

Ancient rite or a wrong?

Genital cutting of girls becomes an issue in Georgia, nationwide

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In downtown Atlanta recently a mother brushed away her tears while her daughter begged an immigration judge not to send her back to Kenya. The young woman's uncles had vowed to cut her genitals in an ancient rite, both women said.

Less than a mile away, another mother begged Georgia legislators to outlaw what is known as female genital mutilation. Please spare children from being maimed as her young daughter had been, she asked.

And around a dining room table in Midtown, a critically acclaimed filmmaker from Somalia recently listened as four women and an 8-year-old girl read the script for her next film. It's her own story of the life-changing day when, at age 13, her sexual organs were cut off and sewn shut.

"I'm still healing," says Soraya Mire, 43. "It's not like I'm done."

From Atlanta courtrooms to the Georgia Capitol, female genital cutting represents a wave of issues Georgians face as the state becomes home to a growing number of immigrants. The sensitive subject engenders cultural and religious debates involving female sexuality and the most intimate details about a woman's body.

It's an issue that Georgia officials, more used to debating school funding or road projects, don't especially want to talk about. But it is one they likely will hear more of. No one knows how many sexually mutilated women and girls live in Atlanta and the United States. It is a hidden, private matter, often called "female circumcision", although in some forms it is more akin to castration.

Worldwide, an estimated 2 million girls a year have their genitals cut, ranging from removal of the skin around the clitoris - the female organ corresponding to the penis - to the total cutting away of the clitoris and vaginal lips and the stitching together of the external genitalia in a procedure called infibulation.

Most of the affected girls are from Africa, where the practice remains widespread in 28 countries. But it is also found in some Middle Eastern countries, such as Israel, and in some Muslim groups in Indonesia, Pakistan and India.

Various sects of Christians, Jews and Muslims have at times embraced the custom. Today, some Muslims religious leaders continue to support the practice, saying it honors Muslim women. Others condemn it, arguing that it has no religious foundation.

UNDER THE KNIFE

Soraya Mire emigrated from Somalia, one of the five countries in Africa where female genital mutilation is most prevalent. These are the estimated percentages of girls and women who undergo the procedure in their native countries.



ELIZABETH LANDT / Staff

"It's not the religion telling them to do this, it's custom," says Imam Plemon El-Amin, leader of one of Atlanta's largest mosques. "I see nothing within the Quran or within the practices of Prophet Muhammad whatsoever that supports female circumcision."

Importing the practice

Despite growing international opposition, immigrants are bringing the entrenched custom to Europe, Australia, Canada, and the United States. In this country alone, an estimated 168,000 girls and women have undergone the procedure or are still at risk, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The number is growing as the number of immigrants from practicing countries grows.

"Yes, it is in the community," says Laila Mohamed, who until last month was a case-worker for Refugee Family Services in Clarkston, where she worked with women from Somalia, Ethiopia, and other African countries. "Most of the women still are believing in this tradition."

The millennium-old practice has been performed for a variety of reasons: to stem female sexual desire, preserve virginity or rid the body of the clitoris, believed by some to be an unhealthy organ. The cutting remains a prerequisite for marriage in many cultures.

Mohamed, who grew up in Sudan, where infibulation is common, was herself cut. Today she considers female genital mutilation a form of domestic violence and is among those who want it outlawed in Georgia.