

Britain tackles "crime of love" -- female circumcision

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By Michael Holden

LONDON (Reuters) - Sacdiya Hussein Ali was seven years old when she was taken to a stranger's house in her native Kenya and held down on a mat by 10 women who pulled her legs apart while a woman cut her with a razor blade.

"The lady who was doing the circumcision came between my legs and she started cutting my private parts," Ali, now 34 and living in London, told Reuters.



"After the cutting I was screaming. They had put some clothes in my mouth so I couldn't shout, but they could still hear me screaming."

Ali is one of an estimated 3 million women and girls who suffer female genital mutilation (FGM) each year.

The practice, also known as female circumcision, involves removing part or all of a girl's clitoris or labia. It is often carried out by an older woman with no medical training, using anything from scissors to tin can lids and pieces of glass.

The victims have no idea what is going to happen to them and anaesthetic or antiseptic treatment is often not used.

"When they cut me, they mixed some herbs and eggs ... and poured it where they had cut and stitched me with thorns," Ali recounted.

The centuries-old practice, prevalent mostly in Africa, is now also being brought by immigrants to Western countries, like Britain.

"FGM is a huge problem in the UK," said Ensharah Ahmed, community development officer at the UK-based Foundation for Women's Health, Research and Development (Forward).

Forward estimates there are around 279,500 women living in Britain who have undergone FGM, with another 22,000 girls under 16 in danger of joining them.

This year London police launched an awareness campaign to coincide with the start of the summer school holidays -- a period, they say, when women who carry out FGM are most likely to come to Britain, or when families send their daughters back to their countries of origin where they can be circumcised.

A CRIME OF LOVE

Detective Inspector Carol Hamilton from London police's Child Abuse Command says it is difficult to tackle what she calls a "crime of love" as those responsible believe they are doing the right thing for their child.

The custom was traditionally carried out to bestow status and honor or because of the mistaken belief it was a religious requirement. It is thought it was also used to control a woman's sexual desire and reduce the chance of promiscuity in marriage.

However, it can disfigure, cause extreme pain, psychological damage, infertility or even kill.

Ali says she has suffered back pains, menstruation problems and kidney infections.

"It has affected me so much -- psychologically, socially," she said. "I can still remember that razor going into my body -- I can still feel it. Even now, I cannot bear to look at razors."

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Ahmed says not enough study has been carried out into the mental scars which were often as bad as the physical ones.

"When you talk to someone who has undergone FGM you can see the flashback and the effects just the bringing up of the issue has for them," she said.

DIFFICULT TO COMBAT

Legislation passed in 2003 makes it illegal for British residents to arrange FGM in Britain or abroad, and those guilty of procuring or carrying out the practice face up to 14 years in jail. No one has yet been prosecuted.

"It's not something you can stamp out in two seconds -- it's been going for thousands of years," Hamilton told Reuters.

"Most communities will say it's necessary, it's something they need to protect their cultural identity now they are living in another country," she said.

"I've been going to a lot of communities and I have spoken to a lot of women and men and they all tell me the same thing -- they have to do it.

"But what it is actually is physical and emotional torture of little girls who have no say in the matter. It is so totally barbaric and against human rights that we need to be seen to be tackling it -- but we have to do it slowly."

Getting the message across is not easy. Many teachers, school nurses and welfare workers are ignorant of the issue, and community workers say the government needs to do more.

"Part of our challenge to the government is to promote this law -- it is a good weapon we have now," said Mary Kanu, a worker in a London-based African community group.

"If the children know that they have a right not to be mutilated they can report it to the police.

"If they have no opportunity to know there is a law that protects them, anything their mum or dad or auntie tells them, they will accept it."

Opponents of FGM have found strong allies among some men in African communities, who openly admit they do not enjoy sex with wives who have undergone the practice.

"They want women who are not mutilated," Ali said.

Religious leaders have also been receptive, particularly at mosques where imams were angry the practice was being carried out in the name of Islam.

"It's not there in Christianity or Islam," Ali said. "It is not a religious issue. It is a cultural issue and it should be abolished."