

**SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR REPORTERS:**

- Avoid the term 'mutilation'. Those who practice it don't see it that way, and terming it such adds an emotional slant to the reporting.
- Report on the reasons/beliefs underlying the practice, to deepen understanding of its social significance. Refrain from superficial catch phrases.
- Represent the different forms of female circumcision and the different rationales for it; they are not uniform.
- Cover any events dealing with the subject in an illuminating way (seminars, etc.). It would be wonderful if local videos on female circumcision could be produced and screened in the communities themselves.
- Engage men (as well as women) from communities practicing female circumcision in an ongoing dialogue about the practice.

girl/woman from being just anyone to being a fully respected member of society with all the attendant rights and privileges. Her father is happy, her mother is happy, the other relatives are happy and the young woman anticipates having her own set-up within the same parameters as everyone else.

This is when we usually come in and say, "It is all right NOT to be like everyone else." But most indications suggest that our view has been largely rejected. Our technical explanations, medical evidence and volumes of 'women's lib' do not provide answers for these people. For them, belonging to their community has no alternative.

This sense of belonging is just as key in more 'cosmopolitan' societies. Those of us living in such societies have developed and adopted mannerisms which keep us blended in the social set-ups to which we belong. Although we are mobile and can 'belong' in many settings, we still tend to cling to certain ones we are more comfortable with and will often go to enormous expense to be seen to belong properly. We can move and start somewhere else if things go wrong. This is the difference: for many societies, such as the Barbaig, such luxury is totally unavailable. They have to belong there, with their people and their customs.

In my view we have failed to address this painful dilemma. We have not had the patience to understand these people, and have instead jumped to name calling. We have not tried to see them as we see ourselves, and we have adopted a 'wicked them' and 'good us' attitude. We have not taken enough time for dialogue with them; rather we have prescribed drugs for a disease we see, but that they do not.

Naturally, they have not taken the medicine.

Our work among the Barbaig raised questions we failed to answer. Yes, they, too, do not want their children to die. They, too, do not want to cause pain to their wives and daughters. But what can they replace such practices with, how and who will lead the way?

One obvious opening was that the Barbaig who were educated and therefore mobile were less enthusiastic about circumcising their daughters. Education, therefore, seemed one sure way of dealing with the problem.

This education, however, itself needs reform. The Barbaig told us that when their daughters finish standard seven (elementary school) they end up going to wash dishes for rich people in towns as domestic staff, which the Barbaig find humiliating. Education should rather empower these girls to go on and be 'somebodies', women who will come back and show the way forward.

To be able to do that, we shall need to invest in structures that can prevail on the Barbaig to release their girls to go to school. These are places where the nearest source of water may be 15 kilometres away, and yet the woman has to fetch water two to three times a day to give the calves water to drink, in addition to the normal usage of water. She has to fetch firewood, cook for her husband and chil-

dren and perform many other household tasks.

Such tasks require that she keep all her daughters near so that they can help. The workload also implies that as the cattle increase, a woman would rather have a co-wife to share in the work, and so on and so on, with even more co-wives. The

man sitting around there with ten wives will be interested in anything that will keep their sexuality low. The women themselves will not have a chance to bathe for long periods, will get skin rashes (*lawalawa*) and will gladly do anything that they are told reduces the risk of such *lawalawa*. These young girls, in a polygamous compound, will be glad to get married and go somewhere else. And they will not go to another ethnic group for marriage, as no young man from another ethnic group will have been there to admire her.

So there they are, caught in a circle leading back to themselves – one we mistakenly think we can break simply with information, statistics and medical reports. Anyone interested in the fate of female circumcision – and in the women it touches – needs to talk more to these communities. Journalists, therefore, should uncover new stories coming from these people themselves, and help us move forward together with a better understanding that could bring an end to this pain.

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PHOTO: ERIC MULLEN/ARND BRONKHORST

# alternative Rites

## Female 'circumcision' by other means By Malik Stan Reaves

the labia minora; and infibulation, the removal of the clitoris, the adjacent labia (majora and minora), and the sewing of the scraped sides of the vulva across the vagina, except for a small opening.

In rural areas, circumcision rites are usually carried out by traditional practitioners using crude instruments and little or no anesthetics. Urban dwellers and the more affluent are more likely to seek out professional health care providers. While in some cultures the circumcised include infants a few days old, most of the affected girls are between the ages of 4 and 12.

The health consequences of FGM can range from serious to deadly. "Short-term complications include severe pain, shock, hemorrhage, urine retention, ulceration of the genital region and injury to adjacent tissue," according to the U.N. release.

"Hemorrhage and infection can cause death. Long-term complications include cysts and abscesses, keloid scar formation, damage to the urethra resulting in urinary incontinence, dyspareunia (painful sexual intercourse), sexual dysfunction, urinary tract infection, infertility and childbirth complications."

Yet female circumcision encompasses more than the practice itself. It is often deeply entrenched in the local culture, wrapped in a complex shroud of assumptions, taboos and beliefs that impact on a woman's social status and personal identity. Indeed, the central defining achievement of Circumcision through Words is not that it saves young women from the dangers of FGM, but that it captures the cultural significance of female circumcision while doing away with the dangerous practice itself.

A growing number of rural Kenyan families are turning to an alternative to the rite of female circumcision for their daughters.

The new rite is known as 'Ntanira na Mugambo', or 'Circumcision through Words'. It comprises a week-long programme of counseling, capped by community celebration and affirmation, in place of the contentious practice often known as 'female genital mutilation' (FGM).

The first Circumcision through Words occurred in August 1996, when 30 families in the tiny village of Gatunga, not far from Mount Kenya, ushered their daughters through the new programme. Some 50 additional families participated in the programme in December, followed by dozens of other families.

Circumcision through Words grows out of collaborations between rural families and the Kenyan national women's group,

Maendeleo ya Wanawake Organisation (MYWO), committed to ending FGM in Kenya. It follows years of research and discussion with villagers by MYWO field workers with the close cooperation of the Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH), a non-profit, non-governmental, international organisation which seeks to improve the health of women and children. Headquartered in Seattle, Washington in the U.S., PATH has served as technical facilitator for MYWO's FGM programme.

FGM is practiced in about half of the rural districts of Kenya, part of a larger international population of more than 100 million women believed to be subject to varying forms of FGM across Africa and parts of Asia. The practice is generally grouped into three categories: incision, the cutting of the hood of the clitoris; excision, the cutting of the clitoris and all or part of

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# Recognising women

Two award-winning African journalists  
share their struggles to make an impact

◀ "People think of the traditions as themselves," said Leah Muuya of MYWO in "Secret and Sacred," a MYWO-produced video, distributed by PATH, which explores the personal dangers and harmful social consequences of FGM. The video explains that female circumcision has traditionally signaled a young woman's readiness for the responsibilities of adulthood.

In response, Circumcision through Words brings the young candidates together for a week of seclusion during which they learn traditional teachings about their coming roles as women, parents and adults in the community, as well as more modern messages about personal health, reproductive issues, hygiene, communications skills, self-esteem and peer pressure. The week ends with a community celebration of song, dancing, and feasting which affirms the girls and their new place in the community.

The original proponents of the new rite have since incorporated and are seeking support from international donors in order to continue and expand their efforts. Funding has come from several international donors including the Ford Foundation, the Moriah Fund, Population Action International (PAI)/Wallace Global Fund, Public Welfare Foundation and Save the Children – Canada.

MYWO and PATH have also developed public awareness campaigns that spread information on the harmful effects of female genital mutilation. According to Dr. Asha Mohamud, a PATH Senior Program Officer focusing on FGM, the two organisations agree that information, education and public discussion are more effective tools against FGM than direct, prohibitive action.

That became clear when Kenyan President Daniel arap Moi declared his intent to abolish the practice. "It led to a terrific backlash," she said, including circumcisions in the middle of the night and a rush to circumcise girls at a younger-than-usual age in an effort to beat the ban.

Accompanying this Kenyan initiative is an international effort to increase global pressure on the issue. In April 1997 the World Health Organisation, UNICEF and the U.N. Population Fund announced a joint plan to significantly curb female genital mutilation over the next decade and completely eliminate the practice within three generations. Many governments have outlawed the practice in their own territories.

Efforts like Circumcision through Words offer a promising approach to resolving this controversial issue, at least within practicing communities, said Dr. Mohamud, since there are many people who would like to end the practice yet are not able to face the social ostracism that would entail. Yet, despite the continuing successes of Circumcision through Words, proponents of traditional circumcision are still numerous in many areas. As many have pointed out, 'culture' doesn't change overnight.

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## Managing Emotional Distance



After South African journalist **Charlene Smith** was raped she used her writing to become an outspoken activist on violence against women. In September she received the South African Award for Courageous Journalism from the Ruth First Memorial Trust. Here she reflects on this combination of journalism and activism:

I loathe the 'me' school of journalism. But perhaps once in our lives, something will have a profound impact on us, and we may believe that we can help generate positive change. Then, I believe, we have a responsibility to share, in as constructive a manner as possible, our experience with society.

I had a powerful sense on the night of the rape that I had to turn a bad incident into something good. My primary skill is as a writer. The initial article [in the *Mail and Guardian*], and those that have followed, have changed rape counselling techniques from San Diego to Namibia, Singapore to Uganda. It has seen the first research into the relationship between rape, HIV and anti-retrovirals. The articles have influenced steps with regard to rape legislation in this country and in Namibia, as well as the rewriting of rape protocols, police training, insurance policies, life skills training in schools and so on.

The first time I covered conflict was in 1976 – I was 17 and *The Star's* first woman crime reporter. It taught me that nothing is more important than the story, the story comes first and when that is done I can deal with my emotions. We have a duty, particularly when confronted with horror, to record in as straightforward a manner as possible what happened – horror needs no embellishment – so that those who suffered or died, did not do so in vain. Our duty is to tell the world, so that it, hopefully, acts against barbarity.

I find it traumatic and emotionally draining to write about rape. Should I be writing about rape? Shouldn't journalists keep an emotional distance? In reporting apartheid many of us did not lose emotional distance, we managed it. This was a crime against humanity so acute that we could not fail to be moved by it. We had to see for ourselves. The truth is rarely self-evident.

## Breaking through in male-dominated Africa

Being a young, female journalist in Africa is no easy feat. Pamela Mulumby, this year's 24-year-old winner of the prestigious African Journalist of the Year award, can definitely attest to that. She has been sidelined, had her credibility questioned and even been accused of sleeping her way to the top at her newspaper, Kenya's *East African Standard*.

Mulumby knocked 14 other contestants from across the continent out of the running. She was awarded the prize for a series of articles published about the plight of slum and squatter dwellers in Nairobi and nearby villages. The win catapulted her to instant stardom but she still faces much criticism in the wake of her success.

"Some men thought I was climbing the ladder too fast and felt their positions were threatened," Mulumby says, alluding to the male-dominated journalism world in Kenya. Other men questioned her credibility and insisted a woman could not win such an award unless she was sleeping with one of the officials, she says.

Women also voiced their disapproval. "They thought I was too positive about life and wouldn't fit in my shoes."

She accuses female journalists of being as corrupt as their male counterparts. "When journalists are corrupt," Mulumby says,

Journalists who are young and female in Africa – like much of the world – have much to contend with in advancing their careers. Rhodes University journalism student **Trusha**

**Reddy** interviews African Journalist of the Year award-winner **Pamela Mulumby...**



"they will not sweep corruption under the carpet, but they will deny the people of the country the services of a free press."

Tribal politics also played a role in her treatment at the paper. Her first encounter with tribal prejudice was from a female editor who did not assign her any stories for two months because she was from a different tribe. "I was left with little option but to be creative and nosy," Mulumby says. "I had to smell news and gate-crash whether there was already a reporter there or not."

Eventually her stories were published, but she was relegated to the traditional female beat, fashion. "Men do not trust women with covering certain issues," Mulumby says. "They cover politics while women cover light stuff like fashion and beauty contests."

Aside from pushing for gender equality, Mulumby names the challenges facing African journalists as embracing new technologies; engaging in further training; resisting government manipulation; and developing a voluntary ethics code.

Mulumby's message to women is simple: "Women are their own enemies. We must be ready to fight. We still have hope."