

Crusade to end female genital mutilation

By
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WHEN Soraya Mire was 13 years old, her mother told her they would go and buy a gift.

Soraya, from Somalia, was as excited as any teenager would be and she went with her mother willingly.

But the gift turned out to be a visit to a traditional practitioner of female genital mutilation, in a home in Mogadishu.

She was subjected to the most invasive form of this practice leaving her with very little of her genitalia intact. Only a small opening remained, through which she could urinate and menstruate.

She remembers that her feet were tied together and that her mother held her tight as the operation was performed.

Ms Mire also remembers that for years she suffered pain. Five years lat-

er, she was studying literature and political science in France. She became very ill and went to the emergency room at a local hospital.

Her attending doctors had never had a patient before who had experienced female genital mutilation, but one doctor arrived at the scene who had some expertise. With her permission, he performed reconstructive surgery.

She would never be quite normal again, but she would at least be able to urinate and menstruate with no obstructions.

From that moment on, Ms Mire became an activist against the traditional practice of FGM. Was she angry with her mother? "I forgive my mother now but I have to tell you when I was having this surgery I was feeling the shock and numbness and most of all the betrayal," she says.

Ms Mire, in Canberra as part of the Second International Meeting on Women and Health, organised with the World Health Organisation's Centre for Health Development by the Commonwealth Office of the Status of Women, feels amazement that her mother, who also experienced FGM, could have 12 children.

"After each child they had to stitch her back together which is another severe pain. How can I still be angry?"

Ms Mire has gone on the lecture circuit, written a number of articles and made several films, one of which was the 1994 documentary *Fire Eyes*, about female genital mutilation, which screened at the Sundance festival. She has also spoken at the United Nations Assembly against FGM.

She was granted a UN humanitarian award for her film and has performed for the past four years in Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* in New York, London and Los Angeles.

Ms Mire says that 130 million women have experienced FGM. When she and others, including international model Waris Dirie, began to campaign against the practice, there were 54 countries involved. Now it is down to 27 and it's getting less every day.

But 6000 children were mutilated each day in different parts of the world and until that ended she could not rest, she said.

In Australia, reports of FGM are anecdotal: it has only become an issue here because of migration. There is a national education program about FGM, funded by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Family Services, and also educational and preventative programs in relevant communities.

The law specifically prohibits FGM in all states and territories (with up to seven years' imprisonment for a conviction), except for Queensland and Western Australia who would use the Criminal Code.