

## I N T E R N A T I O N A L

# Mutilation of girls drops gradually through Africa

By Susan Kreimer

Special to Sentinel-Voice  
WASHINGTON (NNPA)

— On a day she will never forget, Soraya Mire expected to receive a “gift” in her native Somalia. She was only 13 years old and anxiously awaited her mother’s promise.

The present turned out to be her worst nightmare. What she saw upon entering the doctor’s house was a surgery room. Shock froze every bone in her body, yet she couldn’t flee.

“How can you run away when the person who loves you the most — and is supposed to be protecting you — is right there allowing this to happen?” says Mire, who is now 40 and lives in Los Angeles, where she’s working on her second feature film about female genital mutilation. “So, at the moment, you say, ‘Maybe what she’s doing is right.’ But then you know that deep down in you, something awful is going to happen.”

The pain under local anesthetic was so horrendous that she wanted to die. Infibulation, the extreme form of female genital mutilation, involved removing the entire external genitalia and stitching together the vulva, leaving only a small hole.

In Somalia and Sudan, 98 percent of women in Mire’s generation were mutilated, most by age 5 because their mothers and grandmothers believed the younger the better, thinking the torture would be easier to forget. Mire’s family waited so long because her father, who had seen the suffering inflicted upon his three older daughters, wanted to spare the other three. Her mother, driven by peer pressure, wanted it nonetheless.

Slowly but surely, cultural norms are changing. Although more than 90 percent of girls in Somalia, Egypt and Mali are mutilated, the practice is declining in other countries. In Kenya, only about 40 percent of women are mutilated. Most undergo Type I, which is the partial or total removal of the clitoris, or Type II, which is the removal of the entire clitoris and the cutting of the labia minora.

In northeastern Kenya, where the ethnic groups are the same as those in Somalia,

Type III, infibulation, is very prevalent, says Ian Askew, senior associate at the Population Council’s office in Nairobi, the country’s capital. In other parts of Kenya, Type III is extremely rare, and the past two decades have seen a trend moving from Type II to Type I. More commonly, people are ceasing the practice altogether. Finally, the messages about dire physical and emotional scars are sinking in.

“In the past, a lot of messages were oriented around saying how dangerous it is to people’s health,” Askew says. “The problem with that is, people will practice a less severe form rather than stopping it. There’s far more emphasis these days that it contradicts basic human rights for good health and bodily integrity.”

Girls in communities where female genital mutilation is practiced often have no choice. It’s a prerequisite to marriage, a rite of passage that renders them viable members of their society. On a chosen day, a circumciser might come to the village, or the girls are brought to a neighboring village for local festivities or traditional celebrations during which the mutilation can occur.

There’s often no warning or means of escape, and girls tend to accept the tradition because it’s culturally ingrained. However, an increasing number of girls are mobilizing to stop female genital mutilation and rejecting the practice within their communities.

More than 130 million girls and women around the world have undergone genital mutilation, a practice some say began 5,000 years ago. At least another 2 million are at risk every year. The mutilation, generally performed without anesthetic, may have lifelong health consequences, including chronic infection, severe pain during urination, menstruation, sexual intercourse and childbirth and psychological trauma. Some girls die, often from bleeding or infection.

Female genital mutilation is practiced in at least 28 countries in Africa, as well as in Indonesia, Yemen, in a few communities in other regions of the world and in countries with African immigrant com-

munities. Many countries, including those that take in these immigrants, have outlawed or are working to ban the practice.

Women known as female circumcisers overwhelmingly perform genital mutilation. In Sudan, midwives typically carry out the tradition, and in Egypt, barbers often do it.

“It’s a harmful traditional practice,” says Taina Bien-Aime, executive director of Equality Now in New York City, which works to protect the human rights of women and girls worldwide. “People sometimes attribute it to religion. It’s not mandated by any religion. It’s not sanctioned in the Koran or the Bible. It’s very important for people to understand that it’s a human rights violation.”

To help end the practice, midwives and traditional healers are encouraged to look into other avenues of generating an income. Also, new adolescent rituals in parts of Africa are replacing mutilation. Ceremonies continue to honor a girl’s induction into womanhood, teach her to cook and become a wife and mother, but without the cutting.

In Senegal, a holistic and nondirective education program called Tostan, founded in 1991, has empowered villagers to lead a movement against female genital cutting. A staff of more than 600 Senegalese teach democracy, human rights, hygiene, health and management skills in national languages, said Tostan’s director, Molly Melching. Since the first village made a declaration in 1997, 1,271 villages — more than 25 percent of Senegal’s practicing communities — have abandoned the cutting.

“Many more declarations are scheduled within the coming five months in all regions, involving many different ethnic groups,” Melching says.

Assistance from abroad goes a long way, too. The Godparents Association Inc. takes care of 40 to 50 girls in Uganda each year, says Rebecca Salonen, who coordinates the volunteer organization from her home in Bridgeport, Conn. By writing letters and offering monetary support, men and women of goodwill serve as  
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# Sudan’s leaders, rebels OK wealth-sharing deal

NAIVASHA, Kenya (AFP) — Sudan’s government and main southern rebel movement signed an agreement on sharing the oil-rich country’s wealth, a key component of efforts to end 20 years of civil war.

The accord, signed Wednesday in the Kenyan town of Naivasha, provides for an approximate 50-50 split of revenue from the country’s 300,000 daily barrels of oil and other income between the government and an envisaged autonomous administration in the south to be run by the political wing of the rebel Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA).

The deal is due to come into effect once a comprehensive peace accord is signed and to remain in force during an envisaged six-year interim period when southern Sudan will enjoy autonomy from the national government before holding a referendum on its future.

The SPLA has been at war with Khartoum since 1983 and the conflict has claimed more than 1.5 million lives and displaced some four million people.

Wealth and resources have played a key role in the war and have come to overshadow its ethnic, religious and political roots.

Wednesday’s deal was signed by chief negotiators from both sides, Idris Mohammed Abdelgadir for the government and Nhial Deng Nhial for the SPLA, an AFP journalist at the ceremony reported.

The signing was witnessed by Sudanese Vice President Ali Osman Taha and SPLA leader John Garang as well as Kenyan foreign Minister Kalonzo Musyoka.

“This agreement is a major achievement that takes us close to a fair and just agreement in our country,” Garang said at the ceremony.

“The Sudan peace process is truly irre-



Sudanese Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA) leader John Garang. Sudan’s government and the main southern rebel movement signed an agreement on sharing the oil-rich country’s wealth, a key component of efforts to end 20 years of civil war.

versible. We have surmounted another hill,” he added.

Most of the onstream oil in Sudan is located in the south, elements of whose predominantly African population took up arms again in 1983 against the hardline Islamic, Arabic regime in Khartoum, when a peace accord signed 11 years earlier collapsed.

As well as the division of revenues, the wealth-sharing accord covers details about the central bank’s administration and about a commission overseeing oil production.

“This is a tremendous development,” David Mozerky of the International Crisis Group think-tank told AFP shortly before the signing.

“But the toughest issue (of the peace process) remains on the table,” he said, referring to the future status of three disputed areas in central Sudan: Abyei, southern Blue Nile State and the Nuba Moun-

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