



**FIGHTING FOR  
A BETTER FUTURE**

Stories of hope and courage



Save the Children

**Cover photo:** Safiya\* 16 years old member of students' club was part of 156 boys and girls from schools and communities in Somalia. Safiya\* and her friends have become agents, speaking out against FGM in their communities.

# Foreward

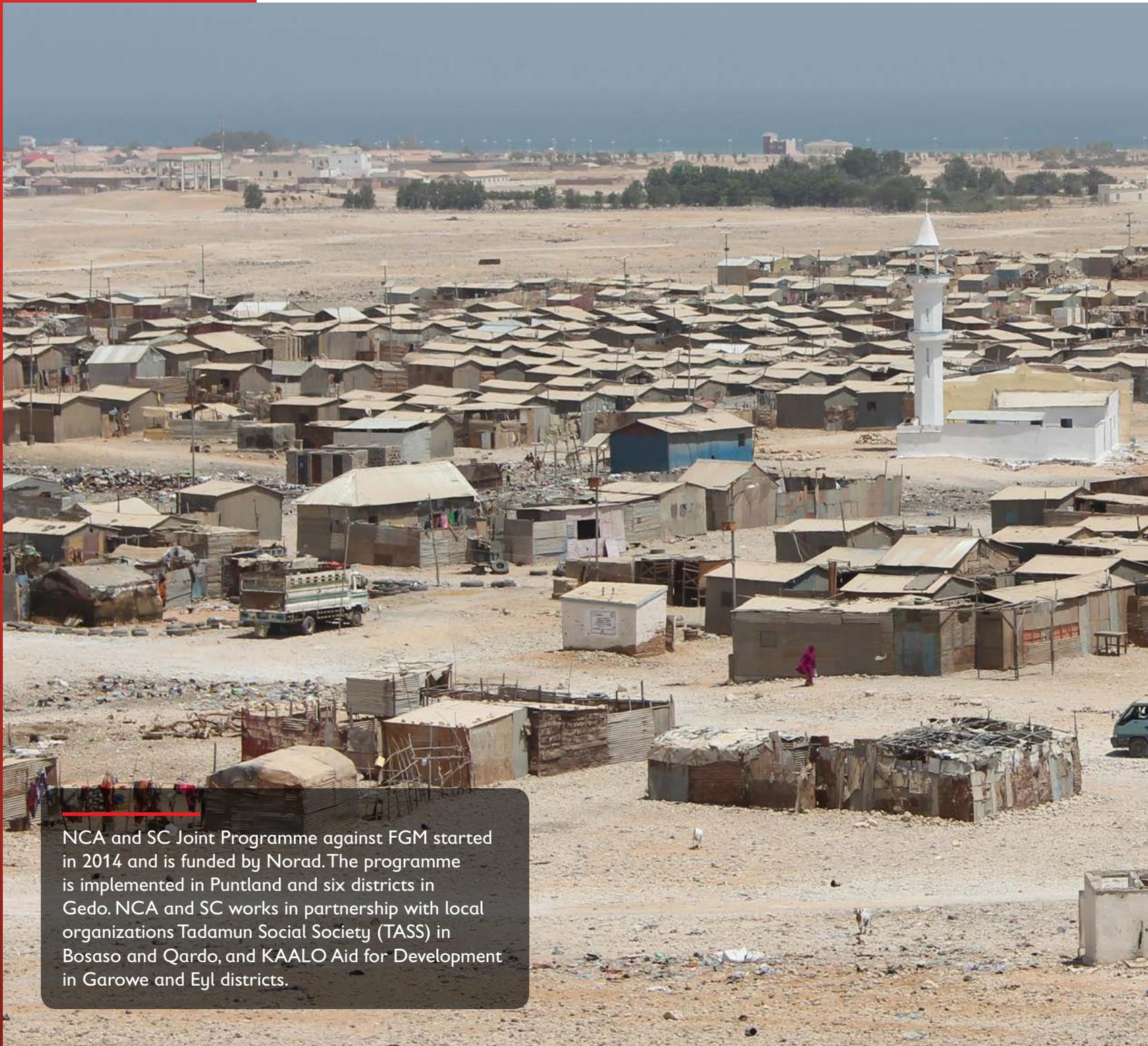
Save the Children is a worldwide leading independent organization for children with presence in 120 countries. We have been operating in Somalia since 1951 covering Child Protection and Child Right Governance, Child Survival (Health, Nutrition and WASH), Education, Child Poverty (food security and livelihood) programmes. Currently, there are 14 field offices across Somalia.

The Joint programme against Female Genital Mutilation is a cooperation between Save the Children and Norwegian Church Aid and is one of our core child protection programmes in Puntland State of Somalia. Since 2013, the project has contributed to the reduction of FGM in its project areas and reached 9,654 direct beneficiaries (2,607 male; 2,800 females; 2,027 Girls and 2, 220 Boys) through social norms changing activities in schools and within the communities. Over 200,000 indirect beneficiaries were also reached through awareness raising messages, FGM policy dissemination and campaigns carried out in partnership with Tadamun Social Society (TASS) and the Ministry of Women Development and Family Affairs and Ministry of Justice, Religious Affairs and Rehabilitation.

The project has a structured and holistic approach, working with children, youth, parents, religious and traditional leaders and government officials to encourage a change in social norms on FGM and lead to public declarations on FGM abandonment from the communities and government. This is supported by structured radio and media programs and public awareness raising on the harmful practices of FGM during the commemoration of 16 days' activism against Gender based Violence, anti FGM day, FGM zero tolerance day and Girl Child Day. In addition, mothers with FGM complications including fistula received treatment and participated in income generation activities to support their reintegration into society.

Thanks to the support of our partner Norwegian Church Aid and esteemed donor NORAD, the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation, we have been able to gather information presented in this photo storybook. Through their generous support, the government, community and anti FGM campaigners have been able to carry out Anti-FGM campaigns.





NCA and SC Joint Programme against FGM started in 2014 and is funded by Norad. The programme is implemented in Puntland and six districts in Gedo. NCA and SC works in partnership with local organizations Tadamun Social Society (TASS) in Bosaso and Qardo, and KAALO Aid for Development in Garowe and Eyl districts.

## **MESSAGE FROM HON. MINISTER MARYAN ALI, MINISTRY OF WOMEN DEVELOPMENT AND FAMILY AND FAMILY AFFAIRS**

The FGM tradition is not a practice that we can eradicate overnight. It has been a ritual that has been there for centuries, but every new step that we take towards the end of the practice is a huge gain.

The government has been working tirelessly to end FGM practices in Puntland. We have been able to publish, while closely working with community members and religious leaders, a religious Fatwa (decree) which prohibits the practice. Also, the Ministry in collaboration with other Ministries like Health and Justice was able to introduce FGM policy in Puntland in 2014 and currently we have finalized the FGM Bill, which got the cabinet approval recently.

Having said all that, let me recognize the commendable work organizations like Save the Children and Norwegian Church Aid are doing to

support the Government's efforts to raise awareness on the harmful practices of FGM in Puntland.

Since 2013, Save the Children has been working with the Ministry of Women Development and Family Affairs in Bari and Nugal region in Puntland to help our efforts to end the practice. We have been carrying out community dialogue sessions while engaging men, women, boys and girls as well religious leaders, policy makers and different stake holders in the community with awareness raising messages on the harms of FGM practices.

Six years down the line, I see a change and can assure you that there are promising messages as many of the communities joined our efforts and have voluntarily become anti-FGM Champions in Puntland. We thank Save the Children for their FGM work in Puntland and hope we can continue to capitalize on the significant gains made to end FGM in Somalia.

**Hon. Minister Maryan Ali**



# Summary

Somalis are very traditional people. Wherever they go, they will strive to maintain their traditions and culture as a way of safeguarding their identity and position in society. Although most of these traditions are useful in maintaining social cohesion, others have been harmful. One such tradition is Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C). There is no benefit to this procedure, yet more than 200 million girls and women have undergone FGM across Africa, the Middle East and Asia who continue to practice this harmful tradition. Somalia has one of the highest FGM/C rates in the world with around 90% of Somali girls between the ages of 15-17 having undergone FGM/C<sup>1</sup>.

According to WHO, FGM/C comprises all procedures that involve partial or total removal of external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons. The procedure is usually done with a razor blade or knife and conducted under very unhygienic conditions resulting young girls to contract diseases or tetanus. The procedure forces girls and women to endure pain,

trauma and life-threatening complications including psychological trauma throughout their lives. Girls who have gone through FGM/C are also at a higher risk of having complications during birth, endangering both the mother and baby.

There is no health benefit to FGM/C and it is recognized internationally as a human rights violation. In Somalia, FGM/C is practiced as a way to control girls' sexual desires and as a means to deter premarital sex. Mothers who do not circumcise their daughters, are seen as outcasts in society and their daughters will find it difficult to get married as they are labeled as "impure".

Currently there are no effective laws that criminalize FGM/C with an exception of Sexual Offenses Law adopted in Puntland in 2016 and in Somaliland in August 2018. Save the Children is working with other partners to support the Federal and State Governments to develop laws and community-based systems to protect girls against FGM/C. These efforts are making an impact as new evidence shows

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<sup>1</sup> Baseline report of Changing Social Norms in Somalia- exploring the role of community perceptions in FGM/C conducted by a consortium of NGOs, IRC, Care and Save the Children.

a reduction in FGM/C prevalence rates from the frequently quoted rate of 98% to 90% prevalence rate.

Following the launch of Save the Children's "Every Last Child" campaign in Somalia, we committed to reach at least 60% of the population with behavior change messages on FGM/C and child marriages. Three years after the launch of the campaign in Puntland, communities and areas targeted by the

End FGM/C campaign including parents, teachers, community and religious leaders; and other members of the community have come together to eradicate the practice in the country and are fighting for the future of their daughters.

This booklet puts together an array of stories and photos of children's voices and communities we work with in from Puntland to end the FGM/C practice in Somalia.





**“I commit to fight FGM and educate young girls on their rights.”**

**Saeed Yusuf, Imam, and anti-FGM campaigner in Puntland**

**Saeed Yusuf is a father of nine children. He teaches young people Quran and other subjects at a local school. He has studied Islam extensively and has developed a non-traditional view of FGM.**

“I am a father of four girls and five boys and I am also a teacher at a local primary school. I used to teach only Quran but now we have expanded the curriculum to include other subjects.

I have found that education and knowledge is the key to living a fulfilling life. Throughout my career, I have noticed that there are no institutions that are educating young girls on their rights and on gender equality. I came to Somalia in 2002 after working in the Gulf for four years. The Middle East has some of the most respected Islamic scholars in the world. I noticed that in those countries, FGM is very rare and none of the scholars are encouraging FGM as part of Islamic religion.

So, I began to ask myself if FGM has no religious backing, why are we still making young girls go through this traumatizing and dangerous experience. I gathered information from books and other sources to add to my lesson plans and always refer to the teachings of the Holy Quran. Allah tells us that He wants our bodies to return to him the same way He created them and FGM is a violation of this command. With all the materials and knowledge I accumulated over the years, I teach girls of their rights so that they can be better informed. They need to understand the difference between tradition and religion.”





women and girls, men and boys, communities and religious leaders have participated in community dialogues on zero tolerance to FGM. The programme provided a safe space for communities to discuss FGM and agree on what needs to be done.

About 600 community members including children in schools participated in either monthly or quarterly Community dialogues to enhance their knowledge and understanding of FGM and its effects. Some community groups developed action plans to guide their work, disseminating information and reaching out to others in their circles, with support from the project teams.





**From a practitioner to anti-FGM  
campaigner**

Hawo Abdirahman Muse, 42 years old

**In her lifetime, Hawo performed many female genital cuttings. She has now put those days behind her and become an activist against FGM. Hawo decided to stop the practice after attending training and awareness raising sessions led by a group of FGM activists (mothers) in her village.**

"I am now 42 years old. I started circumcising girls when I was just 25 years old. My grandmother taught me how to circumcise. I spent around five months learning and practicing before I started providing the service to other families. I have nine children and divorced. I had to work hard to pay the bills and put food on the table and FGM was a good source of income. When I started, I would charge around USD 20 per girl but prices went down as time progressed. Being a 'cutter' is seen as an honorable thing in my community and parents put their trust in me to circumcise their daughters.

All my daughters were circumcised when they were younger and none of them experienced complications. I thought I would feel no emotion towards the process but it pained me to see girls pinned down, crying for mercy as I held a blade to cut their genitals. After years of going through this trauma, it got to me. I could not sleep at night. I felt responsible for all the girls who developed infections and those who had to endure excruciating pain. I put their lives in danger.

I never really understood the purpose of circumcising girls. I was doing it blindly. It really took a toll on me. When I learned from the anti FGM activists in my village, I stepped back from it all and decided to quit. I am still recovering from the things I witnessed. I want people to really rethink why we are causing agony in our community".



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Halima Issac went through FGM at a very young age and has lived with the painful effects ever since. In 2016, when she was giving birth to her third child Marwa\* she experienced prolonged labour which caused her to develop a fistula. After she gave birth, Halima received medical support from Save the Children and underwent fistula repair surgery in Bossaso. She has also received some skills training and anticipates starting a kiosk business to take care of her children.





**Member of Bandar Qasim  
Students' Club**

**Sadam\*, 15 years old**

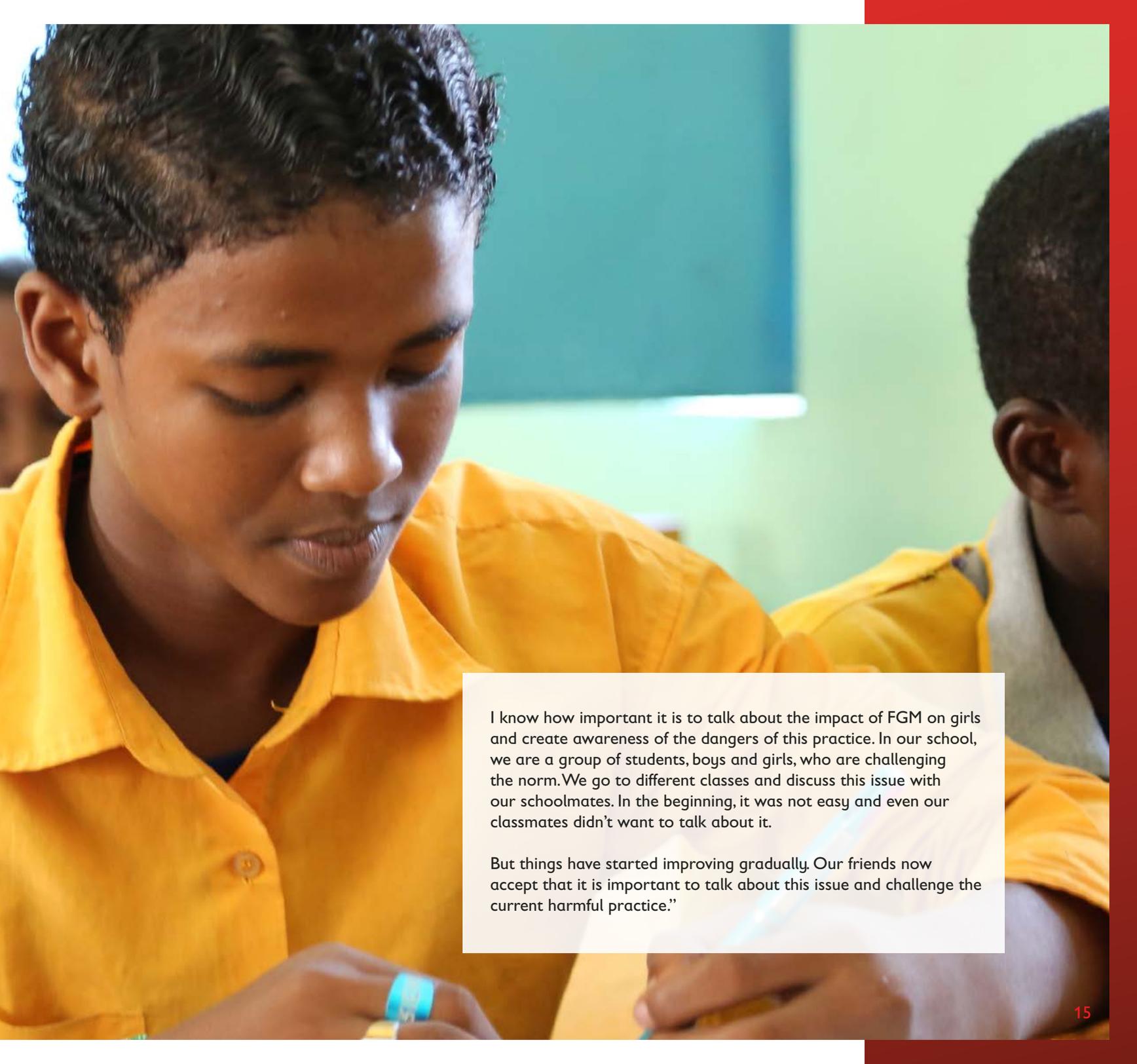
**Sadam\* is a fifth-grade student who is passionate about ending FGM in Somalia because it hurts him to see his female classmates go through so much pain and suffering because of FGM.**

"I'm in the fifth grade and proud to be involved in the End FGM campaign. It is my duty as a brother and one day a father to show my support and love for the women in my life. The pain FGM causes to girls is for a lifetime. This practice has been passed down from generation to generation and I want to be the one to put an end to this suffering. I know of mothers in my village who are not able to take care of their children because they are still coping with the effects of FGM. Although I will never experience this pain, the girls in my class are like my sisters and I care about them very deeply. I can no longer watch them go through this pain.

A girl that I have known since childhood developed life-threatening infection after she was circumcised and had to be hospitalized for a long time. She has lost months of her childhood and schooling because of this. It breaks my heart every time I visit her in the hospital. Her family has spent so much money on medical bills and her parents are unable to provide for the rest of her siblings because their main concern is getting their daughter the proper medical care she needs.

Girls are forced to be out of school because they are unable to bear the pain as a result of FGM complications. Most families cannot afford to get their daughters proper medical treatment.



A close-up photograph of a young boy with dark, curly hair, wearing a bright yellow school shirt. He is looking down and to the right with a focused expression. To his right, the back of another student's head and shoulder, also in a yellow shirt, is visible. The background is a blurred classroom setting with a light blue wall and a whiteboard.

I know how important it is to talk about the impact of FGM on girls and create awareness of the dangers of this practice. In our school, we are a group of students, boys and girls, who are challenging the norm. We go to different classes and discuss this issue with our schoolmates. In the beginning, it was not easy and even our classmates didn't want to talk about it.

But things have started improving gradually. Our friends now accept that it is important to talk about this issue and challenge the current harmful practice.”





***“I don’t want this tradition to continue any longer.”***

**Muna\*, 14 years old**

**Muna\* is a student at the Banadar Qasim School where she helps to raise awareness through campaigns to stop the practice of FGM after witnessing close friends suffer due to this procedure.**

“I am a student in grade 5 and as I get older my friends and I have one thing in common which is our fear of FGM. It’s not fair that we have to experience this trauma and I don’t want this tradition to continue any longer. Girls end up losing a lot of blood that causes internal and external infections. It starts off with severe pains each time they use the toilet. Also once a girl reaches puberty her menstrual cycle is inconsistent and extremely painful and later on we know they will experience complications in childbirth.

Many families prefer to cut girls at a younger age, from six to nine years old, because girls at this age are unable to differentiate right from wrong. At this young age, girls can easily be influenced and convinced into thinking being circumcised is a great thing. Once girls reach around 11-14 years, it becomes more difficult to convince them to get circumcised because they have developed a mind of their own and they can refuse.

A Girl who undergoes the pharonic type of FGM (type III) - —the practice of cutting a portion of the clitoris — will not be able to comprehend how her family could turn their backs on her. These girls are helpless and cannot seek refuge with anyone. I have promised myself that I will never put my daughter through this and I will never put myself in the situation where my children feel like I have neglected them. Parents should be the first ones that a child comes to for comfort and safety, not the ones who put their children in through pain. I will continue to educate as many girls and mothers to consider stopping the practice of FGM.”



***“It is my job to educate children and their parents on the impact of FGM”***

**Mohammed Mahmoud Hussein, 35-year-old School Teacher**

**Mohammed is an elementary school teacher at Bandar Qasim School. His students use their school clubs as platforms to encourage girls and boys to speak up against FGM and address it as a form of child abuse.**

“I have been teaching at this school for the past three years. When I became the head teacher in 2015, we encouraged the creation of forums that children could use to advocate for their rights including eradicating dangerous traditional practices such as FGM. I believe it is my responsibility to educate children as well as their parents on the impact of FGM.

We have created a safe space in our school where boys and girls can openly discuss this widespread practice that is causing great pain in our society. My goal is to educate mothers about the effects and long-term risks of FGM.

Traditional practices have led mothers to continue this custom of getting their daughters circumcised because they believe it will prevent their daughters from practicing pre-marital sex. However, I believe that it comes down to a girl’s morals and connection to God to stop her from doing such a thing, not FGM. We are seeing a shift among young mothers who are reconsidering performing this procedure on their daughters. Save the Children has done well in educating the community and discussing the impact of FGM to women and girls.





Recently at a community meeting, we were able to convince a few mothers not to circumcise their daughters. We allowed the children to talk to the parents openly with the support of the staff and myself. Mothers usually have the last say on whether or not their daughter would be circumcised. For that reason, our campaign focuses on educating the young girls who will be future mothers so one day this tradition may die out.”



The project also mobilized and trained a total of 156 boys and girls from school clubs and communities in Somalia. These groups of activists have become change agents, speaking out against FGM in their communities. The clubs are actively involved in reaching out to their peers and the larger community through sports, folk media and community forums with messages against FGM and child marriage. About 15,423 people were reached with FGM and child marriage messages through these clubs. Save the Children provides basic communication and facilitation skills on how to engage with community members to raise awareness on the dangerous of FGM. The project provides refreshments and transportation as well as information materials to members of students' clubs in order to support their efforts to help end FGM in Somalia.







Hawo\*, 13, was part of some 130 out-of-school girls from Gardo region in Somalia who were identified and supported to enrol back to school and have access to education. They were provided with stationaries, school materials and school fees to allow them to continue with their education with the support of Norad FrameWork Project.





***“I want what is best for all Girls.”***

Marian Salad Abdi, 50, member of a mothers group

**Marian is a mother, activist, and role model in her community. She has been at the forefront of Ending FGM campaign in Somalia. Her aim is to ensure young girls follow their dreams rather than losing years of their childhood coping with the trauma of FGM.**

“I am a mother not only to my biological children but also to the children in my community. I relate with all the girls in my village as my own daughters and I want what is best for them. In Somalia pharonic type of FGM (type III) —the practice of cutting a portion of the clitoris — is seen as a rite of passage to womanhood. They believe this is the only way to ensure girls remain pure and that she will remain a virgin until marriage. Girls who are circumcised are far more likely to get married, however, after marriage these girls experience a tremendous amount of pain during sexual intercourse. Women are later not able to cope with the pain during intercourse and this causes a lot of problems in their marriages.

FGM strips girls of their childhood. It is wrong for mothers to use a needle and thread and let their daughters go through excruciating pain and bleed for days. This process causes a bad smell and the girls are embarrassed but they cannot talk about what they are going through. I want to bring girls out of this darkness and have the community of young girls supporting each other. I have been educating mothers and daughters for the past three years and my goal in life is to change as many lives as possible. The girls who heal physically will never be able to heal mentally or psychologically but I will continue to talk to mothers and get them to reconsider FGM.”





Media professionals were trained by Save the Children on issues of FGM to help creating awareness on harmful traditional practices. The majority of the community members in the project locations have information and knowledge on the impact of FGM and early marriages through community dialogue session and awareness messages broadcasted through the local media. A baseline study conducted in 2016 indicates that 70% of the community members in project locations are aware of the impact of FGM and support the zero tolerance. This was made possible through public awareness campaigns, radio programs, community dialogues and other initiatives.





***“I will never put my daughters through FGM.”***

**Maymun, 40 years old, FGM survivor**

**Maymun is a survivor of FGM. She has survived the pain when she was cut but has gone through untold suffering and complications during her pregnancy, labor and still lives with the effects of FGM— decades later.**

“I went through FGM at a young age. The experience has haunted me to this day. I currently live with my four children, my mother, and other relatives. I didn’t have enough to take care of my children and I couldn’t afford to take them to hospital if anyone fell sick. When I went into labour with my first child, I experienced lots of complications. It was difficult every time I went to labour.

But with my last child who was born five years ago, the situation got worse because after delivery I fell extremely ill. I was taken to a hospital in Bosaso by a local charity called TASS. A lady who works for TASS heard my story and reached out to me. I got Fistula repair, and the lady provided my family with financial support to help take care of the medical bills.

I received about \$700 USD from the NGO. We used part of it to pay my medical bill and the rest I set up this shop. This money took a weight off my shoulders. I didn’t feel like my medical bills were a burden anymore and I was able to regain my independence.

When I look at my daughters, I know without a doubt that I will never put them through FGM. Just from my own experience, I believe the complications that follow the procedure and the mental scars will remain with me forever and I don’t want my daughters to go through that. Now I want to talk to other mothers and share my story as much as possible so that we end this tradition.”



Women with FGM related complications including fistula were supported to access medical services including restorative surgery as well as psychosocial support (counselling). This was made possible through collaboration with Galkayo Medical Centre and Mogadishu hospital. Also, women and girls who have undergone FGM are engaged in income generating activities and are supported to access education. About 30 survivors of FGM received medical services as well as start-up money to help them establish income-generating activities and enable them to be self-reliant.









Waris\*, FGM Champion who refused to cut her daughter give real-life examples on how to end FGM in Puntland. She believes awareness raising and community dialogue sessions will help people understand the effects of FGM. Waris cut four of her five daughters before she joined community dialogue sessions by Save the Children and Ministry of Women Development and Family Affairs in Puntland. She has been an FGM Champion since 2015.

# LESSONS LEARNT

The Joint NCA-SC programme has drawn a number of lessons from experiences gained through implementation and continuous interactions with communities including:

- Engaging men and boys, as change agents, is instrumental towards influencing change in social norms and fight against FGM practice. This is because one of the main reasons as to why communities cut their girls is to prepare them for marriage. The programme will therefore continue to target men to support efforts towards protecting women and girls from undergoing FGM as well as early marriage.
- The project Baseline study conducted in 2016 indicated a disparity between improvement in communities' knowledge and attitude towards FGM abandonment and the actual change in practice. Whereas a majority of community members do not support FGM, the social pressure makes them still do it, or are likely to cut their daughters in future given the possible social sanctions such as stigmatization and shaming that go with deviation from the social norm. In this regard, there's need for continuous community education and awareness on the protection of girls from harmful practices including child marriage as well as promoting collective abandonment of FGM.
- Supporting mothers and girls with health complications requires substantive and strong linkages with health facilities in order to generate good evidence supported information on the FGM/C complications and how to address them.
- Somali is an outspoken society, and information is better retained through verbal communication. Effective radio and well-structured media programming can contribute to awareness raising and cause a significant change in entire communities as FGM/C is deeply rooted in cultural and social norms, and many are still resistant to changing their attitudes. For future programming, it is advisable to invest more on this.
- It is important for the project to explore development of pledge/commitment cards for those who support abandonment of early marriage and FGM to sign and have the project keep that record. This will keep good track of numbers of who committed and it will be easy to follow-up and hold them accountable.
- The main challenge in achieving total abandonment of FGM in Somalia is the linkage of the FGM with Islam. Despite many religious leaders advocating for total abandonment of FGM, citing religious texts to demonstrate that FGM is a cultural practice and not a religious requirement, a vast section of community and religious leaders remain divided on the issue, supporting sunna type of FGM urging that it is a religious requirement. Countering this argument to achieve total abandonment requires continued partnerships with various stakeholders including top level religious leaders to completely dissociate it from Islam and enhance communities' understanding on the negative effects of FGM and other harmful practices such as early child marriage.
- Community conversation remains a key strategy towards community capacity enhancement in Somalia; hence the need to have well skilled staff and facilitators for effective implementation and management. In this regard, NCA and Save the Children continued to draw lessons on best practices around implementing community conversations during the year. Various tools are under development and a Training is scheduled to build the capacity of staff and partners and the community facilitators to effectively manage the processes and continue to empower communities.

*“Save the Children is often told that its aims are impossible - that there has always been child suffering and there always will be. We know. It’s impossible only if we make it so. It’s impossible only if we refuse to attempt it.”*

*Eglantyne Jebb, Founder, Save the Children*

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