Now 29, Zahra lives in Brussels where she works for GAMS, a group committed to the elimination of sexual mutilation. She talks to women seeking advice on medical and psychological issues. Zahra explains that the silent, almost sacred bond of the atrocious experience can create between women a sense of sisterhood in pain.

Several years ago, she unhesitatingly underwent an operation to open her vulva, and she hasn't looked back since.

"When a woman consults with a little girl sitting beside her, like a lovely flower, I want to make sure it doesn't happen to her."

At the age of 16, Zahra Ali Cheik was forcibly infibulated, an operation that involved the mutilation of much of her genital region.

She was a good deal older than is usual for girls in her native Djibouti, where some 98 per cent of women have had their clitoris and inner labia removed and their labia majora stitched up by the time they are 13.

Infibulation of this sort is the most extreme form of female circumcision, and is practiced mostly in Djibouti and Somalia. The reasons for it include the weight of tradition along with such social pressures as finding a husband, coupled with male fears about female sexual desire and pleasure and misguided ideas about hygiene. All contribute to an act that is both barbaric and a violation of human rights.

"I want to make sure it doesn't happen to her."

"My grandmother resented my father for meddling in women's affairs."

The story of Zahra's ordeal is one of a progressive father, a headstrong grandmother, and a mother who was torn between the two and has now become one of her daughter's fiercest supporters in her campaign to stop the practice.

Of six sisters, the two youngest were not cut and sewn when they were little because their father had put his foot down. "He had been to America," says Zahra, "and heard about a child who had died from hemorrhaging after the operation. He told my mother, 'if you touch the little ones, I'll throw you out of the house.' He spoke to an Imam who confirmed that the Koran does not say that women must be circumcised.

"She told us we were dirty and impure," says Zahra, "and she withheld her affection, unlike with our other sisters. I'd have a bath and put scent on, and tell her 'you can't say I'm dirty now.' But she'd reply 'you'll be dirty as long as you have that thing hanging between your legs.'"

Their grandmother's rejection - she wouldn't hug them, wouldn't play with them - was painful to the two little girls, although they didn't really understand what it meant. This isn't a society where girls and women talk openly about their bodies, and Zahra was confused and felt painfully different from other girls.

Girls who have been infibulated urinate through a very small orifice that is opened wider on their wedding night, either by the husband's thrusts or, if that doesn't work, with the help of a razor blade. Urination is slow, and may require pushing the lower stomach with the palms of the hand. As a result, urine dribbles out almost soundlessly. "At school, my schoolmates would say, 'are you sure you are a girl?' when they heard me pee. You wouldn't be a boy by any chance?" But that's as far as it went, and Zahra didn't know precisely what it was her father was protecting her from.

"She mentioned my father for meddling in women's affairs."
Her grandmother invited her home…

She was to understand only too well at the age of 16, when her grandmother invited her along to her home country, Somaliland, during the school holidays. "I was so delighted that I convinced my little sister to come along too." They thought this was an unexpected treat, but in fact they were about to be infibulated against their father's will. The operation was done on the hut's earth floor, the needles were of acacia, a woman sat on top of them, they were screaming and kicking. The fear and pain were terrible, but above all, Zahra was horrified that she had unwittingly got her sister involved.

"And then I somehow drifted outside my body and I didn't feel anything," she says. "Then I fainted." They were put to bed, their legs bound with rope so the scar tissue could form. For three weeks they were fed, washed, disinfected and unable to move off the mattresses. "We started to walk slowly, step by step, and then our grandmother was very loving, full of affection," says Zahra. But when they returned home and their father found out what had happened, he threw the grandmother out of the house. "I clung to him, I said don't do that, let her stay, and he simply said, 'One day you'll understand.'"

“I wanted my body back”

Her father’s words suddenly made sense to her after she had emigrated to Brussels and was sick in hospital with a glandular infection that wouldn't go away. The stitches in her neck kept up opening again, and the doctors couldn't understand why. A nurse asked her if she had been excised, which might explain the problem. The violence of her periods, the vomiting, the coughing, was complicating the healing. For the first time, Zahra talked about it to a doctor. She wanted to be desinfibulated at once. "I had to have that operation - they had made my body into something I didn't want. I wanted my body back."

After the operation, which involves cutting along the scar tissue, her menstrual problems disappeared. "I love the rushing sound of my urine," she says.

An embarrassment to her fellow exiles

When she went public and started to give interviews, she suddenly became an embarrassment to her fellow exiles from Djibouti and Somalia, two countries that form a single community. She was physically attacked in the street. Women asked her why she hadn't at least waited until she had found a husband. She was told she would make others girls into sluts like herself.

At first, her visits to GAMS were a form of therapy because there she found women who listened to her and gave their support. Then she decided to raise the taboo and put words to the hitherto unnamed problem by talking about sexuality and mutilation with the aim of helping other women, and particularly little girls. "My biggest victory," Zahra says, "is that not one of my nieces has been excised."

Copyright: European Commission 2013