

What role can a radio programme play in challenging norms around female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) in Somalia?

Qualitative research with influencers and mothers and fathers, informed the development of the radio programme ‘Tusmada Noloshu’ (Lifeline) and provided feedback on how they felt it had addressed the topic of FGM/C.

Context

Somalia has one of the highest female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) prevalence rates in the world and has been practiced in Somalia for several decades. The Somali Health and Demographic Survey 2020¹ reported that **over 90 per cent or more of girls and women aged 15-49, have been subjected to female genital mutilation, or FGM**. The practice has harmful health consequences - including pain, bleeding, disability and even death – yet discussion around this topic remains taboo².

Project background

From April to June 2022, BBC Media Action, with funding from the German Cooperation and supported by its project on FGM-Prevention in Eastern Africa, adapted ‘**Tusmada Noloshu**’, a 15-minute weekly radio programme, to produce eight episodes focused on the topic of FGM/C. The programme had a 10-minute discussion and five-minute drama segment. This was then

broadcast by seven of BBC Media Action’s local partner radio stations across Somalia. Content of the programmes was collected from different regions of the country, with the help of partner stations. BBC Media Action also created **social media content** on this topic for the [Facebook page](#).

Research methodology

Research was carried out to inform the media content produced, to test pilot output and to assess people’s views of the programme.

First, small scale formative research was conducted to understand Somali audiences knowledge, beliefs and misconceptions around FGM/C. Interviews were conducted across Somaliland, Puntland and South Central Somalia with mothers of daughters who had undergone FGM/C; with women who had conducted the procedure of FGM/C; and with key informants (FGM/C experts and a religious leader). Focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted in Hargeisa, Somaliland with separate groups of mothers and fathers who had a daughter who had undergone FGM/C to test programme output.

Second, respondents were played a pilot programme covering the origins of FGM/C in Somalia, and the different procedures and negative effects on girls to test whether the programme was clear, relatable and had the intended impact.

Third, to gather audience feedback, four FGDs were conducted with mothers and fathers who had daughters who had undergone FGM/C to understand the impact of the radio programme on their knowledge, attitudes and practices.

¹ [The Somalia Health and Demographic Survey 2020](#)

² [United Nations, UN News 4 February 2022](#)

Key findings

FGM/C is seen to increase the chances of girls getting married

- Mothers reported that the main motivation for FGM/C is to reduce a girl's sexual desire and therefore keep her virginity. This is seen to help her get married.
- Mothers supported the belief that FGM/C helps maintain respect for the family in the communities, and thought that families that do not practice FGM/C would be discriminated against.
- A religious leader mentioned that being sexually active before marriage is considered a major sin in Islam.

A wake-up call for the community

- 'Tusmada Nolosha' programme was described as a 'wake-up call' for the community as it informed them of the dangerous effects of FGM/C.
- Men talked about how the programme informed them about the problems that their wives go through from the effects of FGM/C, such as the pain from their 'menses' and pain while giving birth.
- There was also mention that men thought FGM/C is part of the journey that a girl should go through when she reaches puberty. Listening to the religious leaders in the programme helped them to reconsider, although they were still hesitant about the idea of marrying a girl who had not undergone FGM/C.

Drama is a good format for addressing FGM/C

- Drama can help build listeners' empathy with different characters and storylines which help listeners to reconsider and reflect on their own lives in an indirect way.
- For example, participants recalled the drama storyline of Qamar, a female character who strongly supported FGM/C as it was part of her culture. She wanted her daughter to undergo FGM/C and the story follows the tragic consequences of this decision. Female listeners were sad to hear

that her daughter died, because her mother refused to take any advice from her sister and a friend who was a doctor.

- Male participants stated in groups that now they will try to be more involved in their daughters' lives when they reach puberty to make sure that their wives will not have FGM/C performed on their daughters.

"I used to always tell my wife that FGM is women issues and always asked her to make the decision for our daughter but now that I am aware of the health complications I will make the decision to not do FGM on my remaining daughters"

Father with daughter who has undergone FGM, Hargeisa

Key implications

The research has implications for the need to continue work around FGM/C in Somalia.

- FGM/C is a complex social norm in Somalia that is widely accepted by women and men and there is a fear of sanctions for not obeying this practice (girls are not able to marry so easily). Behaviour change takes time and requires a lot of effort to address this in practice.
- The research has highlighted that providing awareness around the harmful effects of FGM/C from influential people such as religious leaders, can have an influence on changing people's perceptions.

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