

# Being free to make choices

## Zainab Osman

Zainab Osman (45) fled the Somalian civil war as a desperate, pregnant young woman. Her flight unintentionally brought her to the Netherlands, where she remained. She never went back. Today, she is town councilor in the municipality of Wijchen, works as a home care nurse and is the mother of three children. Her life story reflects the choices a person can make in freedom or under oppression and the human power that creates opportunities in hopeless situations, through positivity and resilience.

## Freedom, the difference between life and survival

Making choices in freedom. In our Dutch context, it seems such a natural thing. What you do for a living, the people you live with, what your day looks like, what you look like yourself, what paths you choose, what you think, what you say and who you are. There are choices to make in almost everything we do, but we cannot take these for granted. Not always, not for everyone and certainly not everywhere.

What does it actually mean, being free to make choices? I really couldn't explain this to my mother in Somalia. She has never known a life in freedom. As her daughter, I am the first of generations of women in our family who is actually free. For me, it has been almost 25 years since I first experienced this feeling of freedom. A single question was sufficient to make clear what the word freedom really means. And to make clear what a difference it makes. The difference between survival and life!

This experience I am talking about took place here in Wageningen, at the town hall registry office. The question was: "Mrs. Osman, what name do you want give to your child?" This question came as a complete surprise. For the first time in my life, I was allowed to make a choice of my own. I couldn't handle it at the time. The question was so overwhelming that it scared me to the bone.

Within the group-oriented Somali culture in which I grew up, I only knew statements, instructions and rhetorical questions. In fact, everything was or would be decided for me. Whether or not I was allowed to go to school, when and with whom I would marry, what my life would look like and whether I would live or not. You would not be given any choices as an individual, and certainly not as a girl. Choosing for oneself would have meant: exclusion, not belonging anymore, no protection, no help, and no access to facilities. It would certainly have meant one thing: the end.

Yet, occasionally, I long for this time, because even though I sometimes felt that something was wrong, I didn't know or want a different life. Family, relatives, neighbors and acquaintances: people cared for one another and did not need help from outsiders to care for the elderly and the sick. There was warmth, compassion, a sense of belonging.

People sometimes say that happiness was more common in the past. Unfortunately, it wasn't. But the little bit of happiness we had was shared. Just as we shared misery and poverty, which made it feel only half as bad. My mother always said: "As long as you are clean and whole, nobody will notice that you have an empty stomach". Only much later, I realized what her message was. The message was that you cannot always choose everything in life, but that you can choose how to deal with a

situation. Looking back, I realize that this attitude makes a real difference in a war. That it's even more precious than living in freedom.

I certainly did not want to leave home. But the announcement came anyway. My mother looked at me and said: "Don't worry, wherever you go, you will make a life for yourself". I realized then that I would never come home again. She must have thought, "Every child I can save counts". But I would rather have stayed with her. I was young and had never been anywhere else, but I relied on my mother's judgement when I was handed over to a trafficker. A stranger, who I had to obey. I was so numb that I cannot actually remember how it went exactly.

By coincidence, I ended up in the Netherlands where it soon became apparent that I was pregnant. Pregnant by the man I married as a girl, just before departure. I remember that the marriage request came to my family. My father had died, so my uncle discussed the request with my mother. She then told me that I was a marriage candidate. I remember that she was happy for me, because it was a man with a good reputation. A man who offered good future prospects to my family. He was able to support the family financially, which was more than welcome since we lost our father as breadwinner. As for me..., even though the man was 20 years older, I felt honored, because he had a good reputation. Shortly afterwards, I was married in the Somali way.

Today, almost 25 years later, freedom of choice is still not self-evident. Not always, not for everyone and certainly not everywhere. My 16-year old niece is in the same situation now as I was then. Pregnant with a child from an arranged marriage. I feel her sorrow, her concern and her powerlessness. I sometimes get angry if I don't succeed in explaining to my family how this will affect her life. That they are depriving her of the freedom to make choices, to choose her own path. The same thing that happened to me, my sisters, my mother and my grandmother, is happening again and again. I sometimes wonder how many generations it will take before there is room for different views? Why do people stick to these customs and why can't we discuss it? If I wasn't able to empathize, I would become embittered. I do understand that it is not always a question of unwillingness, but of powerlessness. I realize what wealth it is to be allowed to choose. That it is not a matter of course, but a luxury that not everyone can afford.

That is why it is so important that we continue to work at our freedom. Even after having lived through 75 years of freedom and 100 years of voting rights. Because, although I realized that I was on my own when the civil registry officer asked his question, I also recognized immediately that this was the start of my life in freedom. Despite all the sorrow and uncertainty, it gave me a primal strength that subordinated all misery and uncertainty to the feeling of freedom. A feeling that I never wanted to let go. The word 'freedom' should never lose its power and meaning. Freedom is not just about our own freedom, but also about the freedom of others. Only if we cherish that thought, can we live in freedom.