

Malliana



Mariama

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Based on the testimony of Ibrahim Bah and original script for short film”
Mariama” written and directed by Mabel Lozano

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Unión de Asociaciones Familiares (UNAF) is a pioneering NGO reference in Spain in the work of the prevention of female genital mutilation. UNAF works from a human rights perspective to combat the inequality and gender violence affecting all women and girls around the world.

As part of our work, we have created this short story based on the real-life account of Ibrahim

Bah, who

features in the short documentary film, *Mariama*, produced by UNAF and directed by Mabel Lozano.

We invite you to read this tale in the hope that it raises awareness of the practice, helping to

prevent
and eradicate it.

Ascensión Iglesias Redondo
UNAF President



Dedication:

AMIYADARO

(Thanks everyone)

Ibrahim Bah

Hi!

My name is Ibrahim Bah. I was born in the Republic of Guinea but have been living in Spain for several years. My country is in Africa: It's big and beautiful; it has a sea, mountains and more than 15 different languages... But it also has things I don't like. One of those things is the fact that in Guinea – just like in every other country in the world – women have fewer rights than men, and there are very harmful customs and traditions for them. I would like to help make a change and build a better country and planet for my family and everyone else in the world, and so I'm going to tell you a story. It's the story of the girls of my village, of my sister and my daughter, Mariama.

Will you join me?





It all began the day my sister, Fatima, went missing.

Fatima was just a little older than me. We were very close: We used to play together; we went to school together and did chores together in the house. Every morning, she would come into my room and wake me up by stroking my head.

That morning, I woke up on my own and looked around the entire house for my sister but couldn't find her. Where could she be? It was school holidays and it wasn't a market day...



“Where’s Fatima?”, I asked my mother.

“Fatima had to leave. She’s a woman now”, she replied, looking at me with a very stern look in her eyes.

“A woman”, I thought... What did she mean by that? “A woman, a woman”, I muttered to myself, but I didn’t understand...



I later found out there's a day in Guinea where a group of women from the village take several girls to the woods to perform a ceremony and make them adults in everyone's eyes.

This ceremony is performed on all girls. It is considered a custom and tradition passed down from grandmothers to mothers and from mothers to their daughters. The men uphold the tradition and make sure the ceremony is carried out.



What they do to girls during this ceremony, as dictated by the custom, is to cut away a part of their bodies... a part of their genitals. This is always done by a special and highly respected woman who has learned the practice from her mother and grandmother... It really, really hurts and affects a girl's health for the rest of her life.



Once they have done the “cut” in all the girls, they all return to the village to live with the woman until their wounds have healed.

That’s a long time! Their wounds can take over four weeks to heal!

I was missing my sister and decided to go and visit her at the house. Fatima was sad about the pain but also happy to have followed the tradition, because she had now become one of the women in the community and could get married.



My sister Fatima died when she was fourteen.

When someone dies in my country, we don’t ask why; it’s thought to be the will of God.

Many women die during childbirth as a result of genital mutilation, but nobody asks what has happened or what caused the woman to die... Five of my mother’s daughters have died and nobody has ever asked why.



My sister's death left me very upset. I missed her a lot. I missed her in the morning when I woke up alone. I missed the songs she used to sing on the way to school and her laughter, which sounded like a morning birdsong.



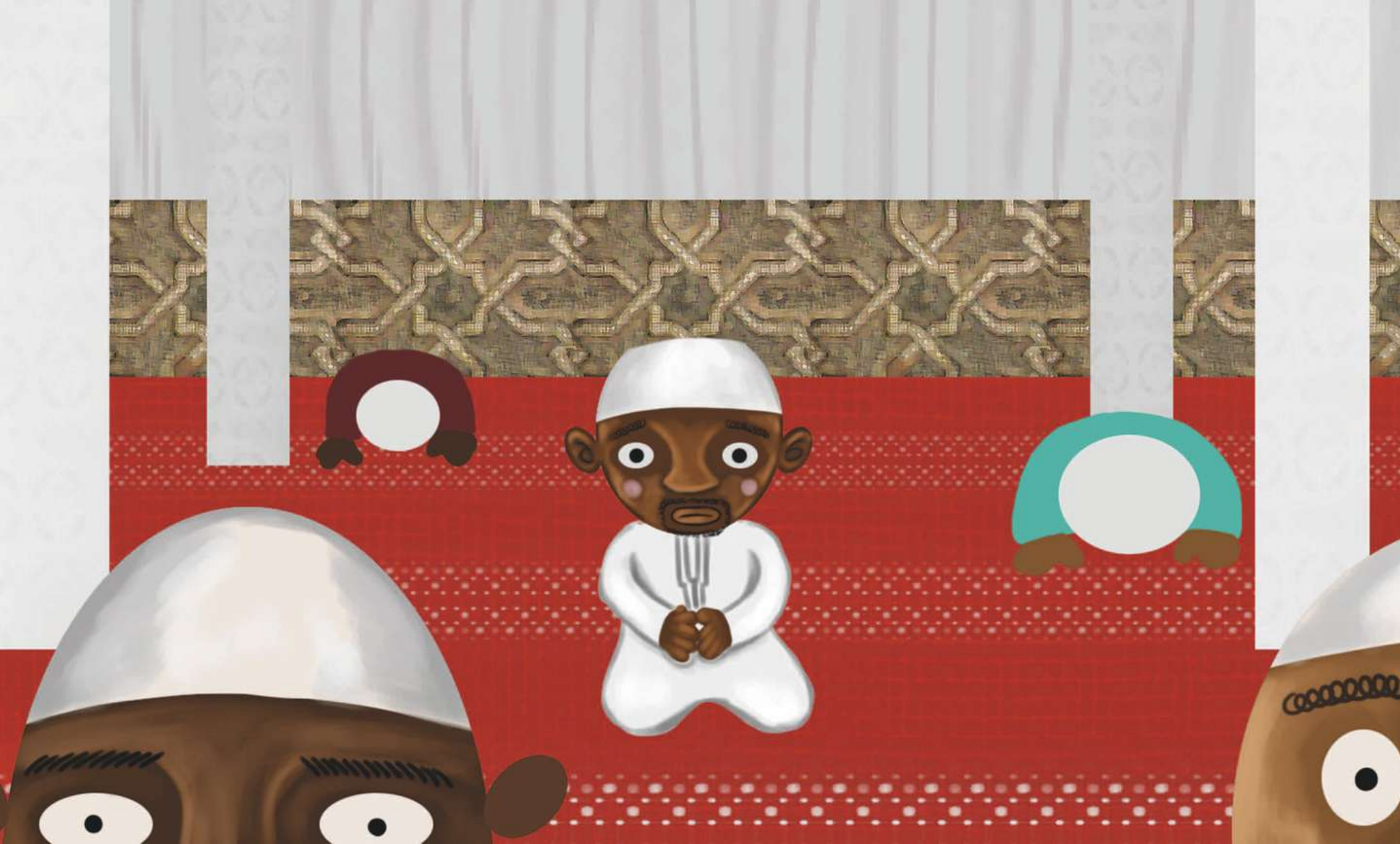
I never told anyone but I always thought her death had something to do with : "... had to do with what they did to her that day in the woods – genital mutilation – because my sister was never the same afterwards. She seemed to be fading away like candlelight and was getting weaker by the day.



When I met my wife, Aisatu, I found my happiness again. She lived in the neighbouring village. We were introduced to each other at a family meeting. We couldn't stop looking at each other all evening. The days passed by, we walked and talked together and our love started to blossom. We were lucky and our families agreed with our decision to get married, because you don't get to choose the person you marry in our country; your family decides for you.



When Aisatu became pregnant with our first daughter, I remembered what had happened to my sister, Fatima. I didn't want my daughter to suffer or die. I would not let them do the same to her.



I started asking some of my friends what would happen to my daughter if she didn't follow the "cutting" tradition.

"Don't even think about it, my friend! You've got to do it! Don't you know that women who don't follow the tradition are worthless?!"

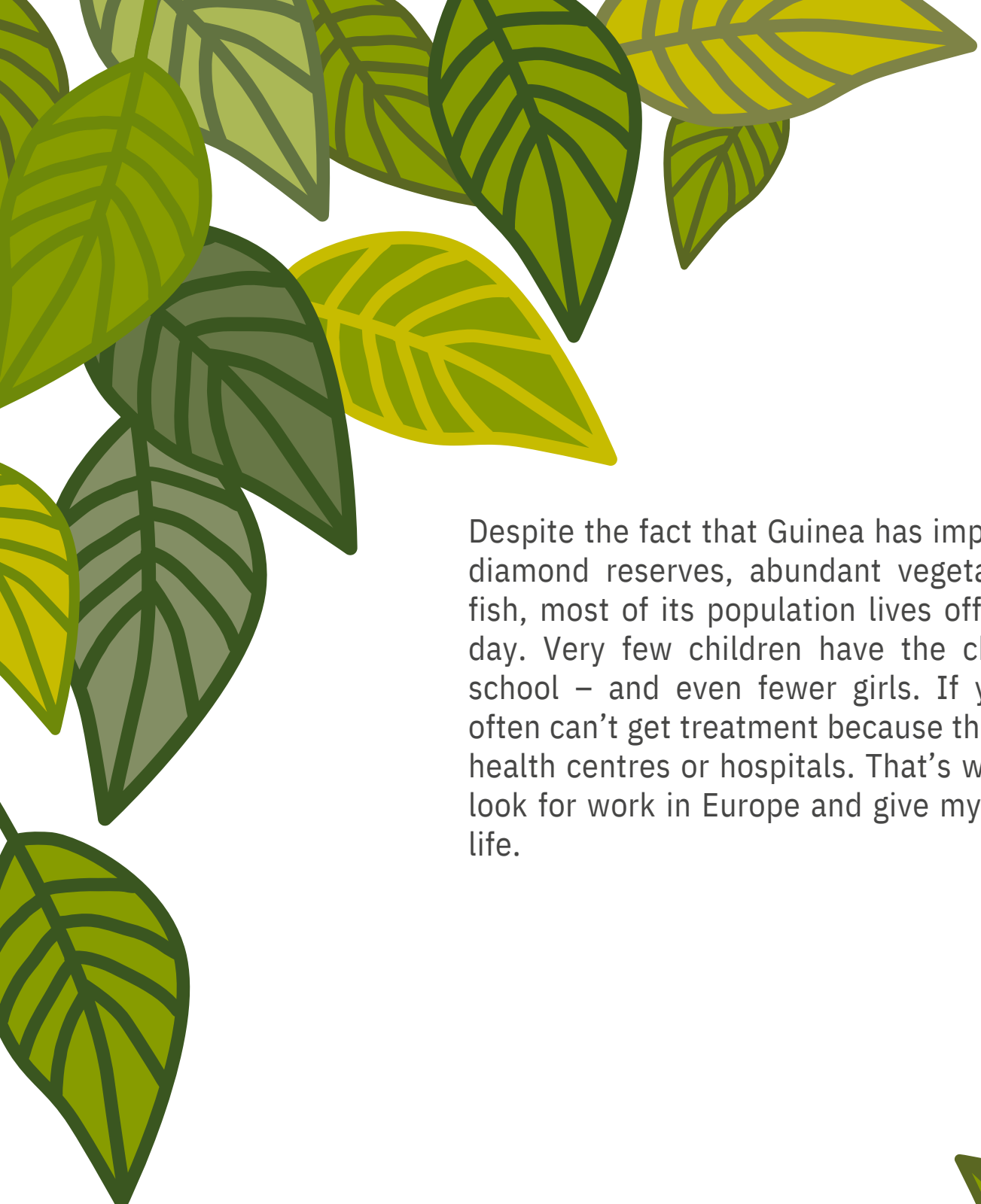
"They smell! They're dirty! Rotten!". They all shouted at me in rage.



"And you are commanded to do so by our religion, Islam", they added.

"That's not true!", I replied. I'm a good Muslim, I respect the law of Islam and have faith, but this custom does not appear in the Koran.

"As Muslims, we are not commanded to damage the bodies of our daughters!"



Despite the fact that Guinea has important gold and diamond reserves, abundant vegetation and great fish, most of its population lives off less than £2 a day. Very few children have the chance to go to school – and even fewer girls. If you get ill, you often can't get treatment because there aren't many health centres or hospitals. That's why I decided to look for work in Europe and give my family a better life.



When I arrived in Spain, I still had muddled ideas about women who had not undergone genital mutilation. I could hear my friends inside me saying what people used to say about those women in my village, but I soon realised that none of it was true.



It's hard to find your place in a new country. You don't know its language and customs, and everything is different: the tastes, smells, clothes and greetings... I found a lot of people who helped me, and a lot of them were women. It was women who gave me the information I needed, taught me Spanish, helped me find a home and work, and helped me get my "papers"... And all those women had not gone through the "ceremony" and hadn't had a part of their body cut away.

That's when I thought, "It's not true! They're wrong!" Genital mutilation has nothing to do with a woman's honesty or kindness.



I became more and more convinced...

**We had to put an end
to the genital mutilation of girls!**



Sexuality is very important. It's something we're all born with and have for the rest of our lives. It involves our bodies, feelings and desires. We use sexuality to communicate, express ourselves, develop relationships and feel good. Or bad.



Genital mutilation takes away women's right to enjoy their sexuality and live full lives. Women have the right to be happy!

Thankfully, an increasing amount of young people – boys and girls – are saying “no” to genital mutilation.



The days went by and my daughter, Mariama, was quickly becoming old enough to attend the “cutting” ceremony. I couldn’t stop thinking about it during the day and at night – it was driving me mad. I knew I didn’t want that for my daughter and was willing to do anything to prevent it from happening, but I also knew this would mean breaking away from a lot of things and challenging something very important.

I told my wife the story of my sister and what I had learned about the consequences it had on women’s health and lives. She struggled to understand at first, as she’d been told since she was little that women whose genitals had not been mutilated did not deserve people’s respect.

Refusing to follow the custom of genital mutilation is considered an offence to your family, people and ancestors, and to the beliefs that live on through the centuries. You then get ignored, insulted and criticised. But despite all that, my wife and I soon agreed to face up to this unjust tradition – for the love of our daughter.





I had many sleepless nights. I started to think my mum or aunt were going to take Mariama away at any moment to mutilate her, because in Guinea, the father's family has more power than the girl's own mother.



Every time a family member told my wife it was time to perform the “ceremony” on Mariama, she would convince them that it was still too soon and that they would have to wait a little longer. She also told them they had to wait until I returned to Guinea to celebrate together, because it is a very important day over there; there is a party, and people sing and give presents.



I started looking for someone who could help me bring my daughter over. I knocked on all doors – NGOs, associations and city councils – looking for anyone who could help me save Mariama from genital mutilation.



I managed to find an association that was willing to help me. But it wasn't easy. Weeks turned into months, and months became years... The process of getting "papers" is very complicated and with every day that went by, Mariama became one step closer to the date of mutilation.



I eventually managed to get all her documents in order, but the most difficult step was yet to come: finding Mariama and getting her safely on the plane.

I phoned the consulate to apply for her visa.

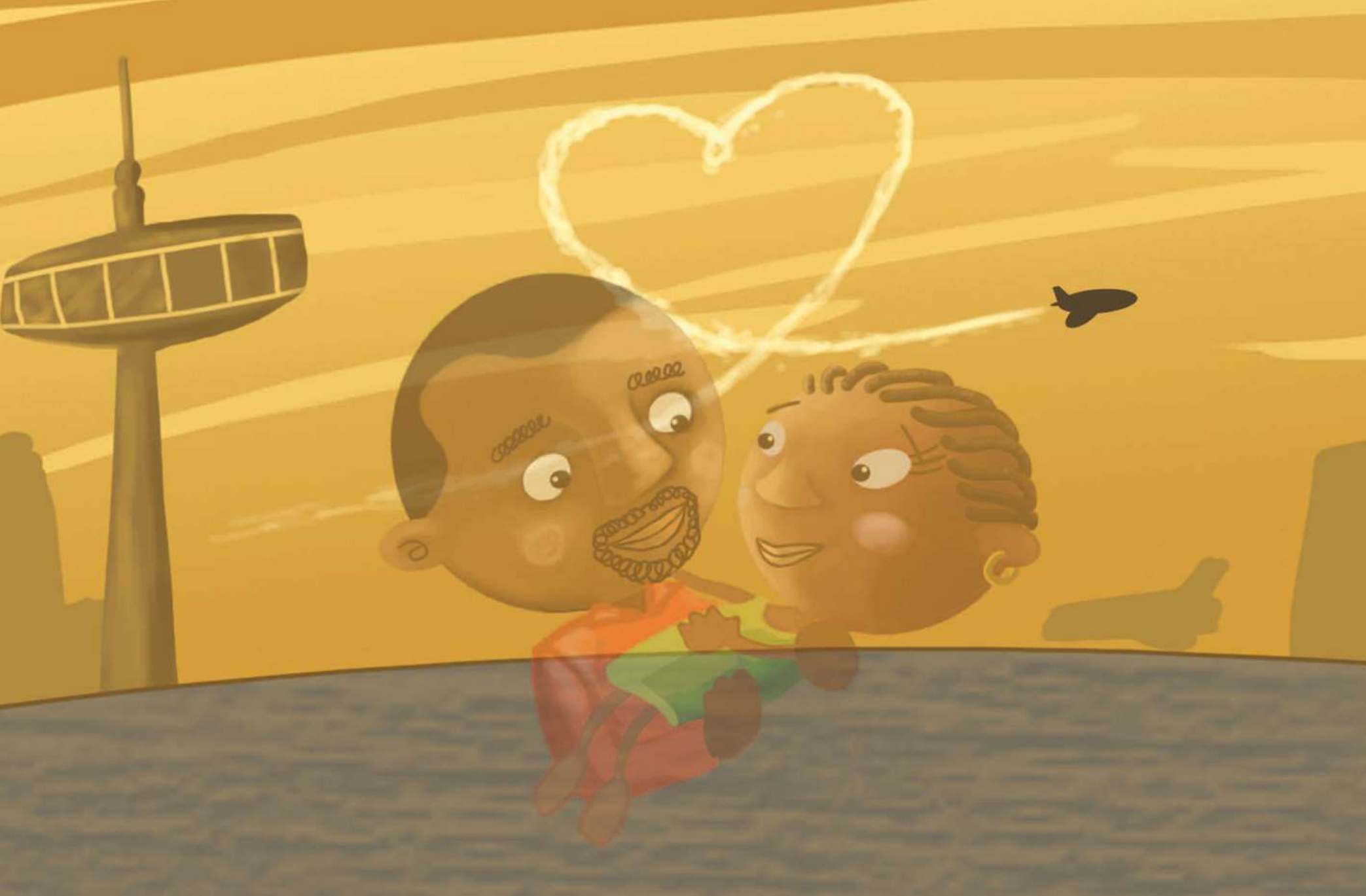
Despite having all the necessary permits, I couldn't bring myself to tell them I was going to take her from

However, the hardest thing of all was telling my mother. I phoned her from the airport. I was now with Mariama and about to board the plane.

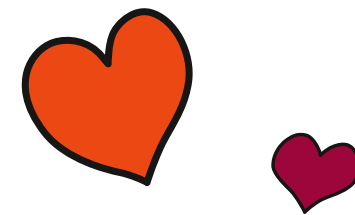
"I'm going back to Spain with my daughter", I told her, my voice trembling as I said it.

Her response was extremely hurtful... She told me that nobody had ever done such a thing and asked me what was going through my head to just take the girl away like that...

I can assure you that I still carry my mother's words in my heart to this day.



My wife and I managed to save our daughter from female genital mutilation, but three million girls around the world suffer it every year. Two hundred million women and girls all over the world are still suffering the consequences.



We need to do something to change this situation.

I'm not scared of breaking from traditions.

I know that the people who keep doing this do not know they are causing harm, because who would want to hurt their son or daughter? Nobody.

People have to understand that the harm they are causing their girls will scar them for life and could even kill them, just like what happened to my sister, Fatima. Despite this, lots of people still think they're doing the right thing for their children.

That isn't true!

We can do the right thing for our daughters by preventing genital mutilation!

ELABORADO POR:



DECLARADA DE UTILIDAD PÚBLICA

Our goal is family well-being

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