

FIGHTING FEMALE GENITAL MUTULATION/CUTTING IN ETHIOPIA'S SOMALI REGION

By Indrias Getachew



Hodan Abdi Mohammed is bitter, for good reason. At 20 years-old Hodan is the only one from among her friends who is not married and without children.

“All the girls my age are married but I remain single because people say that I am open,” said Hodan at a village meeting held to discuss the tradition of female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) organized in Faffan village by the Somali Region Women’s Affairs Bureau with the support of UNICEF. “I was not cut when I was little. If I had been married when I was 16 by now I would have four children.”

Tradition in Ethiopia’s Somali Region where Hodan lives prescribes infibulation, the complete excision of the female genitals after which acacia thorns are inserted into both sides of the wound to seal it shut, as a guarantee of a young girls’ virginity – a prerequisite for an honorable marriage.

“Everyday my mother and I are at war,” said Hodan. “I chastise her saying ‘you are the one who did this to me.’ Because I am not cut I am not able to marry, even in the future. I feel sorry that I am open. If ever I have a daughter, I will make sure she is cut and sealed.”

Every year, three million girls and women are subjected to genital mutilation/cutting globally, a dangerous and potentially life-threatening procedure that causes unspeakable pain and suffering. This practice violates girls’ and women’s basic human rights, denying them of their physical and mental integrity, their right to freedom from violence and discrimination, and in the most extreme case of their life.¹

FGM/C is practiced in varying degrees throughout Ethiopia. According to the 2005 Ethiopia Demographic Health Survey’s (preliminary report) 74.3 per cent of Ethiopian women between the ages of 15 and 49 have undergone some form of FGM/C.

Prevalence rates vary within the country from 27.1 per cent in Gambela region to more than 97.3 per cent in Somali region. In Ethiopia’s capital Addis Ababa, 65.7 per cent of women have undergone FGM/C.

The age at which girls are made to undergo FGM/C varies from region to region. In Amhara it is done during the first ten days of life. In Somali, Afar, SNNPRS and Oromia regions, girls are subjected to FGM/C between the age of seven to nine, or just before marriage between the ages of 15 to 17.

The main reasons for practicing FGM/C include: to regulate a woman’s sexual desire and ensure fidelity in marriage; to ensure virginity at marriage; to ensure that a woman is obedient and submissive; to fulfill rite of passage requirements into adulthood, without which a girl cannot be accepted as a woman and get married in some communities; in response to beliefs that circumcision has personal hygiene benefits; and in response to beliefs that women who are not circumcised are

¹ UNICEF, Innocenti Digest, Changing a harmful social convention: Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting, vii, 2005

prone to break household goods, as well as taboos against uncircumcised women handling grain, serving food and drinks for elders and other respected people of the society.



Asmah Mohammed, Deca Gire, Ferhia Deri and Hassina Tahir (left to right), all between the ages of 6 and 8, underwent infibulation, a form of FGM/C that is common in Somali and Afar regions of Ethiopia. Three days after their operation the girls remained secluded from the rest of the community as their wounds healed. Their legs remained bound together to ensure little movement so that both sides of the wound will seal shut, which could take up to one month.

“The day before yesterday they called us and told us that they were taking us to have our hair made,” says Asmah. “They told us to sit and then they held us down by force. They forced us to lie on the ground and cut us. They tried to comfort me telling me that I would get better – but it burned a great deal and I cried a lot.”

“After they forced us down and cut us we asked them why they were doing this to us,” says Hassina. “They just told us that we would get better and that we should lie down – that we would be given food and drink and they made us sleep. They didn’t say anything else to us. We are tied up and our parents have not allowed us to move about. We don’t wash. We just lie down all day. We only turn in bed. We have suffered a lot and it hurts.”



Asmah’s mother Bedria was not happy that tradition forced her to hurt her six-year-old daughter, but as she explained, she had no choice as the alternative would have been to ostracize her daughter and ruin her chances of finding a good husband and a secure future.

“Your child’s body is like your own body so when the razor cuts it is traumatizing,” says Bedria. “The reason [for FGM]? I am telling you what they say,” said Bedria. “If a man makes friends with a girl and they go together – she will become pregnant. There will be trouble. But if she is sewn up – no matter how many men come, nothing will happen. If someone comes wanting to marry your child and your child is open, you are not considered human. Everyone will insult you. But if she is sewn up – they will pay a lot of money for her and you will be respected. They will give camels because it means she is a virgin.”

Infibulation and customs that require resealing of the open wound following child-birth condemn girls and women in Somali region to a lifetime of pain and suffering.

“I experienced many problems when giving birth,” says Bedria. “Even before birth – when it penetrates the first time - it is cut in so many places. You don’t look forward to your wedding day, instead you cry. On your wedding day they cut you with a razor. And then when you are going to give birth, it is the same. The razor cuts you in so many places. When it is time for your period – it doesn’t flow. Your stomach gets sick. That means the blood doesn’t move. It becomes dirty and you get sick for three days. Your back – all your body parts ache. From our own experience we know that [infibulation] causes problems. However because it is the tradition we continue to do it.”

The Somali Women’s Affairs Office, with the support of UNICEF, is the main body working to end the practice of FGM/C in Somali Region. FGM/C is against the law in Ethiopia with statutes against the dismemberment of any part of the body enshrined in the constitution. Tradition, however, holds sway over the legal system in much of Ethiopia, including the remote and tradition bound pastoralist communities of Somali Region.

“Children get circumcised at five-years-old and then before they are of age they get married,” said Zuleka Ahmed of the Somali Region Women’s Affairs Office. “This is against the law however here tradition is stronger than the law. Our people are mostly pastoralist and they do not give the law much consideration.”

“If you ask why we have not been more successful in controlling this problem, the simple answer is that we have addressed it primarily from a legal point of view,” said Bjorn Ljungqvist, UNICEF representative in Ethiopia. “It is even in the constitution that it is not allowed – and it has been translated in the Family Law and now very recently into the Penal law, but we are learning that it is very dangerous to go only through a legal process because if people are not convinced they will hide away – they will not show that this is still going on. Instead we have to make sure that the legal provisions are there but we also have to make sure that people talk about it.”

Among the strategies being used to end FGM/C in Ethiopia are community dialogue sessions like the one in Faffan Village which bring together various segments of a particular community for discussion in an open forum. In areas where subjects like FGM/C are not openly discussed, the community dialogue process is allowing public discussion and the possibility of social transformation. It is hoped that communities will be able to reach consensus on the harm being inflicted on girls and make the collective decision to abandon the practice. Ending such a deep-rooted tradition does, however, remain an immense challenge.



Eighteen-year-old Kauser Abdulahi Kenedit joined the Faffan discussion from the nearby village of Gursum. “Since the time I was cut I keep bleeding all the time,” said Kauser. “My period is irregular and the blood does not flow freely. It is painful and leads to all types of complications. Before getting married we develop kidney problems. I am also afraid of getting married because I will have to be cut again. There will also be so many problems after marriage. I get scared anticipating what awaits me. I have already gone through so much and I am not even married – so much still awaits me.”

Fatuma Jemal, an older woman and mother of two daughters who have both undergone infibulation testified to the transformation that is beginning to take place as a result of the community dialogue sessions. The change that she describes, however, is not a complete end to the practice but the prescription of a milder form which still violates the rights of girls and women.

“In our community the practice is going down,” said Fatuma. “We have gone out to the rural villages to teach them. Now, instead of infibulation they are just cutting the tip of the clitoris. We have told them that it is not important to seal a girl. They are seeing lots of problems when they are giving birth. If they give birth five times they have to be torn open five times. The people have seen the problems of all that and the only choice is to accept the education. Now they are not resisting – they accept the education and agree to comply. We have organized a committee and women who continue with infibulation will be punished and we are monitoring all of this through the communities. When we see it happening we take them before the law. And so I am telling my sisters here to take this education use it to benefit their children.”

The Imam from the village Mosque adds a religious dimension on the subject. “I would like to inform our people that Islam does not allow FGM... As Muslims, when our religion says you have to abandon this practice– you have to completely abandon it. Otherwise you are not a disbeliever.”

Fateeh Mohammed Yassin, a single man in his early twenties, is among the participants at the Faffan Community Dialogue. Despite having attended several dialogue sessions, listening to the testimony of women who have endured great suffering as well as hearing the teachings by religious leaders that FGM/C is not prescribed by religion, Fateeh remains committed to the tradition. “I would like to marry a woman with the sunna type of cutting,” says Fateeh, referring to a less violent form of cutting where only the tip of the clitoris is cut. “I do not want a wife who has not been cut at all.”

The discussion turns back to Hodan who has by now heard the testimonies and perspectives on FGM/C, including regarding the lifetimes of pain and suffering endured by women who have undergone infibulation. “Hodan is fortunate,” many of them said, “she does not know it. Have you changed your mind about not being cut?” she is asked.

“Until I find a husband,” Hodan replies, “I will not change my mind.”