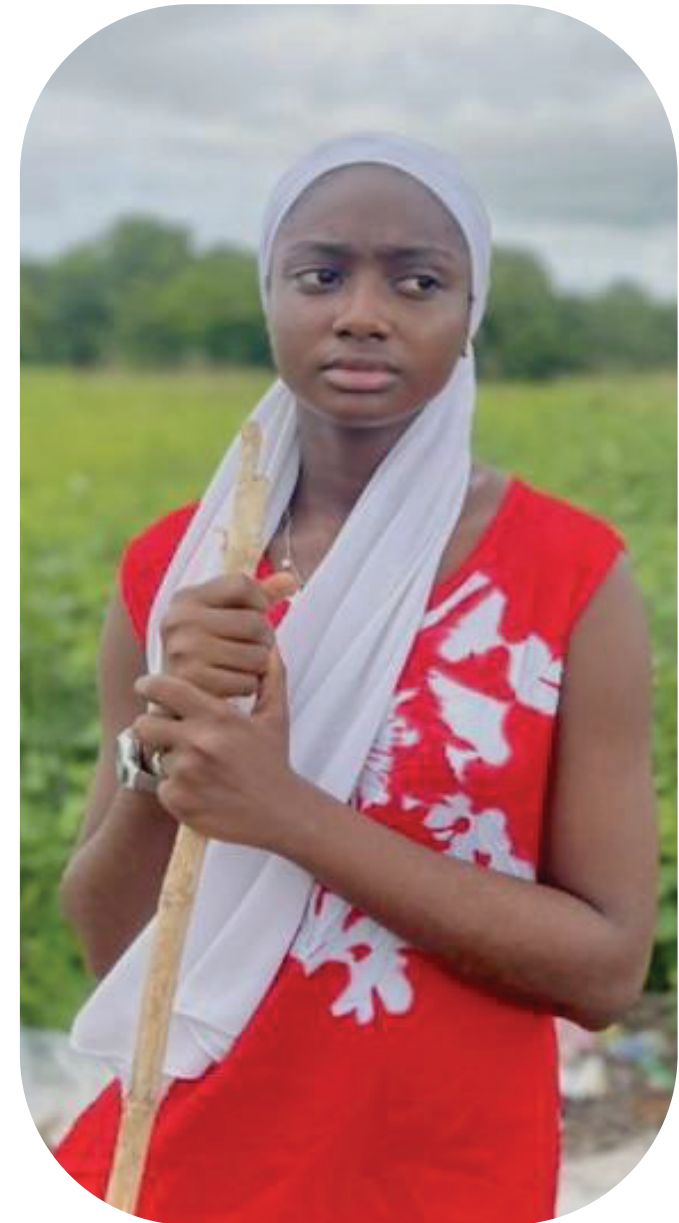
Aisha, a student at Nasir Senior Secondary School, dreams of becoming an entrepreneur and an accountant. Her passion for reading and her drive to create a better future for herself and others are evident in her advocacy work. Through the power of spoken word and poetry, Aisha raises awareness about the devastating effects of FGM and inspires change.

In a heartfelt interview, Aisha opened up about her personal experience with FGM.

"Yes, I am a victim of FGM. Although I can't remember the exact moment, my mother told me it happened twice. The first procedure was incomplete, so they performed it again to ensure I was 'clean.' The pain was excruciating, and I was terrified. I heard other girls screaming, but when I asked why, I was told it was nothing. When it was my turn, they covered my eyes, removed my pants, and laid me down. I felt a sharp, unbearable pain between my legs. They washed the blood away and told us not to cry because we were now 'women.' Even after all these years, the pain and complications from FGM persist. I suffer from severe cramps and blockages during menstruation, which I attribute to the mutilation I went through."

Aisha's resolve to end FGM is fuelled by her own suffering.

"Everything I've been through has only strengthened my commitment to ensuring that my daughters and every other girl will never experience this horror. I am dedicated to fighting FGM with all my strength. My message to every parent is clear, 'protect your children from this cruel practice. No child should ever have to go through what I did'."



Aisha's story is not just about her pain; it's a call to action. She represents a growing movement of young women who, united by their shared experiences, are determined to use their voices to bring about change.

"We are a group of young women, united by our experiences with FGM, and we are ready to make a difference," Aisha declares. "Our voices will not be silenced until every child is free from the horrors of FGM." Through her advocacy, Aisha Kabba is transforming her suffering into a powerful force for change. She is inspiring others to join the fight against FGM and create a future where every girl can live free from this devastating practice.

Elizabeth Camara: Championing the Fight Against Female Genital Mutilation

At just 20 years old, Elizabeth Camara from Basse Koba Kunda is a fierce advocate for ending FGM.

Her commitment to ending this harmful practice is both deeply personal and resolute.

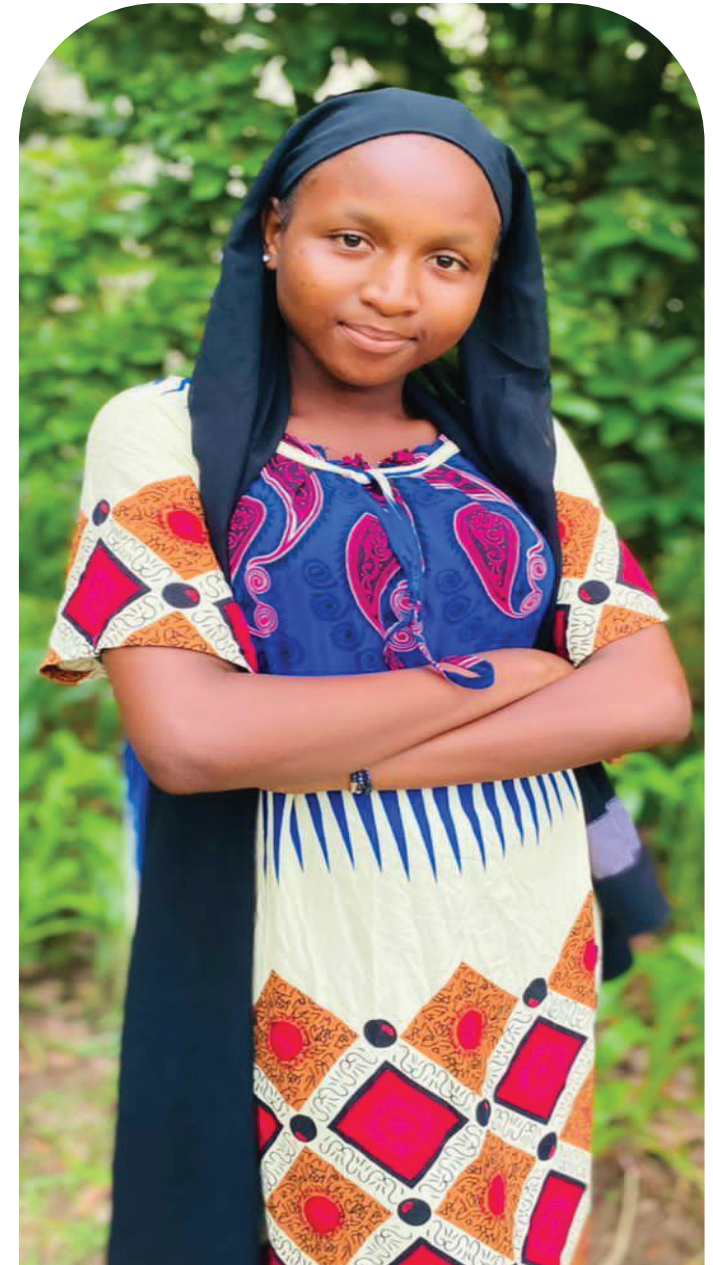
Elizabeth, who survived FGM herself, shared her story. "I am a survivor of FGM. Though I don't recall the details, I know the impact it has had on my life. I am determined to end FGM in my generation. Despite the high prevalence of this practice in my community, I am firm in my belief that we can achieve an FGM-free URR."

Her motivation to fight against FGM stems from a profound realization of its dangers.

"I became inspired to advocate against FGM when I learnt about its severe risks and complications. I began to worry about my own future and the possibility of facing painful and dangerous consequences during childbirth. The fear and regret of having undergone FGM drove me to action. I wish it hadn't happened to me, and I don't want anyone else to suffer the same fate."

To raise awareness and drive change, Elizabeth has turned to drama and stage performances. She believes in the power of these art forms to educate and inspire. "I use drama and stage performances as my platform for advocacy. Even if just one person learns something new from my performances, I feel that I have made a difference. Each performance is a step towards raising awareness and sparking conversations about ending FGM."

Elizabeth Camara's dedication to this cause is a testament to her courage and conviction. She is not relenting in her efforts to create a future where no girl has to undergo FGM. "This is my reality," Elizabeth says. "I am fighting for what I believe is right, which is ending FGM in my generation. I am determined to see a future where FGM is a thing of the past." Through her advocacy, Elizabeth is not only sharing her personal journey but also igniting hope and change in her community. Her efforts contribute to a broader movement toward an FGM-free world.



Fatoumata Joof: From Survivor to Advocate for an FGM-Free Future

Fatoumata Joof, a determined young woman from Basse Mansajang, has embarked on a powerful journey from being a survivor to an advocate. In pursuit of better educational opportunities, Fatou relocated to Bakoteh Borehole to live with her uncle. Today, she is a student of International Relations at MDI, an entrepreneur, and a passionate activist. In a candid interview, Fatoumata shared her personal experience with FGM and how it fuelled her activism.

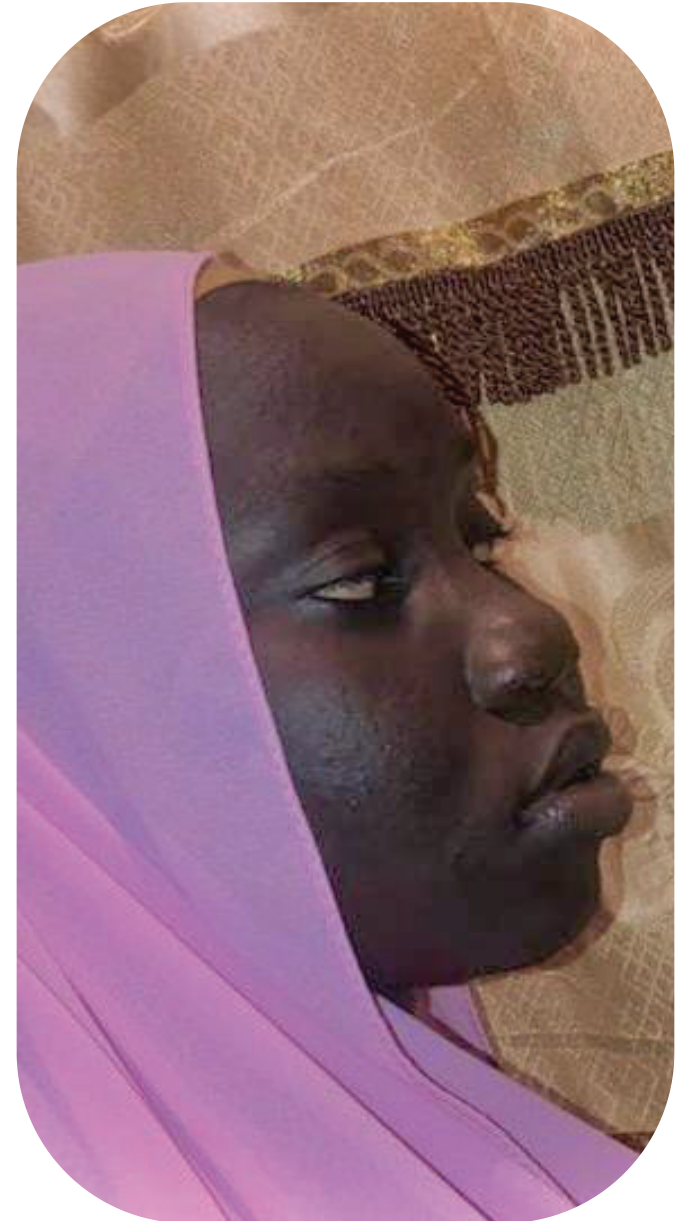
“My experience with FGM was deeply traumatic. I was held down during the procedure, which was incredibly painful and left me with long-lasting complications. The aftermath included severe menstrual cramps, which I believe happen as a result of FGM. Knowing the high prevalence of FGM in my community, I knew I had to act to fight for the young girls who are at risk of undergoing this horrific practice.”

Fatoumata’s experience led her to deepen her understanding of FGM and its impact. Her journey in activism took a significant turn when she connected with Tala Camara, another advocate with a similar story.

“I didn’t stop at my own experience. I continued researching FGM until I met Tala Camara, who had a similar background. Her dedication and efforts inspired me. Tala helped me set up a school club where we conduct community Bantabas, drama performances, and various sensitisation programmes. This support was instrumental in my advocacy work.”

Reflecting on her hopes for the future, Fatoumata expressed a vision of transformation for her community. “I envision a community free from FGM, a place where women and girls are protected and empowered with their full rights. I believe this will significantly contribute to our growth and development. I am committed to continuing this fight until every child in Basse can recognise their own voice and become a voice for the voiceless. Together, we can build a stronger, better generation free from FGM.”

Fatoumata Joof’s journey from a survivor to advocate is a testament to her resilience and commitment to change. Her work is making a difference in her community, helping to pave the way for a future where every girl in her community is protected from FGM.



An Unspoken Abuse: Former 'Kenyeleng' (Traditional Communicator) Speaks on Anti-FGM Campaign

| Patience Loum

Jainaba Jammeh abandoned her support for Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) when her daughter suffered from childbirth complications as a result of undergoing the procedure. These complications eventually led to a Caesarean section during the birth of several of her children. "Although the surgery helped significantly, on several occasions, her body became weak, which forced me to stop everything I was doing to assist her with her daily chores," Jainaba explained.

Jainaba hails from Bansang, a town in the Central River Region (CRR) of The Gambia. According to statistics, rural Gambia has a high prevalence of FGM, with about 71.7 per cent of women and girls having undergone the practice.

FGM is typically carried out by a group of female circumcisers known as 'Ngansimbas', while the 'Kenyelengs' (traditional communicators) sing and hold the girls down. The procedure involves the use of harmful tools such as knives, scissors, or razor blades to remove parts of the female genitals.

Jainaba comes from a lineage of traditional communicators. Born into this family, she initially saw nothing wrong with the practice and had always supported the female circumcisers in their work. However, her perspective changed after her daughter's harrowing experience.

Jainaba shared that out of her four daughters, only the first underwent FGM. The other three were protected from undergoing the practice, and she vowed to ensure her grandchildren would not also go through FGM.

A lot of people in The Gambia allege that they are not aware of the harmful effects that FGM has on the health and well-being of girls and women. While the procedure itself takes little time, the consequences can last a lifetime. Girls and women may develop infections, excessive bleeding, and may also experience difficulties with childbirth, urination, and menstruation.





Jainaba herself underwent FGM and suffered complications during childbirth, losing a significant amount of blood. At the time, she did not realise that her condition was a result of having undergone the procedure. Jainaba has since used her voice and influence in her community to speak against FGM and raise awareness on the harm it causes women and girls. “Just today, I participated in a community outreach program to sensitise people on the dangers of FGM. I can tell you with certainty that the level of engagement has increased, and women are now willing to speak out and share their experiences.”

Beliefs surrounding the preservation of family honour often fuel the continuation of FGM. The older generations of women, who frequently make decisions about the practice, see it as an essential part of a woman’s identity and a social obligation. Many boys and men are expected to marry a girl who has been mutilated, and girls fear social exclusion and diminished marriage prospects if they do not undergo FGM.

Jainaba explained that she began advocating against FGM long before the interventions of GAMCOTRAP and other youth-based organisations. However, their involvement has increased her resolve to further engage with women in her community to end this harmful practice.

Her husband has been very supportive of her campaign, and she has not faced any opposition in her community regarding her efforts.

Today, Jainaba works closely with women and organisations in her community to continue the campaign to end FGM and promote awareness about its dangers.

Defying the Odds: A journey down the life of a victim of FGM | Fatoumatta Joof

In my interview with Zainab, we discussed the reasons why she has strongly refused to have her story be based on the earnest conversation about Female Genital Mutilation with her mother. She has chosen to relay her story with every chapter giving us a sense of her presence. The interview took me on a trip down her life. This covers memories that have gradually become her reality, becoming more than her experience - taking ownership of her body, her voice and power. Zainab also got into how people only see what is on the surface and how she is okay with that because she holds the power to decide who is deserving of knowing what lies beneath the deeper parts of herself.

Graduating with a Law degree from the University of The Gambia, going to private schools all her life and getting exposed to books, she has always been able to articulate herself either through writing or speaking. Her story takes us on her whirlwind of emotions of being a victim of FGM.

Trigger warning: The answers below contain visual images of abuse, emotional and physical abuse. Please take some time to prepare yourself if you wish to go ahead with it, you are also advised to take breaks if it gets too much for you.

What is your first memory of your FGM experience?

Growing up I used to always have this one memory stuck at the back of my head that I could not understand. I will always find myself on the laps of a few grandmas, including my grandma. I can hardly tell you the sequence of what happened but through the daze I am able to remember the chewed up kola nut my grandma had in her hands, placing it somewhere in my vagina. I cannot vividly explain the feeling or remember where it had been placed because I was entirely numb. I was later put in a nappy and thinking back at it now I do not even know what kind of nappy it was. To some people this might be trivial, but to me this memory is everything I have tying me to that day. During that time, from when it happened to the day I finally found out that I was cut, I always thought this memory was a faint dream. People struggle with their identities at different stages of their lives. Zainab has always found herself in between papers, it does not matter what was written as long as the words form a sentence, she will read. At a very young age, she as well as most kids with strict parents, found herself immersed in literature as to feel connected with the outside world. Her mother has never tolerated the idea of them growing up with the influence of other people in their community and this as we know has created the starter pack for inquisitive and curious children. Zainab has always been aware of the world beyond the one she is living in; the same one her mother tried to stray them away from eventually became the life she embraced. Zainab grew up watching Disney channel shows, nickelodeon and other popular television shows and felt free subconsciously while she physically felt constrained. "I grew up to be the presumptuous child my mother tried so hard to stir me away from, and I revel in this little joy any chance I am reminded of it".

At what Age did you know that you were cut?

I was either 13 or 14 when I found out. So, growing up I had always been a bookworm. I was also chatty but because I was so afraid of my mum and being around her, I had to find my peace in reading books. You will find me reading in birthday parties, wedding ceremonies, you get the picture. My older sister was studying for her doctorate at that time and people around her convinced her that she should read more, and I think she got it out of context because all she bought were romance novels. I however understood because we were all teenagers and wanted to fit every fantasy we could in our lives. She got the whole Harlequin publications, and some other classics. I was grateful she shipped the collections when she was done with them. I had to take over the pile of books and had myself reading the next one as soon as I was through with a copy. I was turning the pages through smutty scenes, learning from the main characters, how they reach their euphoric states from the sensitivity of their touches. One thing about smutty books, they will help describe a whole sex scene making you think you are watching it.. One word they kept mentioning elated my curiosity from that experience, the Clitoris.



Zainab could not describe her experience with FGM because she could hardly remember, but she knew she has never felt anything like that on that part of her body. This revelation changed her whole life. Mentioning the clitoris in many instances and me having no clue what it was, prompted me to look it up on the internet. The images that appeared on the screen were nothing like what I have. I had to run to my mirror to do a double check, just to be sure of what I was insinuating. I could see from the mirror that I was looking at something different, to make sense of the situation I had to do more research. I typed “what do you call a vagina without a clitoris?”. I came across a little website called the daughters of eve and I had to learn everything about FGM, well the medical complications and some of the general reasons. All of this happened on the same day and thinking back at it now, I don’t know how I was able to bring myself to that realization.

Another realization I had was that the bad dream I kept having was an actual memory. After this experience, I went on a downward spiral to uncover almost everything written about FGM or anything else related to that. My life was never the same again, I had to be somebody else, I had to wake up everyday with the knowledge of what is within me.

Aside from that experience, what can you tell me about that realization?

Well, funnily I was scared that I will never be able to feel what those girls were feeling in the books I read. The fact that reading through the steamy scenes gave me a certain type of high, I was worried I would not have what it takes to give me that euphoric feeling. It is hilarious thinking back that at 13 years old this is what I was thinking. I thought to myself, I am never going to have an orgasm in my life and boy was I in a mood.

If you could describe your feelings after having an epiphany,, what would it be?

Empty! I felt emptiness. I did not even know where to go from there. At that moment, although I tried to make sense of the situation, my 13-year-old self was not built in a way that everything could make sense. When I was going through my rigorous research on FGM, all the things I saw regarding the act were things I grew up thinking were normal. All those while I believed I was whole and complete; I was not comparing myself to other girls and imagining what they had or did not. Every girl to me had the same anatomy. Finding out I was different; I felt the missing pieces and nerves of my vagina.

How was your relationship with your mother after knowing?

I never had a relationship with my mother. Aside from the fact that I felt angry and betrayed by her for not giving me a choice, there was nothing else to make sense of the situation. However, through the years of talking about FGM to my sisters and cousins who have also gone through it, I developed the courage to make it my platform in my activism journey. I wanted to talk about FGM to anyone that would listen. My biggest challenge in speaking to people about it was the first pageant I took part in. I was older and had learnt enough to educate other people about it. This was also the first time my mother had to listen to my opinion on FGM, and she not pleased with it. She made a whole fit on how disrespectful I was to our culture. A culture that she willingly embraced to fit into my father's community. It was through this conversation that I found out find out that her family does not practice FGM.. My mother not only betrayed us by forcing us to be cut, but also betrayed herself by putting herself through FGM. Whatever it took to land on my father's family's good side, even if it meant sacrificing our freedom and hers to get it there. Sometimes I blame her, and other times I empathize with her. She got married very young and had no time to discover her true self before becoming a mother. Getting married into a family that did not appreciate all your efforts also contributed to the way she was with us. When it comes to my relationship with my mother honestly, I just don't know. I wish she did not have to make us suffer the consequences of her own trauma. I am owning up to my resentment towards her, I can still feel sorry for her experience and hold on to my emotions and that is what I am doing.

After realizing the reason your mother made you go through FGM, did you feel accepted by that same community?

Girl, no! First of all, I don't think I can be more different than what their ideal Serahule girl should be. This bugs my mum so much that she constantly reminds me that I am not acting like a Serahule. I am proud of being a Serahule, there is no disputing that, but I could not be the idea of someone else, especially of a community that has contributed to my greatest dismay. They rubbed me of the choice to choose what to do with my body, I was not about to give them the power of defining who I am meant to be. As a young Serahule girl, I went to school. My maternal grandfather was very particular about that and I extend grace to him for convincing my mother to let me be educated. I graduated with a law degree and that has automatically removed me from what they accept. I have also adapted so many different ideologies, some that could potentially put some elders in a comatose if they were to ever know them.

I know you have briefly spoken about your activism towards ending FGM, could you elaborate more on how you would like to keep this movement going?

Speaking up about it. . Speaking is great and transformative, but I wish for a time where we could actually penetrate through the barriers of everything upholding FGM at once. Speaking at the pageant was a moment for me, indescribable to say the least. I had no idea who was benefiting from that message.. T Change is hard. I am determined to keep going however, with the knowledge that I have and the resilience I built from my traumatic experience, I can not stop now that I have started. I will continue making conversations around FGM to whoever is willing to listen, it might be a long shot, but I would rather it be that than nothing.

Do you ever wish to be 13 again and stay in oblivion?

Oh my God no, because I went through type 3 FGM –infibulation! Growing up, we lived in a big house with about three families. I had a lot of cousins who would eventually get married, my brothers also in time got married. Unfortunately for us, the walls were not soundproof. We could literally hear the screams from the women during sex and let me tell you, they were not screams of someone enjoying whatever was happening. We also had cousins that would visit occasionally and most of them would break down what was happening because they had gone through it too. Those screams and stories scared me. I had to find out that you will need to be torn with a razor blade and your husband has to penetrate you in that moment to prevent the scar from closing all over again. Girl! I wanted to know who came up with this barbaric thing and why we are going through it. That was how and when I vowed to never get married until I found a solution to my predicament. Living in a country like The Gambia makes achieving that very hard because I can not even begin to talk about the healthcare system. Living in a society that is plagued with this practice also made me have questions for healthcare professionals especially the women and girls that have been through it, why have they not worked towards an alternative that could help us avoid going through that torture.. The thought of it upsets me and I was not about to put myself through that, and yes, I still feel the same way. Therefore, I am very keen about the type of man I want for a husband.

The typical Gambian man is not taught seduction, it is like someone holds a gun to their heads for them to deprive their women of pleasure. I can speak on all their misogynistic ways, and we could finish a book, but I just want to point out how limitless our options are as women who have gone through FGM to be with men who care about nothing but their own climax.

How has FGM affected your romantic relationships?

I made a deal to not go through life commitments with anyone who cannot respect my body, be patient, love me unconditionally, including parts of my body that I am most insecure about. That is just the foundation of it all. There are many layers of myself that I want a man to peel, while I can also tap into their vulnerability. Gambian men have left the chat by now. I have had many bad experiences with them that I am afraid of what the next person will make me feel. For me, even outside of their emotionless personalities, I worry about their infidelity. Men cheat on a regular basis. I think to myself that if you cheat on a woman who is complete, who am I to not get cheated on with my conditions. Women with FGM are known to take ages to climax (if that ever even happens). Sex is an important part of a woman's life as much as it is for men, and some women can't be bothered about it because they don't know what they are supposed to feel. Every woman deserves to have a painless and enjoyable sex life. For me, I have reached a conclusion that they will eventually get tired of me, and you will step out anyway to find something easier. This has created an intense fear in me, that I may not be able to feel, I don't know what I am supposed to feel, I just know the possibility of it seems very far off. It may seem like I do hold back a lot with my past relationships, from someone else's perspective, but I don't even know how to let go to begin with. I have not lost all hope, I am just afraid of settling for less.

Who is Zainab without FGM, can you imagine your life without your experience?

I would have still been the person I am today, loud, and confident in my beliefs. That human beings deserve to live a life of peace. They should get to decide what their peace is. The experience would have made my journey easier, but I cannot even begin to imagine what type of a life I would have. This is Zainab, and as I know now, I am shaped through my experience. Growing up, I have always admired Aisha Ceesay from CNN, with her eloquence and poise and the fact that we also shared the same surname. I wanted to be in a spotlight too. I grew up to be outspoken with some of her influence. My life would have still been centered around me speaking and voicing my thoughts, perhaps the conversations would have been different.

FGM as we know it, comes with many effects on one's life, would you say that it has only affected or would mostly affect your sex life?

No, I think a part of your sex life is a part of your life in general. You know guys are usually told to get laid to relieve themselves from whatever is stressing them, as a woman, I also want to have that many options in my life. In fact, every decision of my life from now must involve that, because now I think of not having kids with my situation. I would rather opt for not having kids than put myself through that experience and end up resenting my child. The devastating thing about that is I love kids; I want children as much as the next woman wanting children. However, I need to make a difficult decision of going through with it, and I should not have to because of a choice I was not given. So no, this encompasses every part of my life.

If you were given a chance to speak to anyone that has the power to change so many things for you, including your FGM journey, who would it be and what would you tell them?

Girl, my mum.

One thing is we have never been able to talk to our mother about anything, literally, so this will be difficult even in her absence. I can not begin to imagine what to tell her, and this is to sincerely tell you that I am not scared but words do not come to mind when I think about her or being in the same room with her. I will however, have told her that I wished she had given me the choice to do what I wanted with my own body., You have not been the best at parenting, but you have shown us what your version of love is. I still wished you had not picked yourself over us. You will say that everything you have done was for our benefit, even though it has not benefited us in any way. We are struggling. I am suffering, but you will never know that because you have not made it easy for us to have civil conversations. I don't know how to continue, this is the most I have uttered in whatever space my mother is. I cannot go beyond what I have said.

Zainab plans to continue living her life until she finds the peace she craves for. She is a victim of FGM, not a survivor because she is still learning how to live with her struggles, and until she gets there, the world will stay in gray and white.

Activist Leads Anti FGM Campaign in Bansang CRR

| Patience Loum

The need to end Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) remains a significant challenge, especially in the rural areas of The Gambia. Despite government efforts to end the practice, including the enactment of an anti-FGM law, the practice continues, often hidden, particularly in remote areas of the country.

FGM in Bansang Central River Region (CRR) Yahya Jallow, a youth activist, has led an anti-FGM campaign in Bansang for the past seven years. Fondly called Nesta, he has worked with various youth organisations focused on sexual and reproductive health, championing the rights of women and girls in his village in the CRR South.

“Bansang had one of the highest rates of FGM in the region. In the early 80s to the early 2000s, we had more than four 'Nyangsibas' (traditional circumcisers) in the area, until the Gambia Committee on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children (GAMCOTRAP) became involved,” Jallow explained.

According to the Demographic and Health Survey 2019-2022, The Gambia still faces alarmingly high rates of FGM, with more than 73% of women and girls aged 15 to 49 having undergone the procedure. These statistics highlight the urgent need to intensify efforts to end this harmful practice. UNICEF reports that three in four girls and women of reproductive age in The Gambia have been subjected to FGM.

The Journey of a Lifetime

Yahya is deeply passionate about women's rights. He has worked tirelessly with organisations such as Think Young Women, GAMCOTRAP, the National Youth Council, and many others to prevent and end early marriage, girls' pregnancy, and FGM.

Yaya recalls that working with GAMCOTRAP initially posed a huge challenge due to a lack of understanding in the community. However, over time, he has seen a remarkable reduction in FGM practices in his community.



“The decline has been significant, largely due to the involvement of traditional circumcisers, which has greatly helped reduce the practice of FGM in our area,” he said. “People now understand the dangers of FGM, particularly the complications women face during labour as a result of the procedure.” He also credited nurses for their role in educating women and their partners about the dangers of FGM. “Another key factor in the low rates of FGM in our community is the intervention of organizations like Think Young Women and other youth-led initiatives. Through a series of sensitisation programs with survivors, victims, traditional circumcisers, and communicators, we’ve made significant strides.”

Passion and Resilience

Yahya explained that his drive to fight FGM is deeply personal.

“I remember a friend’s wife who always faced complications during childbirth, and that sparked my desire to understand what the problem was,” he said.

After several attempts to get answers from nurses, he turned to a friend who worked as a gynaecologist. “We stayed together in the Kombos, and this was when he explained to me the implications of FGM on childbirth and other related issues.”

Yahya recalled that during this time, he was still in school, but the sight of pregnant women always reminded him of the potential dangers of FGM, which could even lead to death. “I wanted change, but I was also concerned about how my community would respond to my campaign to end FGM. I come from a traditionally oriented family, and discussions on this topic were a taboo,” he said.

Despite these challenges, his passion drove him to make a difference.

“I started going from house to house, engaging with women, listening to their stories, and questioning some of the narratives told to us by our religious leaders about FGM. I learnt that nowhere was it written in the Quran that women and girls should be cut.”

A Fruitful Outcome

Yahya explained that thanks to the efforts and dedication of the youth, the atmosphere surrounding these discussions has greatly improved, making their work much easier.

“The narrative has changed dramatically. The same people who once advocated for FGM are now the ones discouraging it. Women and girls can now openly discuss sexual and reproductive health without fear of judgment or backlash from community members.”

Yahya Jallow is currently the regional chairperson for **ACTIVISTA-The Gambia** and works with organisations like Think Young Women to bring awareness on FGM and other harmful traditional practices.

Additionally, he has worked with the National Youth Council as the district youth chairperson for Upper Fulladou West, a region with 136 villages, making it the largest district in The Gambia. In this role, he has led numerous engagements with community women, traditional circumcisers, communicators, and youth.



Authors

Alima Taal

- After the cut
- Ending the pain of FGM

Aminata Jaiteh

- FGM and Virginity
- Vaginal Fistula

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- Fighting FGM one classroom at a time
- A Journey to her liberation

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- As narrated by a survivor
- As narrated by ex-circumciser

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- Defying the odds

Lawkadinch Silvia Gomez

- FGM and Sex
- Ma'nyor feleh

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- The Unspoken Struggles: Maya Jabbie's Story of FGM
- Voices of Hope: Young Advocates Leading the Fight Against FGM in Communities

Patience Loum

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