

# BREAK THE SILENCE

## END FGM IN CANADA



THE HONOURABLE | L'HONORABLE  
Mobina S.B. Jaffer  
SENATOR | SÉNATRICE  
CANADA

Q&A with FGM survivor, Maryan Abdikadir



### Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in Canada:

Female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) is a harmful procedure that involves the partial or total removal of external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons.

**Female Genital Mutilation is a horrific and excruciating practice.**

Unfortunately, Canada's record on prosecuting FGM is dismal. Although the Criminal Code was amended in 1997 to include female genital mutilation as a form of aggravated assault, to date there have been no prosecutions for female genital mutilation in Canada.

The End FGM Canada Network estimates that there are more than 100,000 survivors across Canada and thousands of girls remain at risk.

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### Maryan Abdikadir, FGM Survivor and Social Change Agent

I am very fortunate that Maryan Abdikadir has agreed to work with me on the important issue of ending FGM in Canada and around the world, but especially ending it in Canada. Maryan is a tireless advocate for the ending of FGM and has been working on the issues for many years.

On March 28 2022, Senator Gerba, MP Karen Vecchio, MP Larry Brock and I hosted a virtual film screening of the award-winning documentary on female genital mutilation, *In The Name of Your Daughter* followed by an information session with FGM survivor, Maryan Abdikadir. Enclosed below, you will find a Q&A conducted with Maryan as part of the session.

**"We need Canada's silence on female genital mutilation to end, so girls can be protected, and survivors supported. And we need that silence to end now."**

- Maryan Abdikadir

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### Q1. Can you please tell us where were you born?

I was born in Garissa County in Kenya. That is where I grew up and lived for 48 years.

### Q2. Why are you focusing your energy on this issue?

FGM is a personal issue for me. I went through it when I was six years old. From the time I realized how wrong it was, I dedicated my time and energy to end it. I do not want another girl to feel the pain I felt.

**I do not want another girl to be a statistic.** When I was being cut, nobody was speaking out against this practice. Everybody wanted it done. I vowed to never deny a girl my voice.

Here in Canada, I see the wall of silence and how this issue is blacked out. It is considered an issue that only happens in other countries. Yet we have survivors like myself who are here and who require specialized care after this horrendous practice. There are also girls at risk who require protection from FGM. This is why FGM remains to be my number one concern, wherever I go.

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**Q3.** So, the cutting happened to you in Kenya when you were 6 years old? Can you describe the experience of what you suffered afterwards as a 6 year old child?

Yes. I was 6 years old and I was in a group of 6 girls. I watched every girl as she was cut. I was the last on the list. All I could hear was their wails. It is something I still recall. From the sharpness of the razor when it first hit my tender flesh, to the immediate aftermath once the nerves picked, to the having to pass urine. The burning on that wound was unbearable, I do not have any words that can describe that suffering.

We spent the next three weeks in the bush during the day and we would slide slowly back home in the evening. My legs were tied from the thighs to the toes so all I could do was slide. I was not supposed to bend if a thorn pricked me, or call out for help. I was given very little in terms of food and there was no water. The thirst was real! All these scary do's and don'ts were meant to 'seal' me up.

I was subjected to Type III FGM where they got rid of my clitoris, my labia minora, and cut part of my labia majora before tying my legs together. The conjoined wounds healed together making a covering over my vulva, known as infibulation.

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### Q4. Maryan, what is your educational background?

I have two master's degrees, One from Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador. I graduated with a **Master's in Anthropology** in October 2020.

I did my other master's degree at the University of Nairobi, Kenya in 2004. It was **Master's in Development Studies**.

In 2016, I completed the **Graduate Certificate Program on Women Peacebuilding and Leadership** from the Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, Virginia, USA.

I received my **Bachelor of Education** at Moi University in Kenya in 1995

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### Q5. Before you came to Canada, you were involved in the ending of FGM in Kenya, can you talk about that please?

I had the privilege of working on ending FGM back in Kenya. I am passionate about ending this atrocity and I felt honored that I obtained a position specifically meant to end this practice. I worked at the grassroots and at national policy level.

We held talks with different groups and engaging powers at the community level. We started the talks with religious leaders because the target community considered FGM as a requirement in Islam. We had religious scholars on board as consultants and we had many different meetings for this group. I also engaged mothers, fathers, young people, and cutters themselves. We had dialogue with teachers, police officers, nurses, and other medical practitioners as well. **The message was always one. That FGM was inhuman, dangerous, and serves no purpose.**

I also worked with parliamentarians. In 2006, when FGM was thrown out of a Bill on Sexual Offences, which is an Act now, we had to take time and engage parliamentarians using their different committees. **I am so proud that the work we did then resulted in Kenya having a law on prohibition of FGM.**

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### Q6. Why did you decide to come to Canada?

I came to Canada for studies and also to protect my daughter from FGM. I have always desired to pursue further education, but outside Kenya. It was one of those thoughts that I kept postponing until an urgency set in.

From when my daughter turned six years onwards, I was concerned about the practice of FGM. I was terrified for her. **FGM is such a norm in my community that nobody even seeks permission to cut your daughter. They can just do it!**

I ensured she did not go anywhere for holidays without me, and always made sure I had someone I trusted when I travelled. Unfortunately, talks about why she should undergo this practice happened in my own house. My daughter was always reminded that she would smell bad and grow snakes down there if she did not undergo FGM. I was sending people packing from my house for this which put me at loggerheads with many relatives, my siblings included.

I knew that it was time I pursued my desire to go out for studies in order to also get my daughter away from such talks where she was being body shamed. **I may have been able to protect her from the dangers of literal FGM but not from the talks on FGM.** I did not want her to feel ashamed of her body.

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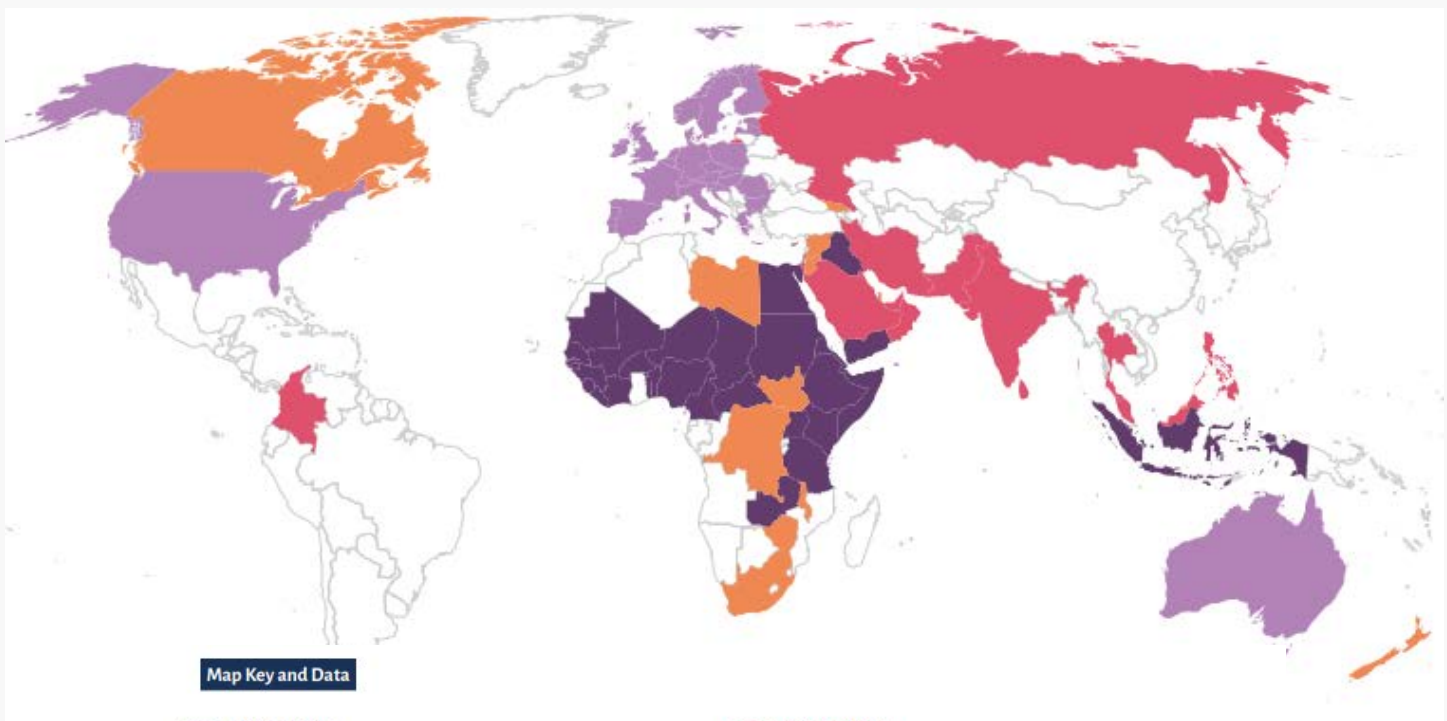


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### Q7. This is not only a practice in Africa, this is a practice around the world, correct?

Yes. FGM is practiced in many countries in the world therefore it is not only an African problem. In 2020, a study was done by Equality Now and partners. From that study, we now know this practice happens in at least 92 countries. And with the new trends of vacation cutting, where girls are taken on vacation and forced to undergo FGM, more countries may join this list.



Map Key and Data

- CATEGORY 1**  
Countries with nationally representative surveys on FGM/C  
Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Cote d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Indonesia, Iraq, Kenya, Liberia, The Maldives, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda, Yemen, Zambia
- CATEGORY 2**  
Countries with indirect estimates on FGM/C  
Australia, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom, United States of America
- CATEGORY 3**  
Countries with small-scale studies on FGM/C  
Colombia, India, Iran, Israel, Kuwait, Malaysia, Oman, Pakistan, Philippines, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand, United Arab Emirates
- CATEGORY 4**  
Countries where media reports and anecdotal evidence refer to occurrence of FGM/C  
Bahrain, Brunei Darussalam, Canada, Democratic Republic of Congo, Georgia, Jordan, Libya, Malawi, New Zealand, Qatar, South Africa, South Sudan, Syria, Zimbabwe.

Source: Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting: A Call For A Global Response (2020) Equality Now, End FGM EU Network, US End FGM/C Network



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### Q8. Are girls in Canada still being sent to countries of their parents' origin for vacation cutting?

Girls in Canada are being forced to undergo vacation cutting. Whether taken back to their country of origin or to any other country, the truth is that vacation cutting is happening. I have met four young Canadian women who are in their 20s and who are survivors of vacation cutting.

- How many more are there who are not coming out?
- How many more maybe taken through it this summer?
- Could it have been happening for the last 20 years?

These are questions that I keep asking myself.

**I have done quite a bit of work with Norway and Britain; they have posters in schools and websites and more to raise awareness of the issue of vacation cutting.**

**In Canada, we have nothing. Additionally, in the UK and the US, they have prosecuted people for vacation cutting. In Canada, we have the law, but we have never prosecuted for vacation cutting.**

**A feminist Prime Minister should not be accepting violence against any girls.**

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### Q8. Are girls in Canada still being sent to countries of their parents' origin for vacation cutting? cont'd

Obviously, more is needed. FGM is no longer an 'over there issue'. Canadian girls are not safe from FGM. There is more that needs to be done and must be done to protect girls.

This is why statistics becomes crucial:

- How many girls are we talking about?
- How many are born to communities that consider FGM a norm and what is their fate?
- How many came here when they were already cut?
- What services exist for both young and old survivors?

Canada obviously must step up and address FGM. There is a lot to learn from other countries and also there is room to develop Canada's own strategy. The wall of silence needs to be brought down completely. FGM will continue to thrive in silence. Canadians need not fear addressing this atrocity. This is an inhuman act that must come to an end.

Addressing FGM is not an attack on any particular culture or religion or community. It is upholding the dignity of girls and ensuring their human rights are not violated.

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### Q9. What Can Parliamentarians Do?

I urge parliamentarians to join this conversation and make it known that FGM is a Canadian issue too. Among their constituents are women and girls who are survivors. They require specialized care. I can attest to the fact that FGM is a lifetime issue. It does not end with the wound healing. It is traumatic and many of us require psychological healing. The least severe symptom I have suffered is recurrent urinary tract infections. Yes, many others who are not survivors of FGM do get them but when it becomes recurrent up to four to six times a year, you can imagine the anguish. There are many other long-term negative outcomes of this practice. **As parliamentarians, you can influence policy and ensure services are provided.**

Among the constituents are young girls who may be victims of vacation cutting. They need protection. As the people who hold the mandate to be their voice, I want to remind parliamentarians that these young girls are looking up to them for protection.

I want parliamentarians to support efforts to end FGM in Canada.  
**Be a champion. Break the silence. Lead the conversation.**