

# Perfect Sense

Speaking up against  
female genital mutilation

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**STM – foundation against female genital mutilation  
for Inter-African Committee on Traditional Practices**





## Berhane Ras-Work

### Preface

'I have witnessed the pain and suffering of young girls forced to suffer from the most gruesome practice of Female Genital Mutilation. I have heard their cries and seen their tears.

To be accepted by their societies as members, wives and respectable mothers women and girls are traditionally forced to sacrifice the most intimate part of their bodies in many parts of the world.

Female genital mutilation takes place in at least 28 countries in Africa. Girls at varying ages are mutilated with knives, razor blades or broken bottles. In some countries, the remaining parts are stitched together to protect the girls' virginity.

FGM, is also performed in some parts of the Middle East, Malaysia, Indonesia, parts of India, Iraq and parts of Sri Lanka. Due to migration, FGM is now also found in Europe, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

A girl or a woman is perfect as created in the image of God.

Join me and the Inter-African Committee on Traditional Practices in the campaign to free women and girls from harmful traditional practices such as FGM. The eradication of FGM should be one of the millennium goals.

If we join our hands and efforts, we shall see a world free of FGM and other harmful Traditional Practices. Yes, WE CAN SAY NO!



## Jet Bussemaker

### Introduction

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is a serious physical form of violation of the rights of children and women, with extremely damaging consequences for the wellbeing of girls and women. It is my opinion that FGM should be fought vigorously. Fortunately, I witness that the international awareness of this terrible practice is growing.

I hear hopeful reports that FGM could be abolished within one generation. Several African countries, for example Senegal, Mali and Guinea, have an efficacious strategy with entire communities publicly and simultaneously declaring themselves against FGM. At the same time, I see a growing involvement in this issue in the Netherlands and Europe, with migrant organisations playing an important part. Following the example of a French travelling document, I introduced a statement in the Netherlands against FGM for parents from countries where FGM is performed. This will help parents to resist pressure from their families and the communities in their countries of origin.

My aim is a closer cooperation within Europe and between Europe and Africa, to exchange expertise in stopping FGM. This might prevent that all countries have to re-invent which method works. Women all over the world are entitled to a life without injustice or violence and it is our duty to join forces in the campaign against FGM. Women have a right to physical integrity and should be able to count on our protection against these dehumanizing practices. And me? I'm counting on you!

Jet Bussemaker,  
State Secretary for Public Health, Welfare and Sport the Netherlands



'I have a very, very strong grandmother. She has control over the whole family.

When I studied medicine, I discovered what female genital mutilation is. I began to understand what had been done to me. Later the enormity of it became clear to me during my marriage, and when my children were born.

You have no idea to how many patients I had to explain that their complications were not caused by an illness, or by a congenital physical disability.

Now I am a health coordinator for the Sudanese government. It is my job to prevent girls having to experience what I, and many, many other women, have been through. I am sure you understand that I am very motivated to carry out my job.

We have just started a new campaign. We opened with a film. Mothers who had just given birth were interviewed. They all declared that their daughters would never be mutilated. The campaign is called 'Salima', which means 'whole', 'intact'. We are promoting Salima girls to come forward.

Strangely, raising the issue in my own family was most difficult. My grandmother still resists my decisions. I explained to my husband why our daughter should not and will not be circumcised. We agreed: saying no to the circumcision of our daughter makes perfect sense.'

Abeer Hassan Ahmed



‘African women used to have a cloth propped up in their mouth. They have taken it out. Now the women are speaking up.

Traditionally FGM is falsely presented as the basis of a harmonious relationship between a man and a woman. It is looked upon as being the key to good fortune, when in reality the possibility of a relationship with equality and togetherness is being destroyed. The pain of the woman is presented as a higher form of spirituality instead of what it actually is: the knot around her neck.

France has given me back my freedom, I have been able to complete my studies and grow as a person, so that now I can devote my life to the protection of girls. We have achieved results in the African communities here in France. In our work, we are aiming at expanding the possible life-choices. We would like the mothers to say No to FGM, but also to a life as a housekeeper.

Of course, I have not turned my back on Guinea. In many regions villages have abandoned this tradition. Regretfully FGM is being medicalized: medical professionals are performing FGM in clinics. What is needed is political will to take the next step in the process of abolishing FGM.

Fortunately a lot of women over there are fighting for the girls too. In fact, that is where our struggle started. The group of women who have a free mouth is growing. Let the emancipation of the women be the saving of Africa.’

## Christine Beynis



'I began to raise my voice when I became aware of the fact that many people lack information on FGM. As a result of that lack, a great number of violations of children and women take place. I am very proud to say that I have contributed to the institution of February 6 as the international day on Zero Tolerance to FGM.

We have learned that we need to sensitize people. We know that the parents who want FGM performed on their daughter in fact want this because they consider it necessary in a good upbringing. Following parents in their wish for the best for their daughters, we need to redirect them to a different outcome: a positive and healthy future is ascertained by not letting them be cut.

I want to shout: "Mutilating your daughter is absolutely not a religious requirement! You can prevent many problems, in giving birth for instance, if you let your daughter be unharmed!" Of course, raising your voice in that way is not effective. So when I am on a stage talking about FGM, I always control myself.'

## Diariatou Kourouma





'In my community female genital mutilation is a tradition that ended a hundred years ago. Fortunately nobody practices it anymore. When I imagine my sister or daughter experiencing such a dreadful procedure it makes me nauseous. I consider myself very lucky to be married to a woman who is not circumcised, though she comes from a community where FGM is common. Actually, I do not know any female friends of ours who are circumcised these days.

I strongly remember the graphic images of the circumcision of little girls exhibited during a regional conference on FGM we organized in Nairobi in 2005. When I talk to members of parliament or religious and traditional leaders about the total abandonment of FGM I always think about these little girls and the stories adult women shared with us about their daily inconvenience, pain and problems due to the circumcision.

Kenya is a liberal country but we still need to turn around many traditional and religious viewpoints on FGM. In my country FGM is illegal; it is a criminal offence under the "Sexual Offences Act" and also the "Children's Act". But still, we need to talk to our leaders to emphasize the importance of the abolition of FGM and prevent this archaic practice going underground. We need to liberate the minds of the people who still feel FGM is part of their tradition. That is our big challenge for the future.'

## Anthony Kuria





‘Of course, I look more like a grandmother than an activist. But I am both. Twenty years ago I started work on this issue. First in Somalia, and now here, in Denmark.

Looking back, it is incredible what we have achieved. Nowadays, when I meet new people, they are eager to share with me that they will absolutely not let their daughter be hurt. Not here, and not in their home country.

Why is our approach successful? Three issues matter greatly.

1. People have to be given facts and figures: education is very important. Everyone needs to be aware of the consequences of FGM, women have to be able to recognize and acknowledge their own pain and their complications.
2. The young men have to be involved intensely. They are the ones who will have to accept the uncircumcised brides. Their approval will help parents to make the right decision for their daughters
3. The women who have been mutilated are the ones who have the knowledge. They are the experts on their own misery, we invite them to join the campaign against FGM.

It can be a lonely struggle. I am very glad that I have very skilled colleagues. The international and European network is a source of support and inspiration to me.

What I really want, is that my grandchildren will grow up thinking that FGM is something from a long, long time ago, something their ancestors did, because they didn't know any better. I want it to be labeled as history as soon as possible. Wouldn't it be fantastic to witness that?’

## Ambaro Hashi Nur



'I strongly believe in education, information and awareness. And if we need the police or social services to help people understand why FGM is so harmful, I do not hesitate to support law enforcement.

It is our duty to provide relevant information to families, especially to mothers and grandmothers, on the implications of FGM on health and we should inform them of human rights and of the legal implications of FGM. We should stress that the practice is not a religious obligation. I believe that to achieve our goal we need a more consistent and sustained campaign to put pressure on communities.

What we truly need is a successful court case prosecuting a person who has in any way assisted at a circumcision, as was held in France. This will send a strong message to communities that the law should be obeyed and that the campaign to stop FGM in the UK is a serious one. We have had cases where children have been removed from their parents by Social Services – Child Protection because the parents said they considered circumcision for their daughters. These stories have shocked the communities who are now aware that the British authorities take these matters very seriously. While I feel uncomfortable to have parents prosecuted or children removed I support these actions as part of the campaign to help eliminate FGM from the UK.'

Sarah McCulloch





'My dream is that one day I will celebrate with lots of friends and professionals that FGM no longer exists. That is not only my dream, but also my goal in my battle against FGM. Two girls come to mind with regards to circumcision. The first is my cousin. She died after she was circumcised, due to an infection, haemorrhage and tetanus. After several days her family finally took her to hospital, but it was already too late. In remembrance of her I speak up against FGM. The second girl I think about is still alive, but she almost bled to death. And that is me. During seven days after my circumcision I lost lots of blood. My vagina was infected; it was dreadful. Even now, every month, I suffer from the consequences. It hurts, gives acute pain, blood clots, so I even consider a surgery in the USA.

For these reasons I speak up, I fight, I talk, convince religious leaders and traditional circumcisers to abolish this violation of child rights. In Sierra Leone we make it possible to give a voice to the medical practitioners and uncircumcised girls. They are part of the new public ceremonies for the girls. So everybody hears why it has to stop. It feels wonderful to speak freely on these matters. I want to give the youngsters a voice too. On coming conferences about FGM the young girls should give a presentation. They need to share their experience. In these days of emancipation and free voice we need to create room for the youngsters.'

## Rugitu Neneh Turay



'Many women nowadays accept that FGM is physically harmful and take a stand against these violations of human rights. What I want to see more of is for more women and men to do so in public.

In the United Kingdom my organization just published the results of a very interesting community peer-group study. It highlights experiences, views and perceptions of how women abandon this social convention. One of the conclusions is that assertive and informed women are more likely to protect their daughters from this practice.

More and more FGM is looked upon as a crime against women, and we must all strive to end these violations of women's bodies. It is clear that change is happening across parts of Africa.

I see individual women and families in the UK who have made the choice not to cut their daughters. But we do need to hear more of these strong voices to help the silent voices to follow.

I really feel we are in an era of massive support for action. I should like to rally all women to continue to question all harmful practices, to transform lives of girls and women. I, in my life, aim to use my voice and my role to strive to make a difference. As women of all ages, color, creed and ethnicity, we shall have to take other women by the hand and stand up together against violence against women. Women have a right to live!'

## Naana Otoo-Oyortey





'My best friend at school went through the practice. I didn't understand it. Why did they do it? It seemed very painful and useless to me. A seed for extensive research was planted.

During my study, and in my adult life, I encountered many gender issues. FGM is definitely the most explicit example of the imbalance of power between women and men I have come across. My curiosity took me on the path to analyze and describe working strategies of NGO's. I came across a lot of pioneering and determination of these women and men trying to fight against the practice.

We have come a long way, since we started campaigning. Now we know what is successful, and what is not. I sincerely hope that we can use the know-how we have acquired. I think there is a great opportunity to debate about what projects we should invest in, and which projects we should put to rest. I am in favor of meetings where we not only listen to each other and applaud each other's achievements, but in which we create a process of improvement and optimizing.

I am very happy that apart from the people at grassroots level, African presidents are taking a stand against the practice, as well as First ladies, and more and more parliamentarians. Religious leaders have confirmed that there is absolutely no religious requirement to let your daughter be circumcised. Those who listen can hear the women raising their voice: "This is my life, this is my health, I am the only one who makes a decision about it".'

## Nafissatou Diop



'For me it is not awkward to speak up. Because I feel that for men too it is important to talk about female genital mutilation. It is not only the responsibility of women. It concerns every member of the community, here in Europe, but also in our home countries. I talk to my fellowmen about FGM, but also with religious leaders to convince them this tradition must stop. We should create a circle of protection around our little girls.

When I think of FGM, I hear my sisters cry. They were circumcised when they were small. The sounds of their crying still echoes through my mind. Horrifying. I believe FGM is an old-fashioned tradition, which needs to be abolished immediately. Therefore I speak up against FGM. I tell everybody who wants to hear it what the terrible effects are on the girls' health. For them as girls, but also as women later on in life. As an ambassador of the fight against FGM in the Netherlands I hope I can become a role model for many more men and women. So I tell everybody I am proud that my daughter is uncircumcised and always will be.'

James Owie



'In our campaign in Kenya we focus on these so-called midwives with their blunt knives who mutilate the young girls. We talk to them and persuade them to stop. We provide other income for these excisers by giving them cattle, like sheep, goats and cows. And as soon as they start circumcising again, we take away their cattle immediately. This method works, because our people love their cattle.

Female genital mutilation must stop, because it is extremely harmful to our girls. When I go back in my memory I can only think of the tremendous pain and all the blood. I know exactly what it means for a small girl. I will always remember the terrible day I was circumcised. It was done by an older woman without any medical training or surgical equipment. I bled profusely and it seemed as if it would never stop bleeding. Now I know that sometimes girls even bleed to death.

I must say we see some progress in our fight against FGM. Some time ago people did not dare to talk about it and closed their eyes. These days we see less taboo and more discussion. We also provide education at schools, organise meetings at villages and sing songs with the people about FGM. Personally I am very proud my daughters and granddaughters have not been circumcised. Even my sons married women who have not been circumcised. That makes me believe change is possible.'

## Lilian Plapan





'FGM is absolutely an unjustifiable form of violence against women. It is an unbelievable concept, to try to control women by deleting a vital part of their body. The excuses that have been presented to motivate it are without any foundation.

I come from Mali. I am sorry to say that severe mutilation of girls is very normal here.

I was lucky, I had the opportunity to go to school. Because of that, I feel obliged to fight. Even if I am very respectful towards our traditions, I cannot deny the truth and must admit that this practice is one of the most barbarian in our culture.

I was the victim of many verbal attacks. Very often people say that I am being paid by western countries to destroy our culture. But on the other hand, I receive a lot of compliments from women and from my colleagues for my courage and my fight.

People are expressing themselves more and more in public. Even the most conservative community is openly speaking up against FGM. Nowadays, the issue is not a taboo anymore and discussions are taking place everywhere: in mosques, churches... Out of 140 villages in the vicinity, 27 have publicly declared no girl living there will be mutilated. Even if there is no concrete law yet to support these declarations, there is absolutely a political will. I hope that all the debates within the National Assembly and the government will be finalized by a definitive law.'

## Boucoun Madina Daff





'I am fighting against female genital mutilation because I believe this tradition needs to be abolished. When I think of my beautiful daughters I cannot imagine that I would tolerate this terrible procedure on them. Therefore I am so grateful my oldest daughter supports my work on this subject.

In Togo I am a member of parliament and at this moment we are preparing a special law concerning reproductive health, which also contains a section on female genital mutilation. We believe that we can abolish this practice by honouring the good elements of our culture.

In some villages in the North of Togo 99 percent of the girls' population gets mutilated. In that area we started the project "Tradition and Dignity", which focuses on the rites for girls and boys when they become men and women. We try to emphasize that FGM is harmful and transform this rite into a new tradition, after which the youngsters still feel they become men and women, but without FGM. We use theatre, music, songs and dances to show that these girls will be wonderful wives later, without the genital mutilation. And we see progress in this approach. There are villages where FGM has been completely abolished.'

## Augustin Sambiani



'I believe it is almost easier to change a tradition in the home countries in Africa than in the communities of for example the Somali people abroad. The ones who live in Diaspora cling to their old traditions and culture. They are less willing to give up the ties to their native country. Especially circumcision is a tradition people treasure.

For me, it was the other way around. I am extremely proud that my twenty-year-old daughter has not been circumcised. And I know for a fact that taking that decision was easier for me living in Holland. I do not believe I would have been strong enough to resist the opinion and believes of my family concerning fgm if I was still living in Somalia. Living in Europa I could explain to them I did it my way. Now it is time for the next generation to stand up. The young girls and boys who were born in Diaspora and grew up with a variety of cultures and believes. It would be so good if they would be more aware of their rights.

My dream is to write a book for small children with a story about FGM. Simple and like a fairytale but with the strong message that circumcision is a criminal act. That it hurts and is not good for your health. So these girls do not only hear about the wonderful gifts they receive after being circumcised. Africans have such a strong history of telling stories, let's use that to our advantage!'

## Shamso Hassan Said



‘People have discussions about FGM in many cities besides Helsinki. Mind you, this is not just women talking to women! Here in Finland, there are successful groups of men and women including youth, who are originally from Nigeria, Sudan, Kenya, Ethiopia ... from all countries where FGM is practiced.

After these meetings, the trainers call me and tell me how the meetings worked out. They make SWOT analyses of the local communities, we discuss their own competences and what they should like to improve. I am proud of what we have achieved and the methods that we use are effective.

As a treasurer of the European Network for the Elimination of Traditional Harmful Practices, I must emphasize the contradiction I encounter. Everyone agrees that FGM is one of the most terrible crimes against women, and that the communities themselves are the primary group to solve this issue, and yet, the trainers, counsellors, mediators: they are all volunteers.

Not one of them would ever object if they were asked to come and talk to parents in order to protect a girl. But wouldn't it be reasonable if there should be some kind of financial compensation? All these people around the world, doing all they can to prevent girls from being cut, they have the knowledge, they are willing to dedicate their time, don't you think it's fair if someone would at least pay their train tickets?’

## Batulo Essak





'I am at a point of no return.

When I was seven years old, an elderly woman mutilated me in my village. I was married when I was 13 years old to a much older man who abused me. I lived with him in France and had five children. Then, I encountered the anti-FGM movement. Since that moment, I have focused on gaining knowledge and strength in order to prevent domestic violence.

The response to the book I wrote (*Mutilée*, 2005) was overwhelming. Young women gave each other copies, talked about the book at length, discussed it with their mothers, women read it with their friends, social workers used the book as an opening in approaching this issue ... I think reading my personal story about violence and FGM helps to un-suppress feelings and thoughts.

Let's be frank: when you don't have the experience of making decisions about small issues in your life, when you are dependent, how can we expect women to stand up against traditions? Working on ending FGM is investing in women's strength.

What is needed is shelters for women in Africa. I am building one, in Senegal, right now. In that welcoming house, women will have the opportunity to feel whole again, to explore themselves, to receive coaching, consultation or comfort to regain strength to build a life for themselves and for their children.'

## Khady Koita





'In 1987 I was working for the Ministry of Education, at the women's education department. The Somali-women democratic organization started a campaign against FGM. The Ministries of Health and Education became involved.

We all received a training, and together we learned how to talk to parents and professionals about FGM. The information we gave to families was very often an eye-opener. That is how we started. Looking back, I know that at that time, we should have developed an alternative strategy. And we are still paying the price.

The goal of our campaign was directed to stopping infibulation, the Pharaonic circumcision. We started out by breaking down the taboo of talking about it. We chose the health-perspective: we explained the health hazards of this type of FGM. Men and women were gradually willing to stop infibulation. They wanted to stop, but only because they knew about the physical damage, not because the girl has the right to use all her senses. The general feeling was that some form of FGM needed to be performed, just to make sure. Combined with the supposedly religious requirements the perfect alternative was created: the Sunna. It had not occurred to us, that because of the focus on infibulation, other types of FGM seemed justifiable, and indirectly medicalization was promoted.

Nowadays, mothers from Somalia still ask me about the Sunna. I explain to them that no form of genital mutilation is acceptable. I am telling you this, because I want everyone to learn from our mistakes. The zero tolerance approach is extremely important. There is no time for errors: the lives of our girls are at stake!'

## Zahra Siad Naleie



## Facts about female genital mutilation

Female genital mutilation (FGM), also known as female genital cutting or female circumcision, is any procedure involving the partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injuries to the female genital organs, for no medical reasons.

Female circumcision is currently practiced in at least 28 countries stretching across the center of Africa north of the equator and in some countries in the Middle East and Asia. Due to migration it is also known in Europe, Australia, New Zealand and the USA. It occurs among Muslims, Christians and animists, although there is no religion that requires it.

UN organizations state that 100-140 million girls and women have undergone this practice. Globally, 3 million girls are at risk.

Generally speaking, the girls undergo the mutilation between the ages of 4-14. However, there are many exceptions. In some cases girls are cut when they are still a baby. In some communities it is performed just a few days before the wedding, or during pregnancy, or directly after giving birth. The practice can cause severe pain and immediate and long-term physical, mental and sexual health problems.

Female genital mutilation exemplifies the inequality between women and men, and is deeply rooted in the social, economic and political structures of communities. It is a severe violation of the human rights of girls and women.

Perfect Sense is published in 2010 by STM – foundation against female genital mutilation.

This booklet is developed to show parents all over the world that more and more people consider it self-evident to let their daughter's body remain intact.

There are organisations in more than 40 countries who focus on the protection of the girls, and they are achieving an increase on the number of parents deciding not to let their daughter be cut. The women and men portrayed in 'Perfect Sense' represent many other strong, gifted and dedicated people all over the world, who dedicate their lives to the abandonment of female genital mutilation.

Perfect Sense is distributed by the Inter-African Committee in 40 countries.

This booklet has been realised thanks to the financial contribution of:

**Cordaid**  
**Soroptimist**  
**Blömer Accountants and Avisors**  
**Municipality Leidschendam-Voorburg**  
**Sports & Leisure Group**

Information about organisations connected to this booklet:

### **STM**

STM is a Dutch foundation, founded in 2004. It's aim is to support women, men and organisations in Africa who are working on the abandonment of female genital mutilation. STM is the abbreviation of Stichting Tegen Meisjesbesnijdenis, which translates as Foundation against female genital mutilation in Dutch.

For more information and support: [www.stm-stopfgm.org](http://www.stm-stopfgm.org)

### **Inter-African Committee**

The Inter-African Committee on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children (IAC) is an International non-governmental organization, created in February 1984, at a seminar in Dakar, Senegal. It started with 20 African countries. To date, the organization has National Committees in 28 African countries and Affiliates in 8 European countries, USA, Canada, Japan and New Zealand.

The Inter-African Committee (IAC) has its headquarters located within the premises of the UN Economic Commission For Africa (UNECA) in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, while a liason office is maintained in Geneva, Switzerland.

The Inter African Committee is the distributor of this booklet.

For more information and support: [www.iac-ciaf.net](http://www.iac-ciaf.net)

### **Cordaid**

Cordaid is one of the biggest international development organisations with a network of almost a thousand partner organisations in 36 countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Cordaid supports organisations working on various themes, including participation, emergency aid and reconstruction, health and well-being and entrepreneurship. The large-scale commitment of people and organisations that set up their own projects is of vital importance to Cordaid. The solidarity between people this expresses forms the core of identity of Cordaid.

For more information and support: [www.cordaid.nl](http://www.cordaid.nl)

### **Soroptimist**

Soroptimist International

A Global voice for Women

Soroptimist is an international organization for business and professional women who work to improve the lives of women and girls, in local communities and throughout the world. Almost 95,000 Soroptimists in about 120 countries and territories contribute time and financial support to community-based and international projects that benefit women and girls.

Soroptimist Club Apeldoorn SorgeLoo's, Netherlands, is the direct sponsor of this booklet.

For more information and support:

[www.soroptimist.org](http://www.soroptimist.org) • [www.soroptimist.nl](http://www.soroptimist.nl) • [www.apeldoornsorgeloos.nl](http://www.apeldoornsorgeloos.nl)

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'Our deepest fear  
is not that we are inadequate.  
Our deepest fear  
is that we are powerful beyond measure.  
It is our light,  
not our darkness that most frightens us.

We ask ourselves,  
Who am I to be brilliant,  
gorgeous, talented, fabulous?  
Actually, who are you not to be?  
You are a child of God.  
Your playing small  
does not serve the world.

There is nothing enlightened about shrinking  
so that other people won't feel insecure around you.

We are all meant to shine, as children do.  
We were born to make manifest  
the glory of God that is within us.  
It's not just in some of us;  
it's in everyone.

And as we let our own light shine,  
we unconsciously give other people  
permission to do the same.

As we are liberated from our own fear,  
our presence automatically liberates others.'

Marianne Williamson  
activist and author



***Cordaid***



Gemeente  
Leidschendam-Voorburg



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