



Online people power

People power in the form of online petitions is taking the world by storm. Avaaz, who now have nearly 36 million members across 194 countries of the world, have made commendable strides in overturning global humanitarian, social and political injustices. Change.org, another particularly effective site, has been making significant waves too.

In their most successful campaign to date, they recently secured 234,300 signatures calling on the powers that be to eradicate FGM (female genital mutilation) in the UK. FGM, otherwise known as female circumcision, is incorporated into coming-of-age rituals, and was criminalised accordingly in the UK in 1985. However, to this day not one person has been held to account for an FGM offence; which is somewhat at odds with the fact that since 2011 over 3,000 women have required urgent treatment in British hospitals following genital mutilation. Evidence also suggests that 24,000 girls under the age of 15 are presently at risk, and that there are around 66,000 victims of FGM in the UK alone.

Somali-born 17-year-old Fahma Mohamed, a trustee of the charity Integrate Bristol, decided to take action. She launched a petition urging Michael Gove, the secretary of state for education in the UK, to write to every school in the country requesting that they educate students about FGM before the summer holidays. In FGM-affected communities, the summer holidays are known as the “cutting season”, with girls subjected to a “cut” on their home turf or abroad. The long break from school supposedly allows time for recovery, and keeps the ordeal hidden from their teachers; leaving only the psychological and physical scars to linger.

On 25th February, Mohammed was finally granted an audience with Gove, and, along with praising her “fantastic work” and “inspirational campaign,” Gove pledged to do everything possible to end FGM. He started by undertaking to write to all primary and secondary schools in the UK, urging them to be "alert to the possibility of a girl being at risk of FGM, or already having suffered FGM", adding that girls at risk of the practice may not even know they are in danger; hence a need to introduce FGM education before summer holidays, and create an environment in which victims feel they can seek support. And so presents yet another shining example that one determined crusader, the internet, and 234,300 signatures is all it takes...