

THE SILENT BREAKERS





Collective work of:

Asociación Más Mujeres and Save a Girl Save a Generation

Text: Anna Maria Porté Estop

Illustration: Sara Fratini

Design: María Ramis

English Version: Natalia Fernández Díaz-Cabal

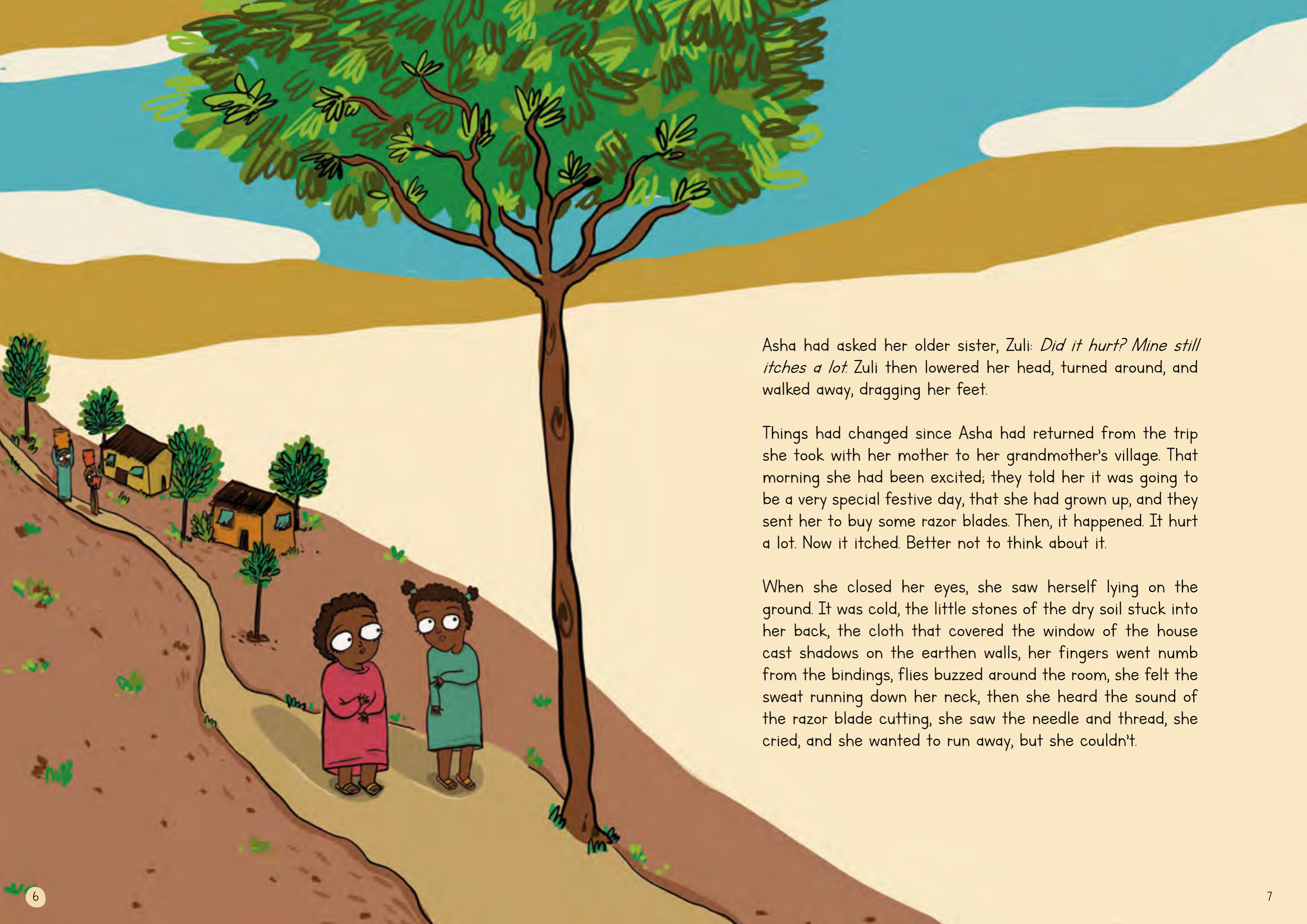
ISBN: 978-84-09-74287-5

Legal deposit: LG BI 00811-2025

THE SILENT BREAKERS

This story is based on real events. Female genital mutilation is a practice that thousands of women and girls around the world still endure today. However, more and more women are managing to break free from it.





Asha had asked her older sister, Zuli: *Did it hurt? Mine still itches a lot.* Zuli then lowered her head, turned around, and walked away, dragging her feet.

Things had changed since Asha had returned from the trip she took with her mother to her grandmother's village. That morning she had been excited; they told her it was going to be a very special festive day, that she had grown up, and they sent her to buy some razor blades. Then, it happened. It hurt a lot. Now it itched. Better not to think about it.

When she closed her eyes, she saw herself lying on the ground. It was cold, the little stones of the dry soil stuck into her back, the cloth that covered the window of the house cast shadows on the earthen walls, her fingers went numb from the bindings, flies buzzed around the room, she felt the sweat running down her neck, then she heard the sound of the razor blade cutting, she saw the needle and thread, she cried, and she wanted to run away, but she couldn't.

Asha didn't understand what kind of celebration that was. She didn't like it. At all. Even though her grandmother told her: *Now you're a big girl!* Days had passed, and it still hurt when she walked, when she moved, when she peed. It itched. She asked her mother, while they were going to fetch water from the well, what she could do, and her mother replied: *Wash with hot water and salt.* Asha washed herself with water that was so hot it almost burned her hand, but she didn't feel anything. The itching didn't go away—on the contrary, it burned even more.

Asha thought that when she was older, the bucket wouldn't feel so heavy when she fetched water. But at five years old—well, she thinks she's five, judging by the height of the other girls who do go to school—but she doesn't know for sure when she was born. Even so, she keeps stopping several times because she gets tired, and of the days she tripped because it still hurts when she walks, and she spilled the water. Maybe grandma was wrong. Maybe she's still a little girl.



That had happened to Asha, and before her, to her grandmother, her mother, and her sister. To all the women in the family. Maybe also to the neighbors. But Asha didn't know, because no one talked about it. She had tried several times to talk about it with Zuli.

One day, while Zuli was chopping onions for the rice, she asked her again: *Did it bother you? Does it go away?* Zuli pointed to the floor, gave her an onion, and said: *Cut it into small pieces.*

Soon after, Asha heard her sister blow her nose, saw those hands with long, slender fingers holding a colorful handkerchief, looked at her face, and noticed her eyes were shining. *Onions always make me cry,* Zuli whispered. Asha's eyes began to sting too. The two kept chopping onions while they cried. And her sister never answered her.



Time passed, and the family was reunited. Asha loved the mango tree that grew near the house. After so many years apart, her mother felt almost like a stranger. Asha and Zuli hardly spent any time with her. At mealtimes, they would go to their aunt's house, reach into the steaming pot of rice, and with their hands still burning, run to eat it beneath the old mango tree as they laughed. It was a giant, lonely mango tree—and they loved it.

Asha's family belonged to the Somali ethnic group living in Kenya. In her short life, Asha had lived in different towns and cities. When her parents separated, the family drifted apart too: her mother had to find work to afford a place to live. One afternoon, her older brother left to live with an uncle. Another day, as a strong wind blew, an aunt took her sister away. Not long after, her mother left her with another aunt and said: *You have such lovely cheeks, my child—meant to be kissed, not slapped. Never forget that.*

Asha missed her family. Sometimes she had trouble sleeping. She wondered if she would ever see her mother again, if her brother still remembered her, if Zuli was saving stories to tell her when they were together once more. She didn't understand why they all had to live so far apart. She didn't like being in that house very much—though if it rained a little more and the dust weren't everywhere, maybe it wouldn't be so bad. She was the youngest, and everyone sent her to do things. She wished she could go to school.



Asha was angry: her brother had been managing the accounts for years, her sister kept writing words on the patio floor that she couldn't read. She was tired of waiting for her moment to arrive. She hadn't been able to go to school at her aunt's house. She was furious with her mother. She was no longer a little girl. She wanted to know. Her body was changing and she thought she could find some answers beyond the silence that surrounded her.



Her mother had remarried. A woman couldn't raise a family on her own and Asha had a new little sister. Asha liked to play with her and take care of her. Even more so when her sister's father left them one day and they were once again living only with their mother. They had moved again. Now they were closer to Asha's father and he came to visit and eat at home with other relatives he invited. Asha had grown tired of being the last, of not being able to study, of waiting and serving the food that the men of the family and friends shared in the main room. The leftovers were for her sisters, for her mother, and for her. Until one day she sat at the table and said: *I don't want to be hungry anymore.*



Asha wasn't born to be told what she couldn't do. All it took was someone telling her "no" for her to stand up and do everything in her power to prove what she was capable of. That day, she broke the rules and sat at the men's table. Her mother was very angry because she was ashamed of her daughter's lack of education. But Asha was not embarrassed, she was just hungry, and if there was food for the men, there was food for everyone. No one else was going to throw her out of any table. So, from that day on, her mother would feed the girls first and then the men.



In Kenya during that time, a child could only begin school once they could touch their left ear with their right hand or vice versa over the top of their head. For years, Asha could easily reach her ear, but only after persistent pleading she was able to go to school, she was older than everyone else in the classroom—and she knew the least. At the end of her first term, she came last in the class. The other students mocked her, making her the target of relentless jokes. She came home in tears. Her older sister, moved by her pain, handed her a book titled “Through the Garden Crate” and said: *If you want to learn to read, study this book. Once you’ve learned, no one will laugh at you again.*

From that day forward, Asha was never again at the bottom of the class. She taught herself to read and soon discovered the library—a place filled with light and stories. She would stay there until closing time, devouring every book she could get her hands on. She was thirsty for words. But her passion wasn’t understood at home. With chores waiting and expectations to fulfill, her love for studying was seen as a distraction. *More discipline and fewer books!*, her family demanded.

Each evening when she returned from the library, she was punished. Still, she kept going back. The more she learned, the more convinced she became that every girl deserved the same opportunity. She would not give up. One day, a teacher visited her family and said: *This girl is strong-willed and intelligent. Let her study—she’s worth so much.*



The punishments stopped. Her family began to see the possibilities and started thinking about how to support her secondary education. From being the lowest in her class, Asha rose to become one of the top students in her entire province. She earned a scholarship to a boarding school—a dream come true. Her first suitcase. Her own towel, toothbrush, wardrobe, and bed. For days, the dimple on her left cheek remained fixed in place from constant smiling. At that boarding school, surrounded by girls who had always had everything, Asha arrived with one clear desire: to learn.



She had managed to convince everyone that she was the niece of an important Somali general—just another girl among many. But one day, in the boarding school showers, a stark truth hit her. The other girls were different. Not just because they went to the Protestant chapel every day or had more shoes and books, but because they hadn't gone through what she had.

Back in her room, she collapsed onto the bed, overwhelmed. How infuriating! Then a thought struck her: Wait a minute—so that doesn't happen to all girls? Why did it happen to me? There was no one she could ask.

She began researching, searching every book she could find, hoping to uncover an explanation. But the books offered no answers. A deep rupture tore through her spirit: Why did they do that to me? It was her body, her privacy, her life. No one had the right to cause her such pain. It didn't matter that it had always been done. Or that the elders said it was "good for the girls." It wasn't right.

They had changed her forever. And now she knew it didn't have to be that way. You could grow up, your body could change naturally—and no one had the right to decide what a woman's body should be. Never. No one. Anywhere in the world.

When the school holidays arrived, Asha returned to her village for a few days. To earn some money for her basic needs at the boarding school, she began selling *sambusas*—pastries filled with minced meat, vegetables, and spices. One morning, she overheard that her mother was taking her little sister to the hospital. They were going to do that to her. *No!* Asha screamed. She tried to stop them—*Not my little sister! Never again!* They locked her in a room. She pounded on the door for hours, screaming until her voice was gone. When she was finally released, her mother said gently: *It doesn't hurt so much now. They do it at the hospital.* Asha hugged her sister. She couldn't look her in the eyes. She held her tightly as her sister sobbed. What did her mother mean? That if it was done in a hospital, it was better? Was that supposed to make it okay? How many others had gone through the same thing—beyond her sister, beyond her village? But why? All that pain. That permanent absence of a part of you. Asha's throat burned—not just from the screaming, but from the fire inside her. This time, she didn't speak. She had no voice left to give.





Asha longed to escape her situation. During her pregnancy, she began working in the home of some friends of her family. She had made up her mind: once the baby was born, she would leave that man. She studied, worked, and saved every shilling she could.

When her daughter was born—little Hayat—the delivery was so difficult that Asha nearly didn't survive. But the moment she saw that tiny face, she made a solemn promise: Hayat will be freer than I ever was.

Asha had dreamed of becoming a radio presenter. She wanted to go to university and become a journalist—tell life stories, speak truths over the airwaves. But there was no money at home. Instead, her family arranged her marriage to an older man living in Mogadishu, the capital of Somalia. When they learned she was pregnant, her husband's family began to care for her. She was now carrying something they considered theirs.



Asha returned to Kenya for a few days to visit her family, though she had to go without Hayat. Her husband hadn't allowed her to take the baby out of the country. But Asha had a plan—the family she worked for had offered to help change her life. Passports were ready. Once she returned, she would take her daughter, and together they would emigrate to Denmark. But then war broke out. The borders closed. Hayat was trapped. Asha was inconsolable. There was no news of her daughter. She had lost her job, her income, her savings—everything. She had been so close to freedom. Instead, she had lost it all.

She couldn't sleep. She couldn't eat. She couldn't feel. The war had taken everything. Again. Then came a letter from Hayat's father. He would try to get to the border with the child. Could Asha get them out? She broke down completely. Her savings were still hidden in a mattress in Mogadishu. Zuli, her sister, looked her in the eyes and said: *Let's go find your daughter. I'll sell my gold jewellery. We'll go to the border. We'll find her.*





They travelled in aid trucks heading toward the refugee camps at the border. The journey was long, the resources few. They arrived at that terrible gate—the one that divided war from peace—faced with an endless line of exhausted bodies and shattered souls. How could they possibly find such a small child in this sea of people? *Asha, get up,* Zuli said, wiping her tears. *We didn't come all this way to give up. We're going home with Hayat.* They split up to search. When every face started to blur into the next, Asha suddenly stopped. In the crowd, she saw a red ribbon, perfectly matching a little dress. There, next to that small, shining star, stood her husband—dirty, frail, reduced to skin and bone.

And there was Hayat. She had never seen anything more beautiful than her daughter in that moment, standing amidst the chaos. Years have passed since that day, but the light from that moment still holds Asha up. She had known it at Hayat's birth—when that tiny fist gripped her finger tightly: this is my reason. And there, in the middle of the most harrowing desolation, she made another vow: No one would ever separate them again.

Asha would no longer allow anyone to decide who she should live with or how she should live. That chapter was over. Her daughter had the right to grow up free—free from the weight of custom, expectation, and fear. Free to dream and choose her own path. Sometimes, Asha had feared she might never hold her again. Now that they were reunited, she would not allow herself to fall. She would look for a job, find training, and educate herself—not only for her sake but to protect her daughter's future. No one would ever hurt Hayat the way Asha had been hurt. Hayat would study. She would work. She would marry whoever she chose.

Asha exhaled deeply, unaware that her tight embrace had frightened the little girl. She loosened her arms slightly, adjusted the crooked ribbon on Hayat's head, and looked into her daughter's face—seeing not only her own child, but every girl who survives daily in a world so often stacked against her. It was time to move. Time to leave that place. She dusted off Hayat's dress, lifted her up, and began searching for her sister. They would help each other find their way back home.



Asha divorced Hayat's father and settled in Nairobi with Zuli and her little girl. She found work at an NGO supporting refugees fleeing the conflict in Somalia. As she helped others find a new home, she was quietly building one of her own. Zuli often made xalwo, a sweet dessert that Hayat loved. It was the perfect excuse for the sisters to gather, share tea, and talk about their lives. One afternoon, as Asha served Hayat some xalwo with biscuits, she noticed how much her daughter had grown. Perhaps, she thought, it was time to break the silence. She looked over at Zuli. Now that they were both mothers, maybe they could finally talk about it—about what had been done to them.

Asha gently wiped Hayat's mouth with a napkin, then sat upright and looked her sister in the eyes. *I'm not going to let Hayat go through what they did to us. Never.* Zuli walked over to the table, dipped the spoon she was holding into the bowl of xalwo, and turned toward the window. *I don't have daughters yet,* she said softly, *but if I had, I wouldn't let them suffer that pain either.* That was the first of many conversations. They listened to each other. They found the words to express how it had felt back then—and how it had marked them, deeply and permanently.



Asha didn't stop there. She began speaking with other women in the family, and with neighbors who had daughters. *I don't want this to happen to my child*, she told them. That simple statement became the seed of Save a Girl, Save a Generation. It was born from Asha's realization that what women needed were safe spaces—places where they could speak, share, and say without fear: *Save one girl, and you save a generation*. Despite the weight of tradition and the resistance of the community, Asha saw the glimmer of a new possibility. Things could be different. The silence Asha broke was not hers alone—it echoed the silence of hundreds of women around the world who are daring to live differently. Because there is more than one way to move forward in life.

And as Asha says:

*The story of my life is written on my feet.
I've never been able to sew a button. Every
time I see a needle or thread, I'm taken
back to that moment.*

*But I am convinced—together, we can weave
the conditions needed to end this practice.*

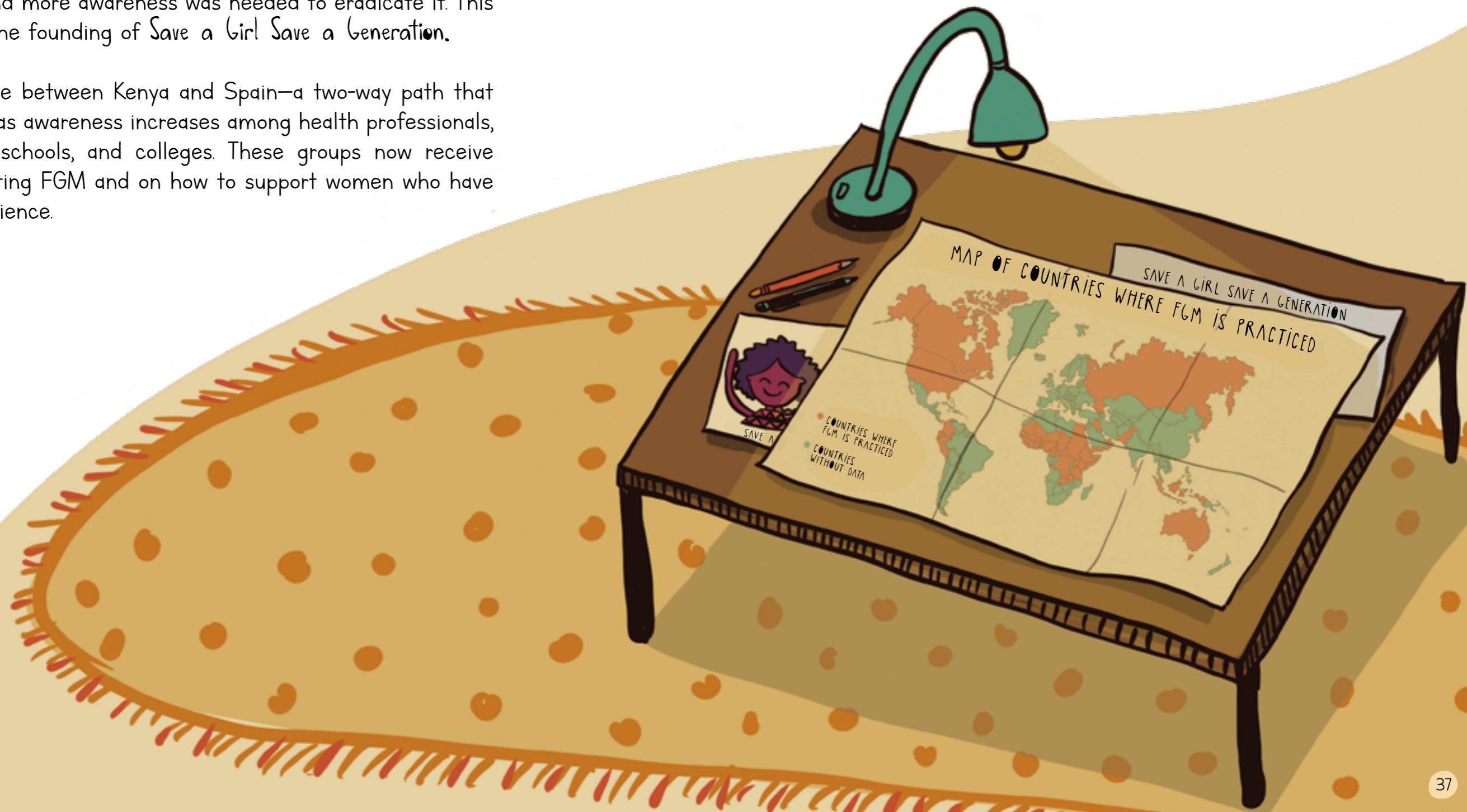
Will you join me?



ASHA ISMAIL AND SAVE A GIRL SAVE A GENERATION

Life changed again for Asha when she remarried. She lived for a time in Ecuador before eventually settling in Spain. There, she had two more children. She encountered health professionals who didn't know how to treat survivors of female genital mutilation (FGM) and realized that women needed spaces where they could feel supported and accompanied in their healing journey. She also discovered that the silence surrounding FGM was not limited to her own community—it was a global issue. Millions of women across the world were affected by this practice, and more awareness was needed to eradicate it. This realization led to the founding of *Save a Girl Save a Generation*.

It became a bridge between Kenya and Spain—a two-way path that continues to grow as awareness increases among health professionals, law enforcement, schools, and colleges. These groups now receive training on preventing FGM and on how to support women who have survived this experience.



Other Survivors Who Fought for a World Without FGM



Reene Bergstrom
American doctor and FGM survivor.



Nawal El Saadwi
Egyptian feminist, doctor, and writer; former Director General of Public Health in Egypt.



Masooma Ranalvi
Indian lawyer and founder of We Speak Out.



Patricia Tobón Yagari
Indigenous lawyer from the Emberá people, involved in Colombia's Truth Clarification Commission.



Waris Dirie
International supermodel, author, and former UN Special Ambassador against FGM.



Adriana Kaplan
Argentine anthropologist, founder of the NGO Wassu Gambia Kafo.



Sophia Abdi Noor
Kenyan Parliament member who helped promote legislation against FGM.



Ifrah Ahmed
Irish-Somali activist and founder of the Ifrah Foundation.

THE BIRTH OF A MOVEMENT

Save a Girl Save a Generation is a non-governmental organization that fights against female genital mutilation, child exploitation, forced marriage, and all forms of violence against women. Founded and directed by Asha Ismail in 2007, it is led by women who were once denied the right to speak and protect themselves as children. Their mission is to ensure that no other girl endures what they did.

Since its inception, the organization has launched numerous projects across both Kenya and Spain, helping to prevent FGM for many women and girls. Alongside other organizations, it has developed educational and action-oriented resources to raise awareness and inspire change:

- How to Talk About Female Genital Mutilation:

<https://www.savegirlssaveageneration.org/imagenes/2022/II/How-to-talk-about-FGM.pdf>

- Getting to Zero Female Genital Mutilation in Africa:

<https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/42276-doc-GettingtozeroFGM-FinalWebPages-small.pdf>

- CHAIN Intervention: FGM and Forced Marriage:

https://www.savegirlssaveageneration.org/imagenes/2022/II/CHAIN_Intervention-chain_Madrid_ENG.pdf

- Mariama-Story and Video (Watch on YouTube):

<https://unaf.org/publicaciones/cuento-mariama/mariama-ingles/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yfm2HCroOtc>

- UNICEF Technical Guidance on FGM and Education:

<https://www.unicef.org/media/108641/file/FGM-Education-Note-English-2021.pdf>

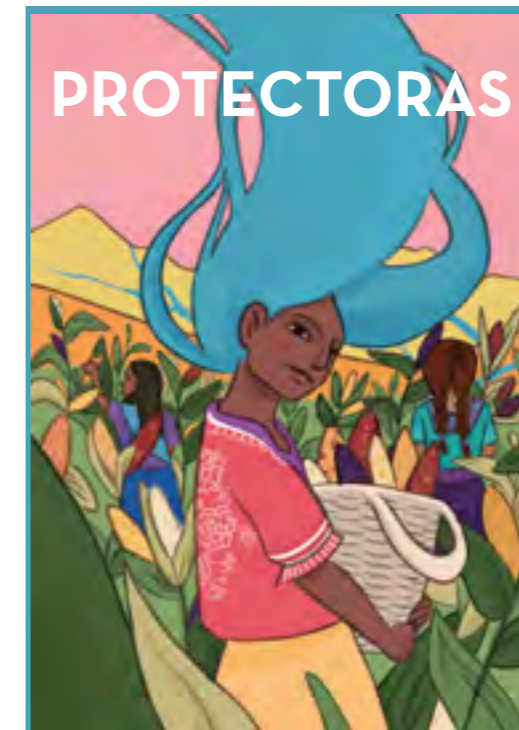


STORIES FROM THE VALIENTAS COLLECTION

The VALIENTAS Collection is a series of illustrated stories spotlighting contemporary women who are building a better world. Each volume combines visuals and narrative to present harsh realities with hope and empathy, drawing more people into the movement for change.

PROTECTORAS: The first volume, highlighting women human rights defenders in Abya Yala (Latin America) who are forced to flee their territories when confronting powerful transnational extractive corporations.

PODEROSAS: The second volume, featuring the Las Poderosas theatre company and other Guatemalan women who used performance to transform from victims into survivors of gender-based violence.



WHY IS THIS STORY SO IMPORTANT?

Female genital mutilation (FGM) is one of the most extreme violations of the human rights of women and girls. It is a form of patriarchal control intended to restrict and define the roles of women in society.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines FGM as procedures involving the partial or total removal of external female genitalia, or other injuries to the genital organs, for non-medical reasons. FGM has devastating physical and emotional consequences: hemorrhaging, infections, painful intercourse, difficulty experiencing sexual pleasure, complications during childbirth, and even death.

Today, over 230 million women and girls worldwide have undergone FGM, most in about 30 countries—22 of them located in Africa, the Middle East, and parts of Asia. These are not just statistics; they are real people with real stories—230 million realities of pain and resilience.

Although banned in 44 countries, FGM continues in secret or through cross-border practices—where girls are taken from countries where the practice is outlawed to others where it is still legal.

The spread of FGM into the U.S., Canada, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand through migration shows how globalised societies often lack awareness and readiness to address this issue.

The Istanbul Convention (Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence), in force since 1 August 2014 and ratified by Spain, is the first legally binding instrument in Europe addressing violence against women in all its forms—including FGM. It demands that states take comprehensive responsibility for prevention, protection, and prosecution.



THE SILENT BREAKERS: A STORY OF COURAGE

THE SILENT BREAKERS tells the story of a woman who believed that things could be different—who dared to prevent her daughter from being mutilated. It's a testimony of her strength, her search for her own voice, and her generosity in sharing her lessons to transform lives.

Asha Ismail shares her experience with FGM not just to recount her trauma, but to eradicate it. Her journey continues to inspire other women since the day she protected her daughter Hayat from the same fate.

Her story is, in fact, the story of millions. All over the world, brave, groundbreaking women have made this human rights violation visible and sparked changes to stop it. 6 February is recognized as the International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation. But the fight is far from over.



This story calls on us—through empathy, awareness, and sisterhood—to walk with Asha and countless women toward the total eradication of FGM.

Support the Mission. With the proceeds from the sale of GROUNDBREAKING GIRLS, we will provide financial support to Save a Girl Save a Generation, helping them continue their educational and preventive work in their mission to end FGM. Because we want this organization to keep protecting future generations.

Asociación MÁS MUJERES
www.masmujeres.org

Facebook:
Colección Valientas—Más Mujeres

Instagram:
[@masmujeressarea](https://www.instagram.com/masmujeressarea)





A TOOL FOR CHANGE

The illustrated story *THE SILENT BREAKERS* shows us—through a true account—that change is possible, and that injustice can be prevented. It inspires us to rise up and shout: Not one more! It urges us to defend the physical and emotional integrity of every girl and woman in the world.

Like all stories in the VALIENTAS Collection, this is more than just a narrative—it's a tool to transform minds and touch hearts, and to engage more people in building a world where women live free from all forms of violence.

