

Panther Prints

Sexuality & More

by Jennifer Caseley & Steve Ellis

THIS WEEK: Female Genital Mutilation

Imagine this. You are a prepubescent girl living in Northern Africa and you are being confronted with an awful dilemma. You must either subject yourself to the excruciating pain of having parts of your external genitalia hacked and torn off and having your vagina sewn partially shut, or risk being shunned by your community and family and never being able to marry. Furthermore, you have no choice in the matter. You will be mutilated. You will be violated.

This is hardly a fair situation for someone of such an innocent age, let alone any age, to have to face. Still, it is this very situation with which an estimated 110 million women on this planet have had to deal. And, an additional 2 million girls are subjected to this torturous atrocity each year.

The negative consequences for the women who undergo genital mutilation (also called female circumcision) are many. They range from physical effects such as haemorrhaging, chronic infections, and scarring to psychological and social problems. For these women sex is agonizing. Many circumcised women die during childbirth.

Female circumcision is not limited to Africa. It is a predominantly Moslem ritual which is also carried out in parts of the Middle East, including Oman, South Yemen and the United Arab Emirates, and in Asian countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, India and Pakistan.

PHYSIOLOGY

According to a report released by the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women in March of 1994, there are three types of genital mutilation.

First, there is sunna circumcision, or clitoridectomy. In this procedure the prepuce of the clitoris, sometime referred to as the foreskin, is removed.

In intermediate circumcision, often called excision, the clitoris and parts of or all of the labia majora and minora are removed and the two sides are stitched together, leaving a variable opening to permit the passage of urine and menstrual discharge.

Finally, pharaonic or infibulation circumcision has two subclasses. The classical type involves removing the clitoris, labia minora and majora, the two sides of the wound being brought together with sugar, egg, thorns, or a palm reed splint called a gundura. The modern type involves the removal of the same parts as the classical, with the exception that only the anterior parts of the labia majora are removed. The two sides of the wound are brought together by stitching with catgut or silk.

Put the medical terminology and its euphemizing effects aside. You can imagine how anguishing a process this would be.

SOCIOLOGY

Why do some societies force their women to participate in such an awful ritual? Put simply, female circumcision is a tactic of male proprietariness.

The practice is maintained as a way of protecting a woman against her 'oversexed nature', as one uncredited source put it. It keeps her from walking the sinful paths of promiscuity and prostitution. It honours the traditional opinion that a man should have control over every aspect of a sexual relationship.

Even the women in these societies think mutilation is essential in order for a woman to have a fulfilled life. They say that mutilation is done out of love. They have been brain-washed.

THE CURE?

According to an article in Canadian Woman Studies, written by Rogaiya Mustafa Abusharaf, efforts have been made to ban female genital mutilation since 1946, when the British tried to eliminate some forms during their colonial rule of Sudan.

The practice has been outlawed recently in many western countries. France(1978), Sweden(1982), and Great Britain(1985) all have legislated laws concerning the issue. They addressed the issue because of the rising number of immigrants and refugees arriving from countries where female circumcision is practised. Canada, as of March 1994, did not have any legislation against female genital mutilation.

In the countries where the practice is a tradition, efforts to curb the practice focus on re-education. If the traditional brain-washing is purged from the heads of the women in countries where circumcision is practised, it will be difficult for the practise to be passed on to the next generation.

Groups such as UNICEF and the World Health Organization have been instrumental in this re-education by organizing conferences and seminars for African women's organizations and other international groups.

Despite these efforts, it will be a long time before this monstrosity is just an unpleasant memory. In the meantime, it is our duty as students -- the next generation of leaders -- to ensure that we do all we can to stay abreast of the issue and to speak out

when we can.

Remember the following quote. It is taken from a posting on a newsgroup called Tharunka, and it is uncredited.

“‘Female circumcision’ or female genital mutilation as it is more correctly called is a social, political, control over the sexual behaviour all over the world. To deny women the basic right to their sexuality, and their bodies is to deny them the rights to having strength, power and identity. The inability of women to have this inhabilitates them, they remain under the heels of patriarchal structures.’”

For more information about female genital mutilation, visit the Women's Centre on Campus.

Thank-you to Ruth of the Women's Centre for providing so much helpful information for the writing of this column.

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