

# PROTECT OUR GIRLS

Khadija Gbla and Amal Kowhah are among a growing group of survivors of female genital mutilation who are campaigning against the practice. But paediatricians say it's not going away, writes **WENDY TUOHY**

**W**HAT do you remember from when you were five — your first day at school, playing or having stories read? For Amal Kowhah, memories are stained with pain. It was at the age of five that, like so many other girls raised in cultures where so-called “female circumcision” is practised, her body was scarred by cruel cuts.

She was restrained while a woman cut her private parts without anaesthetic and then stitched her to protect her eligibility for marriage. The operation was “bad, very, very bad — all the pain”, says Kowhah, 39, shaking her head at the memory. “But when you’re not done, you can’t get married.”

Having this radical procedure, now known as Type 3 Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), was believed to keep girls pure, says North Sudanese-born Kowhah.

Sierra Leone-born Khadija Gbla (left) has been campaigning loudly against FGM since she was 13; she was harmed so badly she was told she could never have children and describes FGM as a “life sentence”.

Kowhah and Gbla are part of a growing global push to have FGM seen for what it is: a violation of girls’ human rights, child abuse and a crime.

For Kowhah, a mother of six, the memory of that awful experience is strong enough for her to be among a generation of mothers and fathers from cultures around the world to say “no more”. Kowhah and husband Haroun Kafi are among the first generation to spare their daughters. A resident of Shepparton’s large multicultural community, Kowhah and parents like her are speaking about FGM to help stamp it out.

According to the United Nations Population Fund, 200 million girls and women worldwide live with FGM, having had it performed in sub-Saharan Africa, some Islamic communities and Arab countries, Asia (some parts of Pakistan, India, Malaysia and Indonesia) and Latin America — and in diaspora communities in Europe, the US, Canada and Australia.

An estimated 83,000 girls and women in Australia have survived FGM, according to those working to prevent it here and to reduce the risk of girls being sent for it offshore.

The challenge for community members such as Amal Kowhah, her dynamic Shepparton Ethnic Council colleague Betul Tuna, Gbla and her No FGM Australia co-founder, Melbourne teacher Paula Ferrari, is to support women who have had FGM to say no to remnant cultural pressure.

Despite the criminalisation of FGM across Australia, cases are being exposed. In November, a retired nurse and a mother of two young girls were found guilty of performing FGM on the woman’s two daughters. And in 2014, a Sydney father was charged with organising for his infant daughter to be “circumcised” overseas. He was later charged with aiding, abetting, counselling or procuring female genital mutilation and handed a suspended jail term.

Gbla, 28, is still angry about what was done to her at her mother’s behest when they were living in Gambia. She attended the first National Summit on Female Genital Mutilation in Canberra in 2013, run by then health minister Tanya Plibersek, and floored listeners with her guts and passion. Gbla told how her mum held her down while an older woman cut her with a rusty knife.

“I was given a mic at the summit and asked to speak so I said, we shouldn’t just be having a talkfest; I want to put a face to something people talk about as a hypothetical thing; this is real, I was nine or 10 years old when a lady took a rusty knife and butchered me. Little girls who are at risk of this need support.”

## AT A GLANCE

■ 200 million girls and women worldwide are living with FGM

■ 83,000 survivors of FGM are estimated to be living in Australia

■ 10 per cent of paediatricians say they have seen at least one case of a girl aged 18 or younger who has undergone FGM

■ 16 doctors have seen it in the past five years

■ 59 child patients with FGM have been seen

SOURCES: United Nations Population Fund, NO FGM Australia, National Paediatric Surveillance Unit