

“I lost my family. I lost my country. I lost my life.”

SORAYA MIRE, Somali-born filmmaker, on undergoing female genital mutilation at age 13



Soraya Mire, 43, of Atlanta says she is still healing from the physical and psychological wounds of being cut as a child in her native Somalia. "It is the ultimate child abuse," she says. She has made one film about the millenium-old practice and is working on another, about her personal experience.

“My Story is Like Millions of Others”

By Jane O. Hansen johansen@ajc.com

She was a 13-year-old tomboy, a daddy's girl who wanted to be a fighter pilot when she grew up. Her father, a military general in Somalia before he was overthrown, had nurtured her free spirit, she says. He had tried to hard to protect her from going under the knife. She even overheard him once urging her mother to put an end to that tradition. But he was out of town the day her mother suggested they take a ride.

Soraya Mire, now 43, remembers every detail of that day. A tiny woman with curly black hair, a lilting voice and large, liquid brown eyes, she sat recently in an Atlanta coffee shop and dispassionately described the event that redirected her life and eventually brought her to the United States, where she would dare to challenge the tradition herself.

“I lost my family. I lost my country. I lost my life,” Mire says.

“My mother had 12 children. Nine of them survived. She had infibulation. With each of them, she had to be restitched. My mother is a tough woman, well educated. She's wealthy, but she's traditional.

“We were raised behind a gate. My father was a general. He traveled a lot. My father changed every time one of us was infibulated.”

She had three brothers and five sisters. “All the girls were mutilated.

“I had always been a curious child, always reading. My father said to my mother, ‘I beg you to stop this. Break that cycle.’ But that woman is stamped with the culture. This is her womanhood.

“My father went to Rome when I was 13. I was always my dad's child. He was raising me to be a boy in a way.”

While he was away, her mother suggested they go out. “I said, ‘OK, she is going to buy me a gift.’ We passed all the stores, and we ended up in a strange house in Mogadishu. It had a very long, dark hall. I got chills. The fear was something was going to happen.

“At the end of the hall there was a door,