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# The Fight Against Female Genital Mutilation



**M**eet Hibo Wardere. When Hibo was just six years old, she was subjected to female genital mutilation (FGM) in her hometown, Mogadishu, Somalia. Hibo underwent type III FGM, also known as infibulation, where a woman's external genitalia are removed and the resulting wound is sewn shut, leaving only a small hole through which urine and menstrual fluid can flow out.

Hibo was pinned down by three women, a 'cutter' and two family members. Her dress was lifted up and the 'cutter' used razors to remove her clitoris and labia.

Hibo Wardere is just one of the estimated 200 million women and girls around the world who are survivors of female genital mutilation, sometimes referred to as female genital cutting or even euphemized as "female circumcision".

FGM comprises all procedures that involve altering or injuring the female genitalia for non-medical reasons and is recognized internationally as a violation of human rights for girls and women. The consequences of FGM to women are proven to be severe and can result in reproductive complications, severe psychological trauma and even death.

## TYPES OF FGM

**Type I: CLITORIDECTOMY**  
Partial or total removal of the clitoris

**Type II: EXCISION**  
Partial or total removal of the clitoris and the labia minora, with or without excision of the labia majora (the labia are the 'lips' that surround the vagina)

**Type III: INFIBULATION**  
Narrowing of the vaginal opening through the creation of a covering seal. The seal is formed by cutting and repositioning the inner or outer labia, with or without removal of the clitoris

**Type IV: Other** All other harmful procedures to the female genitalia for non-medical purposes, e.g. pricking, piercing, incising, scraping and cauterizing the genital area.





## **FGM in Canada**

In the minds of many Canadians, FGM may seem to be a foreign practice that happens only in certain parts of the world but not in the 'progressive' West. And while it is true that FGM is practiced primarily in 28 countries in Africa, Asia and the Middle East; globalization and the free movement of people has made it an international issue. Research shows that FGM is now found in Europe, the United States and even here in Canada.

For the past few years, I have been working with Islamic Relief Canada, one of the world's largest Muslim NGOs, to combat FGM. We have partnered with FGM survivors, like Hibo, as well as other organizations across Canada and beyond to work towards raising awareness about this practice and advocating for it to be brought to an end.

Canadians can no longer afford to sweep this issue under the carpet. With a large immigrant population from countries that have high rates of FGM, there is both reason to suspect and evidence to indicate that there are hundreds of women and girls in Canada who have undergone FGM and many younger girls who are still at risk. And though FGM is illegal in Canada, to date there have been no prosecutions and public awareness is limited.

It is important to note that FGM happens in different religions and communities across the world. It's not just a Muslim or Christian issue. However, at Islamic Relief Canada, we believe that as a leading Muslim NGO, we have a responsibility to play a vital role in combating this social oppression, especially when it is carried out in the name of religion. Hence, the majority of our work around FGM involves debunking religious myths through education and awareness on the practice – both here in Canada and around the world.

## **The motivators and dynamics of FGM is different in each country**

FGM varies by country and city. In 2013, I spent a few weeks in Indonesia looking into the practice of FGM in detail. My research in the country saw the practice

medicalized and equated with male circumcision. Young girls and even newborns were having "slight cutting, piercing or pricking" of their clitoris (referred to as Type I and Type IV) in hospitals and clinics. The majority of Indonesians believe that the severe types of FGM (Type II and III) causes harm, but that a slight 'cut' has benefits for women and girls. This slight 'cut' is known as female genital circumcision (FGC) in the country, rather than FGM. According to UNICEF, 49% of girls in Indonesia under the age of eleven had undergone FGC. While Type I and Type IV FGM are not as severe as the other two types, experts say that this slight cutting can remove a woman's right to sexual pleasure and even cause reproductive problems later in life.

In parts of Africa, the motivators around FGM are very different to that of Indonesia. We see the more severe types of FGM being carried out (Type II and III) and the practice is not medicalized, but more deep-rooted in cultural traditions. For example, in Guinea 97% of women and girls between the ages of 15 and 29 have undergone in FGM and in Kenya this figure is at 21%.

## **Is FGM a religious practice?**

Many critics of FGM say the practice is religious and even here in Canada, we see many people saying religion and in particular Islam, is the problem when explaining the issue. When it comes to Islam, FGM predates Islam and the Quran makes no mention of the practice. FGM is not even practiced by the majority of Muslims worldwide.

As a Muslim woman myself, I've always been drawn to the concept of justice in Islam. This is a practice that harms women and girls with long-term consequences. A practice that causes harm to anyone is not allowed in Islam.

Hibo has come a long way since that fateful day in Somalia. Now living in London, UK, Hibo is now one of the world's leading FGM campaigners. As I am speaking to her over Facebook video, she's preparing for a meeting with Prince Charles and his wife Camilla, who has asked to hear her story and her thoughts on what needs to be done to end FGM.



In 2016, Hibo attended a parliamentary event here in Canada with Minister Marie-Claude Bibeau where she told her moving story to a room filled with politicians, experts and others working in the sector. There was not a dry eye in the room. Hibo wants Canada to do more to end FGM.

Hibo believes there are survivors like her living across the country, but with no resources like how she has had in the UK to help her cope. "The entire ordeal is traumatic, which can last a lifetime." Hibo tells me: "I'm now in a position where I'm learning how to manage it and there are resources available. In Canada, there is nothing. Even the doctors need to be better equipped to learn how to deal with patients who may have undergone FGM."

My research with Islamic Relief Canada has shown that to successfully change attitudes and beliefs towards FGM, campaigns and initiatives have to be community-led, starting with education and awareness. It is only when we engage with the communities who are affected by this practice, that we start seeing change.

**Editorial Courtesy: Reyhana Patel**

Reyhana Patel is the head of public relations at Islamic Relief Canada. She's a former BBC journalist and former writer for The Huffington Post U.K. and The Independent newspaper in the U.K.

