

Genital Mutilation Common in 28 African & Middle Eastern Nations

Clitorectomy

In Man, on the Ivory Coast of Africa, Marthe Bleuis is a 12 year old, shy and pretty little girl with a heart-shaped face. She enjoys being casually dressed in flip-flops and a lacy white pinafore trimmed in pink satin. But already her body is taking on the soft, rounded shape of womanhood. And these days she wants more than anything to do what she believes stands between her and being grown up. She wants to have her genitals cut off.

In the lament of pubescent girls everywhere, she says that all her friends are getting ahead of her. Their parents have sent them into the woods where village women "cut what is down there," she said, gesturing to her lap.

After the rite, the girls are showered with gifts of money, jewelry and cloth. Their families honor them with sumptuous celebrations where hundreds of relatives and friends feast on goat, cow and chicken.

"It is the custom, and I want to respect it," she said.

The tradition of female genital cutting is woven into the everyday life of the Yacouba people here, just as it is for hundreds of ethnic groups in a wide band of [28 countries](#) across Africa. In Man, it is part of a girl's dreams of womanhood, a father's desire to show off with a big party and a family's way of proving its conformity to social convention.

Benin	Egypt	Kenya	Sierra Leone
Burkina Faso	Eritrea	Liberia	Somalia
Cameroon	Ethiopia	Mali	Sudan (North)
Central African Republic	Gambia	Mauritania	Tanzania
Chad	Ghana	Niger	Togo
Cote d'Ivoire	Guinea	Nigeria	Uganda
Djibouti	Senegal	Zaire	

The rising chorus of international condemnation of this age-old practice, voiced in recent years from the podiums of United Nations assemblies in Vienna, Cairo and Beijing, echoes only faintly in places like Man, a tourist town deep in the interior, surrounded by the craggy, cloud-shrouded Toura mountains.

On the coast, in the cosmopolitan hubbub of Abidjan, and in other parts of Africa, the debate about female genital cutting is slowly moving into the public arena. Only in the last few years have African nations even begun measuring the prevalence of genital cutting as part of national health surveys or in other research.

In the Ivory Coast and the Central African Republic, 2 out of 5 women have been cut. In Togo, it is one in 8. In the Sudan -- the only country that already had reliable national estimates -- it is 9 out of 10. In Mali, it is 93 percent.

"It looks like women in most countries are nearly as likely to undergo these procedures as their mothers and grandmothers," said Dara Carr, a researcher at Macro International Inc., the Maryland-based company that is assisting the countries in conducting the health surveys. "But there are some seeds of change."

In the Sudan, the prevalence of the practice has dropped from 96 percent to 89 percent over the course of a decade. And there has been a shift toward a less severe form of genital cutting. In Togo, a survey found that half of the mothers who had been cut wanted to spare their daughters. And while three-

quarters of the women in Mali favor continuing the practice, a majority in the Central African Republic want to end it.

But what women want and what they have the power to accomplish are very different things. In most of the countries where tens of millions of girls and women have been cut, organizations have sprung up to combat the practice. Like mosquitoes attacking an elephant, the small, ill-financed groups are struggling within societies where men rule women's lives, and old people, including old women, rule the young.

There are, for example, Ivoirian laws against physical violence that could be used to stop the cutting, said Idrissa Fofana, a high-ranking official in the justice ministry. But the government has no interest in imposing them on unwilling families, antagonizing village chiefs and family elders who are pillars of society and guardians of tradition.

"If there was a complaint from parents that their child had been excised against their wishes, the justice ministry could pursue the case," Fofana said. "But if there is no complaint, we cannot disturb the peace of the family and the village."

Like most Yacouba girls in Man, Marthe Bleu is an eager initiate. But even if she resisted, her father, Jean-Baptiste Bleu, a trim, genial, neatly dressed waiter at a local hotel, would insist on her cutting.

"If your daughter has not been excised, the father is not allowed to speak at village meetings," he said. "No man in the village will marry her. It is an obligation. We have done it, we do it and we will continue to do it."

"She has no choice. I decide. Her viewpoint is not important."

The Bleus have not yet chosen who will cut Marthe, but a few minutes from their home, through a maze of dirt pathways, lives Madeleine Douan, 47, one of the local excisers.

The tall, sinewy woman refused to show the ceremonial knife she uses, but brought out other accouterment of her calling: a long strand of metal bells and cloth sacks filled with bottle caps. While she cuts a group of 10 to 15 girls on the ground of the forest, other women shake the noisemakers, covering the cries of pain. Mrs. Douan herself sings traditional songs.

She introduced several of the girls she had recently cut. Natalie Sahi, 15, sat on the side of her thigh outside Mrs. Douan's windowless mud hut to avoid putting direct pressure on the wound. "I wanted it to happen," she said. "It's natural."

Patricia Vehgolou, 13, her hair neatly braided in corn rows, buried her face in her hands and would only giggle when asked if the cutting hurt. Mrs. Douan explained that the girls must swear before leaving the forest that they will not share the secrets of the rite with the uninitiated.

The purpose of the cutting, Mrs. Douan said, is to help insure a woman's fidelity to her husband and her family. "It's a tradition from antiquity," she said. A woman's role in life is to care for her children, keep house and cook. If she has not been cut, Mrs. Douan said, a woman might think instead about her own sexual pleasure.

The Origins: Pride, Tradition And Ignored Risks

It is not known when, where or why the practice of female genital cutting originated. Scholars believe that it started in Egypt or the Horn of Africa more than 2,000 years ago, before the advent of Christianity or Islam. It then spread west across the continent, all the way to the Atlantic Ocean, with the migration of dominant tribes and civilizations.

The practice knows no class or religious boundaries. Most prevalent among Muslims, it is also performed by Christians and followers of traditional African religions. The practice is more widespread among the illiterate, but it is also common among the educated.

The nature of the cutting, the reasons for it and the age at which it is done vary greatly by region and ethnic group.

The practice involves amputating some or all of the external genitalia - the clitoris, the small genital lips and the large ones - diminishing a woman's ability to experience sexual pleasure. It can also cause serious health problems, including hemorrhaging and infection.

Typically, the cutting is done by traditional village women without anything to dull the pain. But sometimes, when midwives or nurses are brought in to do the job, they apply a local anesthetic.

Many believe that cutting helps insure a girl's virginity before marriage and fidelity afterward by reducing sex to a marital obligation. Often, people follow the custom simply because it has always been done.

"Children are born and the parents do it," said Awa Kone, a Malian washerwoman in Abidjan, who plans to take her baby daughter, Kadia, to an exciser in the near future.

Infibulation

In the Horn of Africa - Djibouti, Somalia, the Sudan and parts of Ethiopia - the most severe and harmful form of cutting, infibulation, is practiced.

In this procedure, the clitoris and some or all of the small genital lips are cut away. Then an incision is made in the large lips so the raw surfaces can be stitched together, covering the urethra and most of the vagina. Only a small opening, as tiny as a matchstick or as large as a small fingertip, is left to pass urine and menstrual blood, said Nahid Toubia, a Sudanese surgeon who is an associate professor of clinical public health at Columbia University.

Infibulation comes with its own set of rationales. Some men say the artificial tightness heightens their sexual enjoyment. The smoothness of the scar is found esthetically beautiful. And the stitching itself forms a chastity belt of flesh.

There is a common thread to all forms of cutting. Economic realities underlie the practice. Women typically have no way to survive without a husband. Parents insist on the rite so their daughters are marriageable.

"People do know the health risks," said Ellen Gruenbaum, a medical anthropologist at California State University, San Bernardino. "They have seen people get sick. On rare occasions, a girl might die. But you will not change people's minds by preaching to them or telling them they're primitive. They undertake the risks for reasons important to them."

After the cutting, more pain lies ahead. Women who have endured the more extreme forms of the practice have particularly agonizing and complicated deliveries. The scarring narrows the vaginal opening and makes the flesh inelastic, doctors and midwives say. The pressure of a baby's emerging head often causes grave tearing of the vagina.

Women who bear a child in their villages without a doctor to widen the vagina surgically sometimes arrive torn and bleeding at the Maternal Health Center in Man. On occasion, the tearing goes up into the urethra and bladder, down into the anus, as well as side to side. The women must then be sent to a hospital in Abidjan for surgery.

Clautilde Yenon, a midwife at the health center, tried to think of a way to convey the excruciating damage. Finally, she had an idea. She picked up a sheet of paper and ripped it into jagged pieces.

The Policy: Official Reluctance To Oppose Custom

Ivoirian officials, working in skyscrapers that form Abidjan's sawtoothed profile, talked a good deal in interviews about the evils of genital cutting, but then conceded that their ministries have done little to put words into action.

The ministry of public health is planning a campaign to educate people about the health consequences of the practice, often referred to here as excision and sometimes as female circumcision, but there is as yet no budget or staff to carry it out.

Narcisse Ehossou, an obstetrician who heads the ministry's reproductive health program, told this story to explain the slow pace of change:

"A French doctor of public health once visited the western Ivory Coast. He was horrified by what he saw, people with goiters on their necks. When he returned to the district offices, he asked, 'Why don't you study this?' He was told, 'We don't study it because it is normal.' "

For women, excision [clitorectomy and infibulation] is normal. "You have to be patient in Africa. Just as it was difficult to convince people to accept family planning, so it is with excision."

It is not surprising that the Ivoirian government is loath to take on genital cutting, despite the existence of laws that could be used to stop it. Like most African countries, the Ivory Coast is composed of many ethnic groups. Some practice it. Others, including that of President Henri Konan Bedie, the Baule, do not. There is generally great tolerance for differing traditions, and a reluctance to disturb the sometimes uneasy political balance.

"A judge's role is to maintain public order, but by combating excision, he would disturb public order," said Fofana, of the justice ministry. "We cannot impose the law suddenly. The law we have was inspired by the French colonizers. It does not take account of customs."

Such views aggravate Tomam Constance Yai, a speech therapist for deaf children and the Ivory Coast's leading crusader against genital cutting. "For our government, violence against women is not a public disturbance," she said ironically.

Ms. Yai, whose grandmother was an exciser, founded the Ivoirian Association for the Defense of Women's Rights four years ago. It is a grand name for a small group of volunteers who fight ingrained cultural practices like forced marriage, polygamy and genital cutting.

With wily charm, Ms. Yai is pushing the government to act, careful not to favor the aggressive prosecution of excisers or offending parents. Such tactics, she believes, would only drive the practice underground. Rather, she wants to bring an educational campaign to the government-controlled television stations, as well as schools, hospitals and clinics.

International pressure gives her group what little strength it has, she said: "If it were only our association, our government would ignore us. They would say we're just a small group of foolish women."

So far, the pressure has mainly taken the form of verbal denunciations at United Nations gatherings. In Beijing, at the Fourth World Conference on Women, Hillary Rodham Clinton called it a human rights violation "when young girls are brutalized by the painful and degrading practice of genital mutilation."

Some human rights groups maintain that Western governments should link foreign aid negotiations with progress on the issue. But in the Ivory Coast, diplomats from the United States, which provides no direct aid to the Ivoirian Government, though it is supporting an AIDS research project, and France, the country's former colonial ruler and biggest aid donor, are reluctant to press the Ivoirian government on the issue.

"It's a matter principally for local society to determine the extent to which these practices are to be tolerated," said Thomas G. Hart, a spokesman for the United States Embassy in Abidjan.

Emmanuel Gagniarre, a spokesman for the French Embassy in Abidjan, said: "This is a marginal problem. It's important, but to feed people is probably more important. I don't think it can be an issue when negotiations take place on aid provided to African countries."

The Ceremony: Excruciating Pain, Joyous Celebration

In Man, a girl's rite of passage culminates in a day of joyous, enveloping pageantry. But the powerful pull of belonging to the group does not always overwhelm private doubts about the intimate consequences of the practice.

Jean-Baptiste Bleu, the waiter who plans to have his daughter cut, said he has slept with women who have not been cut and married one who has. A woman who has been cut is difficult to arouse, the sex often dry, he said. Yacouba men talk among themselves about how to excite their wives -- what places to caress, what words to whisper.

Without equivocation, he said, sex with an uncut woman is much better. "She is happy, joyous," said Bleu, who is 39.

Still, he believes the cutting is a duty. His daughters must endure the rite courageously, without showing their pain or fear, he said.

His wife, Yvonne, 31, said she will defer to his wishes, but she despises the practice because it deprives women of sexual sensitivity. "It is up to my husband," she said. "We live in Africa. The man makes the decisions about the children."

Several other women whose families rent rooms around the same courtyard as the Bleus pulled up a chair to join the talk. Not all were as emotionally torn.

Margarite Lou, 31, fondly remembered the celebration that followed the rite - the lavish gifts, the applause of the villagers, the feast. And she lustily asserted that she very much enjoys sex, despite having undergone one of the more extreme forms of cutting. Even her scar is sensitive, she said.

Mrs. Lou dismissed notions that the cutting is harmful to a woman's health, passing on an old wives' tale. "It's easier to give birth if you're excised," she said. "There are no lips to close the opening of the vagina."

Twelve-year-old Marthe Bleu was then playing across the courtyard, as innocent of the bawdy talk that day as she is of sex itself. For her, womanhood beckons. And genital cutting is the portal she must walk through to enter it.

"I feel my friends are better than me because they have been cut down there," she had said earlier, her hands twisting in her lap. "It's very difficult, but I want to do it."