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The Cutting Edge of Brutality Against Women

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Female Genital Mutilation remains a scourge too often ignored in the #MeToo climate.

Although the #MeToo and Time's Up movements have received significant media attention, one horrifying violation of the rights of girls often goes comparatively unnoticed. Today, it is estimated that an astonishing 200 million girls have been forced to undergo Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) around the world.

The practice of FGM dates as far back as ancient Egypt and has been practiced in civilizations around the world to varying degrees. FGM today is strongly associated with religious and tribal communities. Shockingly, as in the case of foot binding in ancient China, the practice is generally carried out by women in these communities.

One courageous voice against the practice is Egyptian author Nawal El Saadawi who recalls her own terrifying experience in these haunting terms:

I just wept, and called out to my mother for help. But the worst shock of all was when I looked around and found her standing by my side. Yes, it was her in the midst of these strangers, talking to them and smiling at them, as though they had not participated in slaughtering her daughter just a few moments ago.

While it is now illegal in most countries, it is still practiced under the radar in many communities in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, and among immigrant populations in Western nations. Even in democratic societies such as India, FGM is widespread.

But women in India's Dawoodi Bohra community are bravely speaking out against FGM. Victims relate being tricked into having the procedure done. They have pressed India's legal system to address the issue, and circulated an online petition to raise awareness and gain support. The Indian Supreme Court ultimately ruled against the practice, deeming it unconstitutional.

However, as with many human rights violations, a legal victory is not enough to ensure eradication of the abuse. Particularly in India, there is often a deep disconnect between the law and cultural practice. Banning activities deemed inhumane can simply drive them underground. Therefore, public education and cultural change must accompany the new laws.

The online petition circulated by women of the Dawoodi Bohra community stated: "Most of us are too scared to speak out publicly. We fear ostracization, social boycott and exclusion of our

families from the rest of the community by our religious clergy.” A few courageous advocates have even created a Facebook group called “Speak out on FGM” for victims to share their stories. Yet tragically, these women face opposition even from other women in their community.

Those bravely fighting this injustice would benefit from more support around the globe, rewarding them for speaking out and challenging this great wrong — and for unselfishly risking their own safety to ensure that the same harm does not befall future generations.

Eliminating a practice so widespread is not easy. As in the case of other deeply entrenched injustices — such as racial apartheid — international involvement is critical.

The end of FGM in our time will require international attention commensurate with the suffering imposed on young girls. Until then, we will continue to live in a world where some young women face the pain and permanent damage of mutilation — young women like Jaha Dukureh, a victim of FGM who is now speaking out.

Dukureh, who has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, explained: “Right now everyone is turning a blind eye and pretending nothing is wrong — but once we stand up together, they won’t be able to ignore us anymore.”

Her voice, and the voices of other women like her, must be encouraged and amplified. FGM must receive the same attention and visibility now given to other assaults on the fundamental human rights of women. We should insist that there is no place in the modern world for the barbaric mutilation of children.

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