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“My mum was the one who stopped me from being cut; she told me that our religion says that no part of my body is Haram and so shouldn't be cut out. But other girls say uncut girls like me are unclean and cannot read the Koran or go to mosque. They point at me and laugh, and this makes me sad. But the girls who have been cut will have problems later on when they deliver their babies. I am happy not to be cut.”

Sophia Abdi Razak Abdi, 13  
Somalia

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# Using performance and poetry to break the silence

The troupe of male and female entertainers emerges from their van in the centre of town, stomping and clapping and drumming on empty water bottles as a crowd, drawn by the music, gathers in the cool of the late afternoon. Shortly thereafter, a skit begins. Three women debate the merits of FGM/C.

“It’s part of our culture,” says one. “A girl who hasn’t been cut feels too much—she can’t stop herself.” Some members of the audience clap and cheer.

“But if we find out it’s harmful, we must abandon it,” says her companion, who holds a baby. “Some girls who have been cut can’t restrain their desires anyway.” More cheers and hoots.

“The behaviour of girls depends more on education,” says the third woman. “All of my daughters have been cut, but, if it’s harmful, we must stop.”

The skit echoes sentiments in public that are usually discussed only in private. One of the main characters, a strong woman who has herself been cut and whose daughters have been cut, shows a willingness to change her mind in light of new information. In essence, she gives permission for others to do so as well. Or at least to think about it.

“It’s such a wonderful feeling to see large numbers of people all flocking to view our drama,” says Abwaan Jama, one of the young performers. “You need only see their faces to realize how much they love it.”

“It’s great,” adds Adwaan Cawadgale. “I never thought I’d be able to use my talent and art to change people’s attitudes.”

Somalia is a land of poets and musicians. With no written language until the 1970s, Somalis over the centuries acquired rich oral traditions. Even today, interactions among family members—even presentations to a council of clan elders—are commonly framed in poetic language, enlivened with proverbs, riddles, prayers, chants and words of wisdom.

Building on this strong cultural heritage, the Joint Programme in 2013 and 2014 partnered with the Somalia Ministry of Women’s Development and Family Affairs to train 40 young musicians, poets and dramatists to produce lively, improvisational street theatre designed to get people talking about FGM/C, child marriage and other forms of gender-based violence. Key messages were developed, and continue to be refined and harmonized by the Country Office, says Isatu Sesay-Bayoh, the gender adviser for UNFPA Somalia.

During 2014, the trained troupes fanned out across villages in conservative areas of Puntland. They set up in high-traffic locations during the late afternoon when many people have time for a break. In Somaliland, similar performances were organized during 16 Days of Activism against Gender Violence (25 November to 10 December 2014). In both Puntland and Somaliland, the performances reached some 8,000 community members.

“The Somali community is very vocal, and they love theatre arts, sketches, music,” says Bahsan Said, a programme officer on gender, youth and HIV/AIDS for UNFPA Somalia. “These performances go beyond community engagement on FGM/C; they’re also a way to revive the Somali culture of music and traditional dance.”

And with a medium that is so distinctly Somali, the messages don’t seem to pose a threat to the cultural identity of the crowd.

Moreover, the improvisational nature of the performances allows the performers to quickly

adapt to the mood of the audience, which is asked to join in. In a country where most people are used to verbal challenges, a kind of poetry slam can ensue, with members of the audience responding in poetry—either supporting or opposing the ideas presented, says Ms. Said.

Some of the performances end with individual or collective declarations against FGM/C. In other cases, discussions follow. Older women, often the staunchest defenders of the ritual they themselves have endured, protest. “This is not what we want—our girls will be unmarriageable,” they say. Yet younger men, who are increasingly taking a stand against the practice, may dispute this.

Attitudes towards FGM/C in Somalia are definitely changing, says Ms. Sesay-Bayoh. Anecdotal evidence is backed up by preliminary findings—for example, the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey of 2012,<sup>10</sup> which shows significant reductions in the numbers of people who support the practice. “The fact that people are openly discussing the issue is in itself a huge change,” she adds.



The troupe of performers engage the audience and provoke different reactions

<sup>10</sup> United Nations Children's Fund, Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys. Available from <http://mics.unicef.org>