

THE SUNDAY PROFILE

In our tradition, a woman gets more trust when she's stitched. Let me give you an example. In the morning, leaving your apartment, would you leave your door open or locked? A woman is not a door, but she's property to someone. She's my property.

—All, a 32-year-old Somali man, in "Fire Eyes," a documentary by Soraya Mire.

By RENEE TAWA
TIMES STAFF WRITER

That day, her mother tricked her. "I'm going to buy you some gifts," she said. Soraya Mire, then 13, obediently got into the car with her mother and a driver. She wondered where the guards were. She was a general's daughter in Somalia. Always, they had armed guards. But she said nothing. Somali girls learn to say nothing.

The driver stopped at a nice house in Mogadishu. A doctor's house, her mother said, taking her inside. They walked down a long hallway to what looked like an operating room. The doctor tied her feet down with rope so she could not move.

"Honey," her mother said, "it's about time."

Time to become a woman.

That day exacted a terrible toll on her body, on her soul. That day, the doctor cut away her external genitalia. He sewed the raw edges together, leaving only a pinhole opening for urination and menstruation. He created a chastity belt of her own flesh, so she could be stitched shut until marriage, in an ancient rite of passage known as female circumcision.

Soraya Mire
endured a painful
rite of passage—
female
circumcision. But
now she's fighting
back. Through
her powerful
documentary and
lectures, she's
forcing people to
confront an
ancient and still
common practice.

Like her mother, and her mother's mother, and so on, Mire's destiny was to endure that day in silence—until she set out to change it.

Now Mire is a 33-year-old struggling Los Angeles filmmaker whose documentary on female circumcision, "Fire Eyes," premiered last year at the Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah. Her one-hour film also played to full houses throughout the country and Europe, at such venues as New York's Lincoln Center, Stanford University and Laemmle Theatres' Sunset 5 in West Hollywood. This year, it is scheduled to air via public television in Germany, England, Poland and France.

She is a leading spokeswoman against female circumcision, decrying it as barbaric on ABC-TV's "Nightline," on a PBS special and on an American Medical Assn. video. For her work, she was awarded the Winnie Mandela Leadership Award for Upliftment of African Women by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New