



## Combating and Living with FGM

**The Combat and Living with FGM project started in December 2020. It was set up to target 300 villages with continuing high rates of FGM (Erbil and Ranya areas) through women-led mobile teams. The teams work with local communities through dialogue, education, and engagement. The goal is to lower/end the practice of FGM. The Living with FGM part is implemented in areas where FGM is not practiced anymore. It helps affected women to cope with the late effects of the mutilation and improve their lives and partnerships.**

In the areas where FGM is still practiced at high rates, Wadi's goal was to engage in a holistic strategy to change the culture surrounding the practice of FGM. In Wadi's 30 years of experience a 'one size fits all' approach is not helpful when dealing with such a topic as different groups have different understanding and attachments to the practice. Over the recent twelve months of the project Wadi saw high engagement and participation in both Erbil and Rania. Overall the topics of women's rights, domestic violence, forced marriage and other GBV issues were repeatedly and consistently addressed. Men were encouraged to participate in specialized seminars, and although numbers were small they were consistent, showing that there is a space for growth.

In the second phase of the project Wadi aimed to expand the Living with FGM project best practices and lessons learned and also focus on knowledge transfer to local actors in the community. Tools for women and men living with FGM in villages that have rejected the practice of FGM have been established and refined. From the experience gathered so far, a comprehensive Living with FGM handbook for psychosocial assistance to survivors of FGM has been published. The living with FGM sessions were held regularly, and participants generally reported feeling better for attending them. Although the sensitivity of the topic did ruffle some feathers, the overall reception was positive and continue to show the importance of this groundbreaking project.

## FGM PREVENTION & AWARENESS PROGRAM

### Summary of awareness seminars:

The awareness seminars took place in Erbil and Rania where FGM is still being practiced.

The seminars covered a wide range of topics over the twelve month period, with the main topics being the misinformation that continues to exist around FGM, domestic violence, forced marriage, child marriage, and the provisions of Law no.8 Combating Domestic Violence, and their implications. A total of **240** trainings was offered, with **1,198** women and **198** men participating.



Our teams' approach was to be non-accusatory and evidence based while sharing the longterm negative consequences of FGM as part of the prevention program. The teams also discussed the psychological harm that many women suffer from and the trauma they re-live when they remember being mutilated. This was often an entry point for discussions with women, and many shared their experiences and stories.

After reflecting on their experiences or experiences of women they know, the teams talk about FGM into the larger context of violence against women and girls. The idea that FGM is a deep

form of domestic and sexual violence against girls and not a requirement of religion is a big part of connecting with participants on why this practice needs to end.

There are so many stereotypes that are culturally associated with FGM that it really is important to engage with each one and discuss it. Some of the most common arguments that persist in favor of the practice are that women who are un-mutilated are 'unclean, unattractive and improper' there were many variations in the details of the arguments but those were the uniting themes.

### **Awareness seminars for Men:**

As in the previous year, seminars for men were held once a month in both Erbil and Ranya. The topics covered by the teams were the general explanation of Law No.8 which covers domestic violence, violence against children and bans the practice of FGM. In general the teams reported that most men were surprisingly receptive to the topics and the idea of seminars in general.

They often expressed that as men they also were concerned and affected by these topics, and were glad to have a forum to discuss them in. There were a lot of different attitudes towards family violence held by the men that participated in the seminars, with many not seeing many violent acts as 'violence' but rather as 'educating' or 'correcting'. Participation of men remained small, but at least some were ready to talk about it. The teams noted stark differences between villages, as some were very open while in others the men refused completely.



## **LIVING WITH FGM PROGRAM**

Area of focus Garmyan & Halabja, where no new cases have been recorded since 2022

### **The sessions:**

In 2023, **705** women and **6** men participated. 'Living with FGM' project has taken many lessons learned from the pilot project supported by the Consulate of the Netherlands. The teams felt more empowered after their trainings in 2021 and 2022. The areas where seminars took place were villages where FGM is no longer practiced. Participants were mostly women who have been attending Wadi FGM awareness programs and reached out about more help. It is and continues to be very important that this project does not appear to condone FGM in any way or



send the message that 'it's not that bad if you mutilate your daughters because there are coping strategies'.

This project deals with very sensitive issues, and in order to continue to 'do no harm' as this project progresses it is very important to protect participants' anonymity and to focus on creating real safe spaces for participants. Therefore no pictures and no recordings were made as well as no social media posts about these activities, however notes and written reports were taken by our team members.

As the small intimate sessions began there were two clear areas of focus (1) the physical effects of FGM and how to manage them long term and (2) the emotional and mental effects of FGM on the self and on married life. The longterm physical effects could not be understated, participants shared their constant state of pain, inflammation and pain during sexual intercourse, as well as disinterest in sexual relations due to pain. The teams also discussed the history of FGM, psychological and physical impacts of FGM, the effects it has on sex life and child birth, the law against FGM, people who support FGM and participate in it on any level, the physical complications such as bleeding, infections, infertility in addition to STD's and HIV.

On the emotional and mental health effects women expressed a sense of hopelessness and also loneliness. Although there was at times criticism about talking so 'openly' about 'shameful' topics by some participants, most were relieved to have a space where they could finally safely unburden themselves. The deep rooted 'shame' of FGM and sex in general meant that the idea of discussing their needs with a husband was really difficult. Many women shared that they were taught to put themselves last, and asking or even thinking about pleasure for themselves was just not accepted. This way of thinking is part of the many layers of misogyny that affect the society of which FGM is but one part.



As the sessions moved forward women began to feel more comfortable and ready to learn about the tools and techniques on how one can verbalize their emotions and speak about their pain when they want, how to overcome fear and self soothe when needed.

### Living with FGM Handbook

This comprehensive manual was written by Dr. Mahmoody as a result of his three-year-long training within this project. Wadi's teams translated, layouted and printed the book which includes everything they learned about ways of living with FGM.

This book is specially made for team members that are a part of the Living with FGM program, but is also designed to provide future teams of other organizations with the knowledge and lessons learned required.