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Saying NO to the mutilators

Last week's Global Meeting for Equality and Justice in the Muslim Family saw some of the world's most spirited individuals engage in law reform discussions and activism. CHAI MEI LING sits in for a tale of how three such personalities defied convention to champion for social change in their home countries

TWENTY years ago, moments after the birth of her daughter, Assita Monique Tamboula stood her ground — there would be no genital mutilation on her newborn.

In a country where more than half its population still subscribes to this age-old practice today, it took more than conviction on Tamboula's part to put her foot down.

Any girl in Burkina Faso who has not been cut up runs the risk of growing up single and unwanted by the males in the West African country.

So, families engage the service of the mutilators, rural women who mainly hail from the "blacksmith" caste, to sever the genital tissue of their girls — either at birth or just before they start school.

"During the process, a girl's clitoris is cut off to stop her from masturbating. If a woman wants pleasure, she has to go to the man," says Tamboula, 51.

"They do the cutting with a small instrument that looks like a scythe. It's flat and the edge is very, very sharp. No anaesthesia, nothing. Casualty due to blood loss is not uncommon."

In two provinces, girls undergo the procedure just before they wed.

The act itself is part of the marriage ceremony, celebrated like a festival, taken on as a feat of courage and adds "value" to the bride.

"Women have no right to speak up, because the society is layered, with men on-top and women bottom. Full stop.

"Even if a man is aware of the problem of genital mutilation and wants to stop it, and he decides not to have the girls in his family mutilated, the girls would still be rejected by the rest of the society.

"People laugh at them. So what to do?"

So set in stone is this custom, whose origin predates Islam and Christianity, that it continues to thrive in the country despite its stringent law, affecting some 70 per cent of the rural female population and 30 per cent in town.

The government condemned the act, passed a law which carries a maximum penalty of 10 years of jail term, and beefed up enforcement.

But perpetrators found haven in neighbouring countries.

Mutilators reside to the north in Mali, where they can't be touched by law and are sometimes protected even by the society, crossing over to Burkina as and when their clandestine service is needed.

These women would pass on their skills to their daughters, making sure that tradition lives on with the lineage.

The fight against the controversial practice, which dates back to the 20th century, is uphill because social will is lacking, but local group Maia Association, of which Tamboula is a member, strives towards its end.

With support from family planning and health groups from France and Switzerland, the association goes to

the ground to raise awareness and impart knowledge with the aim to sensitise men and women and influence mindset, not only on female genital mutilation, but also on a host of issues from gender power imbalance.

Maia talks families out of the norm of casting their unwed, pregnant daughters out to the streets, where many, unable to fend for themselves, would die from hunger.

It works closely with secondary schools to provide easy support and assistance to pregnant students.

Aminata Diallo, the association president and also an educator, had three pregnant girls in her class last year, not counting those who have had abortion.

Diallo caps the rate of teenage pregnancy at 10 per cent, but says the problem is worsening with more girls getting pregnant at a younger age.

The legal age for marriage is 17, but girls as young as 15 are already pregnant, she says.

Maia also addresses rape, forced marriages, poverty, violence against women, and HIV/AIDS.

It teaches girls and women to how convince men to wear condoms during sex, and in cases where negotiation fails, encourages them to put on the femidoms.

It also discourages levirate, a custom where widows are made to marry a male member of the deceased husband's family. Those who refused to toe the mark have been known to be poisoned.

"When you see something so horrible happening before your eyes, you have to react," says Diallo, 53, explaining how she got into the movement.

"A girl sleeps with a boy, gets pregnant and is expelled by the family to sleep on the streets while the boy merrily carries on with his education. Where is the justice?"

Since being set up 15 years ago, Maia has achieved notable success in alleviating the lives and status of women in the country.

Through advocacy, women are now allowed to work on the land and keep their earnings from crop yields. It was just as recent as four years ago that women were not supposed to touch the soil.

In the area of female genital mutilation, Maia's programmes with the youngsters bore fruits.

"When mutilation is being carried out, it's always a youngster - girl or boy - who calls the police in," says Diallo.

Another young boy reported on his twin sisters' case and got them rescued in the nick of time.

For Tamboula, her personal accomplishment didn't stop at relieving her daughter of the physical and psychological scarring that she herself experienced as a child.

No girls in her family born after her daughter has to ever undergo that.

■ The interview was done with the assistance of French interpreter Françoise Liaunet-Hughes.

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Monique Tamboula

