

YOUNG HUMAN RIGHTS REPORTER OF THE YEAR

Torture masked as tradition

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"Harmful practices, such as genital mutilation, constitute a serious threat to the health of millions of women and girls worldwide and violate their fundamental rights". So said Ban Ki Moon, United Nations Secretary-General, addressing the issue of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). 3 million girls between birth and age 15 across Africa, Asia and the Middle East are at risk of circumcision. These girls are rarely asked for their permission, and are almost never forewarned. They are simply taken aside by older women, and often an untrained woman slashes at their genitalia with rusty, sullied "medical" instruments, causing extreme pain and leaving them at risk of infection, shock, haemorrhage, infertility, childbirth complications, and even death.

There are no medical advantages of this procedure, which can also include sewing the vagina to preserve the virginity of the girls. These stitches must be removed each time the woman gives birth, or else she risks the threat of her baby becoming brain-damaged or both her and her baby dying.

Those in favour of this "tradition" claim it is an integral part of their culture and customs. This belief is the driving force behind women in other parts of the world, including Britain, who decide their daughters should be violated in this way. Others are convinced it is an Islamic religious requirement, and is sacred. However research has shown that FGM predates Islam, Christianity and even Judaism. This custom has simply been rebranded by a small minority as "religious", when in reality Islam does not and has never supported it.

Waris Dirie knows only too well the dangers of circumcision. She is a human rights activist who campaigns incessantly on behalf of women like herself: those scarred, emotionally and physically in the name of tradition. "Female Mutilation has no

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cultural, no traditional and no religious aspect." She asserts. "It is a crime which seeks justice". At the age of 5 she, like 98% of all girls in Somalia, was mutilated. Speaking about the ordeal, she said: "Mama tied a blindfold over my eyes. The next thing I felt my flesh was being cut away. I heard the blade sawing back and forth through my skin. The pain between my legs was so intense I wished I would die." Somehow, she managed to flee her country aged only 13 and is now a special UN ambassador for the elimination of Female Genital Mutilation.

Unfortunately, she is one of a small minority. The World Health Organisation has estimated that for every 1,000 babies delivered in 6 African countries, 10-20 deaths are directly due to FGM. The only way to stop this epidemic is through education. Rural communities must be made aware of the reality of circumcision. Many, many women are dying as a result of ignorance and this has to change. The suffering from Female Genital Mutilation has to end. As Dirie explained "everyone (has) to be enlightened about the status of genital mutilation: not culture, but torture."