



Interview of the Month Ifrah Ahmed, Somali social activist February 2017

1) GenderHopes: Can you tell us more about the Ifrah Foundation? What inspired you to create it?

Ifrah Ahmed: I was eight when I was sent to a family doctor. There were other girls there too, and afterwards we had our legs tied together and had to rest for weeks. One girl died from the bleeding. I had to go through Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) for the second time when I was thirteen due to complications, and when I came to Ireland, I learned the truth when, with the help of a translator, a doctor explained FGM to me. After that, it was hard going through the Irish medical system, talking to doctors and nurses about it.

The Ifrah Foundation was set up to support my work on eradicating FGM within Somalia, hopefully within a generation. I met some great women in Ireland who want to support me in my work and assist me in following my beliefs, which are to eradicate FGM.

I was inspired to set up Ifrah Foundation so that I could get more support for my work, and create a wider framework for my work, such as employing staff. I want to be able to support women to get through FGM, and I want it to be an issue that can be talked about. I want to offer support to women to help stop FGM, but also to recover from FGM. I want to see women in Somalia being leaders of change. Details about the Foundation can be found at www.ifrahfoundation.org.

2) What is Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and how does it affect the physical and psychological health of women and girls? Can you tell us more about where it is practiced and how many girls have been subjected to it?

FGM is female genital mutilation, the term female genital mutilation also called female genital cutting and female genital mutilation/cutting refers to all procedures involving partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons. Between 100 and 200 million girls and women in the world are estimated to have undergone such procedures.

FGM causes pain, infection, kidney failure, this may lead to painful menstruation (dysmenorrhea), irregular menstrual cycle and difficulty in passing menstrual blood, particularly among women with FGM type III.

The effects are very emotional – girls experience extreme trauma with FGM, and for many, it is very difficult to talk about it. Part of my work with the Ifrah Foundation is to be able to create a platform where women can talk about FGM and get any support they need to work through any emotional difficulties they experience.

3) Somalia has the highest FGM prevalence rate in the world. You have made it your personal mission and that of your Foundation to ensure that FGM is eradicated in Somalia. Can you explain more about the FGM eradication programme that you are working on with the Somali government? How do you explain that FGM has not yet been eradicated in Somalia?

Somalia is often quoted statistically as the country with the highest incidence of FGM. How could I tackle the task of eradicating FGM across a country slowly emerging from the ravages of a 30-year war? Understandably, the government is dealing with all sorts of immediate emergencies, the religious leaders are engaging with hard-line reactionary issues. The day-to-day life of Somalis, so many of whom have been displaced because of the war, is very hard.

To focus their attention on FGM as a human rights issue has taken years. In Somalia, 98% of women and girls have experienced FGM. The Ifrah Foundation has designed a unique approach to creating change in Somalia. This is firstly rooted in my own life experiences of having been subjected to FGM. I have a cultural understanding of why this happens and continues to happen. I want to create a fundamental shift in the way FGM is thought about so that change can be long standing in Somalia.

I have been working for the past two years lobbying with Somalia Government and the community to recognise FGM as human rights violation. This lobbying brought the issue of banning FGM very close to passing the bill, until the member of the Parliament said they recognise Sunah which is Islamic type and we argue if we allow sunah we are still accepting FGM. I am still hopeful we can get a law in Somalia banning FGM – all FGM.

The work has started on eradicating FGM in Somalia. Hopefully in 2030 we will end FGM around the world.

4) The US State Department has organized a conference on FGM for the first time in December 2016. What was the outcome of this conference?

The outcome of the conference was to give young FGM Survivors a voice. The conference also founded the Big Sister Movement - where advocates come together across Africa to fight FGM. The conference gathered women all over the world who had experienced FGM. It was empowering for these women to meet and discuss what they are doing to ensure that FGM is eradicated around the world.

5) Do you have a message for women and girls living in countries where FGM is practiced?

My message to all women and girls who are living in countries where FGM is practiced is: don't be afraid to raise your voice if you think you can express yourself without putting your life at great risk. January was the best and happiest month for me so far this year as I have saved a little girl's life who underwent FGM aged two and had kidney failure and one kidney stopped working altogether, she was very ill. I helped her find support in Mogadishu Hospital and I managed to get her help and she is now receiving treatment, I believe that it is within all of us to do something to help and stop this dreadful practice that is FGM. Truly, I believe that what happened to me shouldn't be happening to other girls. Why would I allow young girls to die of FGM when they can live a peaceful life?

6) Somali first female Presidential candidate Faduma Dayib risked her life to run for President in Somalia this year. What does her candidacy mean for Somalia and for Somali women?

Faduma Dayib, is a very brave and inspiring woman who challenged the Somali status quo and became the first woman to run for president of Somali, and she intends to put human rights at the forefront of her campaign. She has given a voice to Somali women and most importantly she has inspired and given hope to young Somali women that there is hope and that a woman can aspire to become president in Somalia. Even if she does not win the election, she has opened the door for Somali women to follow her footsteps and one day a woman can be elected president of Somalia.

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***Ifrac Ahmed** is an Irish citizen born in Somalia. As a survivor of FGM/C, she has spent the last ten years of her life campaigning for awareness of the implications of FGM/C, often using her personal testimony to draw attention to the practice. She has worked within Ireland, the EU, internationally and in Somalia to bring about legislative reform, political and social awareness and social acceptance of change. In 2010, she created the Ifrac Foundation, which aims to drive legislative change against FGM/C in Ireland and Europe.*

Instinctively understanding the deep-rooted cultural resistance to change in FGM/C practice in Somalia, she recognises that the first step to change is acknowledgement and dialogue about the practice.

Recently appointed to the position of gender coordinator as a special advisor to the Prime Minister of Somalia on Gender issues, she is in a unique position to act as the lynchpin for the proposed Ifrac Foundation coalition for change. Together with formal and informal partners, the approach of the Ifrac Foundation is based on a three-pillar strategy to end FGM/C in Somalia, the IGAD territories in the horn of Africa and beyond.