

60 MINUTES SOCIETY

## It was a memory I had blocked out, says activist Masooma Ranalvi

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**Ranalvi, who is at the forefront of the campaign to end female genital mutilation in India, is just back from the UN**

Masooma Ranalvi vividly remembers the day when as a little girl her grandmother took her out for a walk, a day that ended instead in a nightmare: "A stranger undressed me and cut a part of my genitals," she recalls. Today, Masooma spearheads a campaign against female genital mutilation (FGM), a painful, dangerous and patriarchal practice, known as *khatna* or *khafz* in her community, the Bohras. The two-year-old campaign broke the silence around a practice that is carried out in secret by a

midwife when a girl turns seven, and is aimed at curbing her sexual desire so that she does not “go astray”. Last month, Masooma presented the first-ever submission on FGM in India at the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC). Excerpts from an interview.

**You recently wrote an open letter to the Prime Minister asking him to ban FGM. Surely you know of his long-standing association with the Syedna, the spiritual head of the Dawoodi Bohras?**

Yes, I do. But the Prime Minister has often spoken about his commitment to Muslim women’s rights, and even referred to this in his Independence Day speech this year. What about us? Bohra women are also Muslims. Six months ago, the Union Minister for Women and Child Development, Maneka Gandhi, promised to write to the Syedna to stop the practice. If that failed, she said the government would bring in a law. But since then, there has been silence. Clearly, the government is reluctant to move on this. In Kerala, it recently came to light that some Sunni communities practice FGM. I have seen statements by BJP leaders from Kerala asking the ruling CPI(M) how it allows such a practice to continue. Ironically, the same party at the Centre is quiet.

**What exactly happened at UNHRC?**

The UNHRC has a bi-annual review of the human rights situation across the world, where we presented a written submission on FGM in India and the need for the government to address it. This was the first time the issue was being brought up at the **United Nations**. We were invited by the Global Alliance against FGM to present our case. FGM is practised across the world; Bohras are a minuscule community and being part of the Global Alliance has given our fight an impetus. There are strong movements against FGM all over the world backed by governments, but we have no such backing.

**What has been the response of the Dawoodi Bohra establishment to your campaign?**

They have dug in their heels, saying *khatna* or *khafz* is our religious tradition, who are you to tell us it’s wrong. They have even set up a website called dbwrf.org (Dawoodi Bohra Women’s Association for Religious Freedom) to counter us. It has women writing in support of FGM, saying it’s only a small symbolic nick on the clitoral hood, not the barbaric practice carried out in some African countries. But even a small nick falls under the World Health Organisation’s definition of FGM. And if it’s just symbolic, why do it? Medically, it has no benefit. It only harms. These women are even saying it’s done to enhance sexual pleasure, turning its aim on its head! But even if one accepts this argument, do you mutilate a child to enhance her sexual pleasure? She can undergo this procedure if she wants to when she’s an adult. The fact is FGM finds no mention in the Koran or even in *Daim ul-Islam*, the religious book the Dawoodi Bohras follow, it is not clearly mentioned.

**The rival Syedna has come out against the practice. Has that helped?**

Yes, that is important, because the argument is that religion can never be changed. He is accepted as the Syedna by many. So it shows that a religious leader can be open to change.

**What about the reformists in your community?**

I wanted the reformists’ conference held in Udaipur in March this year to pass a resolution against FGM. My father was a reformist and I am what I am because of him. I can take the establishment head-on because of how he moulded me and my sisters. But although reformist leader Irfan Engineer and others fought to get me the opportunity to speak at the conference, no resolution was passed. It is telling that there is resistance even among the reformists. But there was a section of women who supported me.

**Given such resistance, how have you managed to launch and sustain your campaign?**

It all started in October 2015 when I wrote a blog describing my experience. It was very difficult to do so. It was a dark memory that I had blocked out. I was never told about it; my grandmother took me for an outing that turned into a nightmare. At that age I felt violated, because a stranger undressed me and cut a part of my genitals. It was very painful. I never wanted to confront this memory. Almost 30 years later I came to know what this whole thing was. I felt angry when I realised what had happened to me. I did not have the courage to talk to anyone about it at that time. Later when I spoke to **people**, I realised that ignorance prevails.

I got a lot of responses to my blog from women who felt this was their story too. We thought why not connect so that we could fight this together. We formed a WhatsApp group called SpeakOutonFGM and within a week we had 50 women from India and

across the world. Till then, we had never discussed how this procedure had impacted us.

Talking about it was not easy. It is a memory of something traumatic. It was also not easy talking about sexual parts, sexuality, and the impact of this at first. But together we breached this barrier and we could open up to each other.

In December 2015, we drafted a petition on change.org demanding a ban. Soon after, we started a campaign called #NotMyDaughter. We hoped to get a handful of women to pledge they would break this cycle by not doing this to their daughters. We got 120 signatures.

I talk about it whenever I meet my community, and I find that a lot of ordinary Bohra women are now opposing this practice. They realise how harmful it is. We are after all an educated community. But the culture of social boycott in our community prevents people from coming out openly. But men too are now supporting us.

Though the entire procedure involves women only, it is the male Amils (community leaders) who insist on it. In recent years, even non-Bohras who have married Bohras have to present a certificate to the Amil that they have had this [*khatna*] done before their nikah is solemnised.

But I am still hopeful, because a conversation on this forbidden topic has started within the community. Also, there is a PIL on this in the Supreme Court. So both inside and outside the community, there is pressure to end this practice.

*The writer is a Mumbai-based freelance journalist.*

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