

In Egypt, a rising push against genital cutting

By Michael Slackman

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KAFR AL MANSHI ABOU HAMAR, Egypt: The men in this poor farming community were seething. A 13-year-old girl was brought to a doctor's office to have her clitoris removed, a surgery considered necessary here to preserve chastity and honor.

The girl died, but that was not the source of the outrage. After her death, the government shut down the clinic, and that got everyone stirred up.

"They will not stop us," shouted Saad Yehia, a tea shop owner along the main street. "We support circumcision!" he shouted over and over.

"Even if the state doesn't like it, we will circumcise the girls," shouted Fahmy Ezzeddin Shaweesh, an elder in the village.

Circumcision, as supporters call it, or female genital mutilation, as opponents refer to it, was suddenly a ferocious focus of debate in Egypt this summer. A nationwide campaign to stop the practice has become one of the most powerful social movements in Egypt in decades, uniting an unlikely alliance of government forces, official religious leaders and street-level activists.

Though Egypt's Health Ministry ordered an end to the practice in 1996, it allowed exceptions in cases of emergency, a loophole critics describe as so wide that it effectively rendered the ban meaningless. But now the government is trying to force a comprehensive ban.

Not only was it unusual for the government to shut down the clinic, but the health minister has also issued a decree banning health care workers—or anyone—from conducting the procedure for any reason. Beyond that, the Ministry of Religious Affairs also issued a booklet explaining why the practice was not called for in Islam; Egypt's grand mufti, Ali Gomaa, declared it haram, or prohibited by Islam; Egypt's highest religious official, Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi, called it harmful; television advertisements have been shown on state channels to discourage it; and a national hot line was set up to answer the public's questions about genital cutting.

But as the men in this village demonstrated, widespread social change in Egypt comes very slowly. This country is conservative, religious and, for many, guided largely by traditions, even when those traditions do not adhere to the tenets of their faith, be it Christianity or Islam.

For centuries Egyptian girls, usually between the ages of 7 and 13, have been taken to have the procedure done, sometimes by a doctor, sometimes by a barber or whoever else in the village would do it. As recently as 2005, a government health survey showed that 96 percent of the thousands of married, divorced or widowed women interviewed said they had undergone the procedure—a figure that astounds even many Egyptians. In the language of

the survey, "The practice of female circumcision is virtually universal among women of reproductive age in Egypt."

Though the practice is common and increasingly contentious throughout sub-Saharan Africa, among Arab states the only other place where this practice is customary is in southern Yemen, experts here said. In Saudi Arabia, where women cannot drive, cannot vote, cannot hold most jobs, the practice is viewed as abhorrent, a reflection of pre-Islamic traditions.

But now, quite suddenly, forces opposing genital cutting in Egypt are pressing back as never before. More than a century after the first efforts to curb this custom, the movement has broken through one of the main barriers to change: It is no longer considered taboo to discuss it in public. That shift seems to have coincided with a small but growing acceptance of talking about human sexuality on television and radio.

For the first time, opponents said, television news shows and newspapers have aggressively reported details of botched operations. This summer two young girls died, and it was front-page news in Al Masry al Yom, an independent and popular daily. Activists highlighted the deaths with public demonstrations, which generated even more coverage.

The force behind this unlikely collaboration between government, nongovernment organizations, religious leaders and the news media is a no-nonsense 84-year-old anthropologist named Marie Assaad, who has been fighting against genital cutting since the 1950s.

"I never thought I would live to see this day," she said, reading about the subject in a widely circulated daily newspaper.

Dr. Nasr el-Sayyid, assistant to the minister of health, said there had already been a drop in urban areas, along with an aggressive effort in more than 100 villages, mostly in the south, to curb the practice. "Our plan and program over the next two years is aiming to take it down 20 percent nationwide," he said.

The challenge, however, rests in persuading people that their grandparents, parents and they themselves have harmed their daughters. Moreover, advocates must convince a skeptical public that men will marry a woman who has not undergone the procedure and that circumcision is not necessary to preserve family honor. It is a challenge to get men to give up some of their control over women.

And it will be a challenge to convince influential people like Osama Mohamed el-Moaseri, imam of a mosque in Basyoun, the city near where the 13-year-old girl lived, and died. "This practice has been passed down generation after generation, so it is natural that every person circumcises his daughter," he said. "When Ali Gomaa says it is haram, he is criticizing the practice of our fathers and forefathers."

But the movement against genital cutting is increasingly prepared for these arguments. At first, Assaad and a group of intellectuals who together created a task force simply lectured their neighbors, essentially calling the practice barbaric.

"At the beginning we preached and said this is wrong," she recalled. "It didn't work. They said, 'It was done to our mothers and grandmothers, and they are fine.'"

She and her colleagues sounded like out-of-touch urban intellectuals, she said. But they enlisted the aid of Islamic scholars and health care workers, hoping to disperse misconceptions — like the idea that cutting off the clitoris prevents homosexuality — and relate to people's lives.

"Circumcision is a very old custom and has absolutely no benefits," Vivian Fouad, who helps staff the national hot line, said to a caller wondering what to do with her own daughter. She continued: "If you want to protect your daughter, then you have to raise her well. How you raise your child is the main factor in everything, not mutilating your daughter."

Egypt is a patriarchal society, but women can be a powerful force. So Assaad helped persuade two important women, elite and privileged, who like herself could not believe the practice was as widespread as it was, to join her battle.

The first was Suzanne Mubarak, the wife of President Hosni Mubarak and a political force in her own right. The second was Mosheira Khattab, head of the National Council for Childhood and Motherhood, a government agency that helps set national health and social policies.

Khattab has become a force in pressing the agenda. Her council now has a full-time staff working on the issue and runs the hot line. She toured the Nile Delta region, three cities in one day, promoting the message, blunt and outraged that genital cutting had not stopped.

"The Koran is a newcomer to tradition in this manner," she said. "As a male society, the men took parts of religion that satisfied men and inflated it. The parts of the Koran that helped women, they ignored."

It is an unusual swipe at the Islamists who have promoted the practice as in keeping with religion, especially since the government generally tries to avoid taking on conservative religious leaders. It tries to position itself as the guardian of Islamic values, aiming to enhance its own wilted legitimacy and undercut support for the Muslim Brotherhood, the banned but popular opposition movement.

But the religious discourse concerning genital cutting has changed, and that is credited to Assaad's strategy of reaching up to people like Mubarak and out to young women like Fatma Ibrahim, 24. When Ibrahim was 11 years old, she said, her parents told her she was going for a blood test. The doctor, a relative, put her to sleep and when she woke, she said she could not walk.

The memory haunts her now, and though she says that her parents "will kill" her if they find out, she has become a volunteer in the movement against genital cutting, hoping to spare other women what she endured.

"I am looking to talk to the young, the ones who will be parents in 10 years," she said. "When I get married, inshallah, I will never, ever circumcise my daughter."

Mona el-Naggar contributed reporting from Cairo.