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Genital Cutting Shows Signs of Losing Favor in Africa

By MARK LACEY

NAIROBI, Kenya, June 7 - Isnino Shuriye still remembers the pride she felt years ago when she leaned over each of her three daughters, knife in hand, and sliced into their genitals.

Each time, as the blood started to flow, she quickly dropped the knife and picked up a needle and thread. Quickly, expertly, she sewed her daughters' vaginas almost shut.

"I was full of pride," she recalled recently. "I felt like I was doing the right thing in the eyes of God. I was preparing them for marriage by sealing their vaginas."

Now she feels like a butcher, a sinner, a mother who harmed her own flesh and blood, not to mention the thousands of other girls she says she circumcised in the last quarter-century as part of a traditional rite still common in Africa.

Slowly, genital cutting is losing favor. Parliaments are passing laws forbidding the practice, which causes widespread death and disfigurement. Girls are fleeing their homes to keep their vaginas intact. And the women who have been carrying out the cutting, and who have been revered by their communities for doing so, are beginning to lay down their knives.

Ms. Shuriye, an elderly mother of eight who is known far and wide in northeastern Kenya for her expertise as a genital cutter, is one of them.

When local members of Womankind Kenya, a grass-roots group opposing the practice, visited Ms. Shuriye's hut outside Garissa two years ago, she chased them off her property.

This was something her mother had done before her. She started as an apprentice while still an adolescent by holding down girls' legs for her mother to perform the rite, which opponents call genital mutilation. "I thought my mother would curse me from the grave if I didn't carry on the tradition," she said.

There were tangible benefits as well. She had prestige in her community and earned a good income, more than her husband did as a camel herder before he died of tuberculosis.

She said she had no use for those people who came around denouncing her way of life.

But the opponents were a determined lot. They knew that Ms. Shuriye was one of the longest-serving genital cutters around and that she held sway over the community. If only she could be converted, they figured, others would certainly follow.

Ms. Shuriye, a frail but feisty grandmother who wraps her head in colorful scarves, was rather set in her ways. Again and again she refused to hear their arguments.

"It was so difficult to change her mind," said Sophia Abdi Noor, the founder of Womankind Kenya, which works with the ethnic Somalis who live in Kenya's rugged North Eastern Province and has attracted local supporters throughout the region. "We knew she was respected, and we wanted her on our side."

Finally, the anti-cutting advocates tried a different tack. They showed up with religious leaders. Ms. Shuriye, a religious Muslim, could not chase them away. She sat down with some influential clerics in her community who had come to the realization that the tradition was harmful, and not dictated by or consistent with the teachings of the Koran.

The imams denounced the practice. They told her that the vagina was a part of the body, just as important in the eyes of God as an eye, a finger or a limb. Cutting it, they argued in their long session outside her home, is a sin.

They went even further. They told Ms. Shuriye that her sins required her to compensate the girls she had maimed. Each of them was due 80 camels, they said. Ms. Shuriye, prosperous by local standards but not that prosperous, was shaken.

She sobbed. Then she prayed. Finally she pleaded with the imams for a way out of her impossible situation. They said the only way to avoid paying the compensation was to seek the forgiveness of each of the girls she had cut.

That is when Ms. Shuriye turned from a cutter to an active opponent. She began making house calls on the girls who had gone under her knife. Many of them were women now. She explained her conversion and pleaded for their forgiveness. She cried each time, she said.

Most offered their blessings. A few saw opportunity in Ms. Shuriye's suffering and demanded the camels, which she did not have. And Ms. Shuriye was able to persuade a small number of the women in her tiny village of Ijara to join the cause.

Laws are not enough to stop the practice, which is carried out in at least 28 countries in Africa and elsewhere in the world.

Kenya banned the cutting of girls several years ago, but the local newspapers continue to carry reports of the ceremonies and of young girls fleeing the knife. Twenty-three of them are now under the protection of Ken Wafula, an activist who files civil protection

orders to spare girls in the town of Eldoret.

In Tanzania, where cutting is also illegal, three young sisters sought refuge in a church after their father said they would have to undergo it. One of the priests took the girls to the police for protection, but the officers turned them over to their father, who had them cut the next day, and married soon after.

"This is a deeply rooted culture," said Ms. Shuriye, speaking through a translator in a mixture of Somali and Swahili. "It's religious. It's very difficult for people to leave it overnight."

Reflecting on her old life, Ms. Shuriye lamented the loss of status she had suffered since she had given up cutting. People in the community denounce her to her face, she said. Imams who still endorse genital cutting smear her name in some mosques.

With Ms. Shuriye's help, Womankind Kenya has managed to persuade 12 other genital cutters to denounce the practice. Of those, only about half are regarded as committed opponents. "Some of them, we suspect, are doing it in secret," said Ms. Abdi Noor, who has yet to persuade her own mother to give up cutting. "We hear rumors about them."

But everybody knows where Ms. Shuriye now stands. She is so vocal that she was recently invited here to the Kenyan capital for an international conference for reformed genital cutters organized by Equality Now, an international women's rights group based in New York. There were cutters from Tanzania, Somalia, Mali and Guinea, among other places Ms. Shuriye had never visited.

In some countries the cutting is limited to the tip of the clitoris, an effort to reduce sexual pleasure for women and reduce the likelihood that they will stray from their husbands. In the more extreme form that Ms. Shuriye performed, all of the external genitalia are removed and the vagina is sewn virtually shut.

At the conference, which ended Monday, Ms. Shuriye met women like her who also had been persuaded to give up their knives. She heard of the frustrations faced in trying to stop such a deeply rooted practice. She learned how some groups were training reformed cutters to earn money in different ways, like sewing or making soap.

Reporters at the conference questioned Ms. Shuriye, and a documentary film crew sat her down by the pool of the hotel for a long interview. "I like being an activist," she said.

Ms. Shuriye said that she had no idea how many girls she had cut over the course of her lifetime, but that she was determined to find as many of them as she can.

"This has got to stop," she said.

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