

FGM: Kenyan woman uses film to fight scourge



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Circumcision of women and girls continues around the world even in countries where it has been expressly banned by law. More and diverse efforts are need to win this struggle, as this Kenyan filmmaker explains

In her poem *Dahabo Musa*, a Somali woman, describes infibulation as “three feminine sorrows, the procedure itself, the wedding night when the woman has to be cut open, the childbirth when she has to be cut again”. Infibulation is one of the three different practices which are included in the definition of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), along with clitoridectomy and excision which are severe forms of removing, partially or totally, the external female genitalia.

Though FGM seems to be an issue far from our imagination, it requires a lot of attention considering that is currently practiced in the five continents, regardless of religion and the law. Numbers speak: 140 million women in the world have undergone Female Genital Mutilation. 3 millions of girls from early infants to 15 years old are at risk every year. FGM is a cultural practice in more than 50 countries between Africa and South Asia. Many anthropological studies refer to it as an old practice, having traces from ancient Egypt to the Roman Empire. Perhaps unknown to many, in more recent times, in the 19th century, FGM was performed in the United States as well as in some European countries to treat lesbianism, masturbation and hysteria.

In 2014 it is necessary to set FGM in a new context, as it is not just performed in the countries where it was born. Immigration, in fact, has contributed in spreading the practice all over the world enlarging the geographic impact of FGM. The main reason of this is that communities which have established themselves in

a new country where laws punish whoever follows the practice seek to maintain bonds with their homeland. FGM is seen as a significant mark in man-woman relationships. Often women who have not undergone the cut are outcast and unmarriageable in their own communities.

Based on inequality between the sexes, it is one of the extreme forms of discrimination against women. FGM is internationally recognised as a violation of the human rights of girls and women as it violates their right to health, security and physical integrity. In some countries like Djibouti and Somalia where 98 per cent of women are still cut, there's also a high percentage of mortality among women and girls.

The inhuman and degrading process which a mutilated woman undergoes requires world-wide attention: promoting awareness in schools as well as in other fields of the social life to help raise of a public dialogue. The stigma women have on them is unspeakable, let alone the physical and psychological stress they have to live with on a daily basis.

Changing a social convention needs time and the commitment of all the social parts of the community, involving three important basics: information, education and confrontation. Immigrants are called to play a significant role as mediators between the old and the new, between the custom and human rights.

I came across Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) many years ago in Kenya, but in recent times I have had the chance to focus on the issue while working with a collective of women in Cape Town, South Africa, in a workshop based on "telling spaces through narrative and exploring one's impact in society in terms of human rights sensitiveness". Some of the women who participated in the workshop were migrants from other African countries and had experienced Female Genital Mutilation in their life. These were women who have been taught to suffer in silence, to avoid the shame that the community would throw at them if showing signs of opposition. Working with them was such a rewarding and humbling experience, especially because, by attending the workshop, they soon became conscious of the power of imagination and art as a media through which to share their sense of loss due to the cut. Theatre, writing, dance, poetry have provided a strong sense of awareness that has led them to a choice that is also a statement: fighting FGM in their own communities by embracing the idea that, as violence is cultural, it is through culture that it has to come to an end. In the words of Amina, one of the women of the group: "I carried my wound secretly uploading the custom as a pride to wear on my bleeding scar/ but time has provided me with the right words / I hold this pen to fix the wound and raise the change I made for my daughter to be/ I sewed the cut with the thread of words and the seed of knowledge."

At the beginning of this year, film director and producer Andreas Frowein, a professor at Kampala University, stumbled upon my work and that's how I met Kenyan filmmaker and activist Beryl Magoko, producer of 'The Cut', a documentary on Female Genital Mutilation shot in her home vil-lage in Kuria, Kenya. The Kuria people, in Kenya and Tanzania, are still practicing FGM as a ritual. Even though it is officially banned in Kenya since October 2011, FGM is highly practiced among different ethnic groups who put pressure on the girls, who fear to find no husband if not cut.

The merit of this documentary is the attention given to perspectives. All the members of the community in the village were asked their opinion on FGM; no one was left voiceless: women, girls who are not yet cut, girls who are already circumcised, circumcisers, men, doctors, teachers. Pro-moting a new sense of awareness, available to all, that there's another possible future for many girls, who today still can be potential victims of FGM, is an undeniable merit of this film.

Presenting her documentary in different countries, Magoko achieved im-portant recognition: "Best Feature Film" at London Feminist Film Festival, "Best Documentary" at Great Rift Valley Film Festival, "Best East African Film" at Kenya International Film Festival, "Best Documentary" at Reel Sisters of the Diaspora Film Festival. Born in Komotobo, Kuria, Kenya, Ma-goko studied Graphic Design at Mombasa Polytechnic and later attended a Film-TV-Production course at Kampala University in Uganda. She is cur-rently working on two new films, both representing difficult situations that Africa women confront. Here's our conversation.

VALENTINA ACAVA MMAKA: Beryl, you produced 'The Cut' as a film fo a diploma course while attending Kampala University in Uganda. What moved you to choose such a delicate theme like Female Genital Mutilation, a part from being yourself a victim of this practice?

BERYL MAGOKO – First, I don't like to be referred to as a victim. The Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) topic has been in my mind since childhood. In early 1995, a certain NGO came to our school to teach us about the effects of FGM. That was when I knew it wasn't good. For me that was a few moths too late. I thought someday I would tell the story to inform/ educate my people. Nevertheless, I didn't know how to do that at that time. After my secondary education, I studied graphic design, but it could not help much in telling the story.

When later I was studying Mass Communication from November 2007 on, I thought of writing a newspaper article, but that was not going to reach my target audience. In 2009, film was introduced in our university. I didn't hesitate to register for the course. I knew if I had a chance to make film my medium.

VALENTINA ACAVA MMAKA - The documentary is set among the Kuria people, who still practice FGM, a community to which you belong. How did being circumcised effect you as a person when you moved out of your community to study and meet other women? How did this practice effect you as a girl and as a woman?

BERYL MAGOKO - This is a difficult question. The good thing is the by physical appearance you can't distinguish between a circumcised girl and one who is not unless she tells you. There is no discrimination and I hardly talked about it, (unless I was with some people that had gone through that and they asked me. But that was so rare). Most people don't want to discuss it for reasons known to them. It didn't affect me. Once you know the truth, you have to find a way to deal with it. And going to different communities just widened my horizon. I found that not all women have undergone FGM. Once I found out that it serves no purpose, I was not happy and I regretted having gone through FGM. At the end of the day I had to accept and learn how to live with it .

VALENTINA ACAVA MMAKA - What was the position of your family regarding FGM and how did they receive your work?

BERYL MAGOKO - During research my mother and my sister told me to choose another topic (since the subject was more complex than circumcision itself). They were worried of my well-being. After explaining to them that I wanted the project, they supported me. I remember my mother wanted to be part of the research if other women refused to talk to me! During shooting, I underwent many challenges, but my family was there for me. They were and have been so supportive.

VALENTINA ACAVA MMAKA - The film is rich by the fact that it includes all the people concerned with this practice: girls, circumcised and uncircumcised, circumcisers, men, women, activists, doctors, bringing different perspectives. Working in your homeland among your people did it prevent you from having difficulties? Did you encounter some obstacles while working?

BERYL MAGOKO - Yes, it was not as easy as I had thought. I had thought that working in my home area I could do research within a few days, but that was not the case. It took me five weeks. In the beginning, it was difficult for me to get people who are willing to talk about the practice since it is a taboo. Some people thought that I was investigating and feared that I would tell the police so that they will be arrested. The hardest part of all was to get girls who were circumcised and were willing to talk about it. For many girls who underwent FGM that is not easy. Many would tell me that they didn't go through it, although they did. But I understood. During shooting, there was harassment, but I endured it.

VALENTINA ACAVA MMAKA - Watching the documentary there's a number of girls who refuse to undergo FGM. What is their role within a community so traditionally linked to this practice? How will they be able to find a way to effectively reject the practice against their families or community?

BERYL MAGOKO - They are the role models to other young girls who are growing up. But without telling others that they didn't go through FGM how will they know? They can achieve that through motivation, information and encouragement from activists, the church and from teachers. However much pressure they face, they should be strong and learn to say 'No' to FGM, no matter the circumstance they are going through. I know this is difficult but wherever there is a will there is a way.

VALENTINA ACAVA MMAKA: It's interesting that young men stand by women's rights, not wanting their girlfriends and wives cut. What is the percentage?

BERYL MAGOKO: I can't really tell the percentage. All I know is Kuria men marry women from other tribes who are not circumcised and nowadays some marry Kuria ladies who are not circumcised, but they are few...

VALENTINA ACAVA MMAKA: A woman who has undergone FGM is often a woman who feels a sense of loss, physically and psychologically, especially when it comes to confronting herself in a context different from hers. What made you aware that FGM is a wrong thing and what drove you to embrace the cause of fighting it?

BERYL MAGOKO - It was in 1995 when an NGO came to our school telling us the effects of FGM using some pictures. Then I realized that it was not good. Most girls go through it unwillingly, just because they do what the

parents say, and many don't even know that these effects are there. I just want to find a way of giving the necessary information to the community.

VALENTINA ACAVA MMAKA: Numbers speaks alone: 140 million women in the world are victims of FGM regardless of religion and geography. One of the consistent facts is that FGM is widely practiced in the diaspora among the migrant communities who often practice it against the law in a very hidden way. How do you think a documentary like yours can affect the diaspora communities in Europe, USA, Australia for example, in perceiving a different vision about it and in thinking about a possible change for the future generations?

BERYL MAGOKO: I hope that many people will see the film and learn what it really does to the girls. A big number of men do not really know what happens and many women do not know enough about the consequences. Therefore, I hope that 'The Cut' can give them more information to understand that FGM is a human rights violation that should end as soon as possible. I also hope that those who have understood this will be courageous enough to talk to their relatives back home.

VALENTINA ACAVA MMAKA: Even though in countries like Kenya FGM is illegal, laws are still not working to defeat the practice. What do local communities and migrants need to do to eradicate FGM?

BERYL MAGOKO: What the communities need is education, more education and information about the practice. Also, the activists should not concentrate in one region only; rather they should spread and even reach the minority in other communities. Don't get me wrong, I am not against the law. But to me arresting one couple who have circumcised their daughter and leaving hundreds walk free isn't going to solve the problem. Give the people information that they need; if they don't follow then the law breakers concerned can be arrested.

VALENTINA ACAVA MMAKA: What was the response from the audience where your documentary was screened? Did you notice a different reception in Africa and in Europe? If yes, how? Did you have the chance to confront directly with women in the audience who have been cut? What have you been told so far about your work?

BERYL MAGOKO: The reception of the film was good – in most places. In Kenya a big number of people who have watched don't understand why FGM is taking place when there is a law against it. Well, in Ouagadougou I saw men cry (it was touching for me). Some of those men came from regions where women are circumcised. In Europe more people attend the screenings; some have little idea what is all about FGM and others are already rather well informed about the topic. I can't say 'confront' rather I met a few women who approached me for a quick chat. During the screening in Frankfurt, a woman from Egypt told me she went through it at a tender age, she realized later in life that she was circumcised, and she had to confront her parents (it took long for her to forgive them). When she saw the film she imagined what she underwent. Another lady from Brussels went through it at the age of seven and she was so emotional from the beginning of the film to the end. She told me her story too. In West Africa, a lady from Middle East didn't want to watch the film because it was 'hard' for her.

Some women who have gone through it don't want to watch the film because it brings back the memory that somebody is trying to 'bury'... A big number of the people like my work. But one woman from Germany attacked me badly - although she has never watched the film - saying that I should have protected the girls by calling the government to intervene... She didn't know what she was talking about, because the government representatives who work in Kuria are aware of the practice and some are invited to attend the ceremony and others stand on the way to watch! She not only attacked me but also other NGOs in German that fight FGM. Also one man from Kenya tried to urge me to shoot another film and show how important circumcision is.

VALENTINA ACAVA MMAKA: Sometimes when interviewing old men they speak on a defensive tone, pretending that it is the women who want FGM and not them imposing it. How would you describe this behaviour? Do you think it is a hidden sign of recognition from the elders that FGM is a wrong thing?

BERYLMAGOKO: When you ask men about FGM most of them say that it is the women who want it. To me this is not true. For instance in Kuria women don't give orders. So men influence; they usually tell their wives that their daughters should be circumcised. Some few don't tell the girls directly, they want the mothers to tell the girls. If mothers say no, sometimes men become violent and the mother and the girl have to accept FGM just for the sake of peace! In addition there are some cases of men marrying ladies who are not circumcised. Then they torture the ladies physically and psychological until they have no choice but to undergo FGM. This doesn't happen in Kuria only but in other communities too. All in all, there is a lot of pressure from parents, neighbours and peers. To the elders that is their culture and it is a compulsory. Some of them know that some

day it will end, but they don't want to end it. Nevertheless some educated people don't circumcise their daughters anymore.

VALENTINA ACAVA MMAKA: Recently Aminata Taouré, a politician writer and feminist from Mali said that while she is against FGM, she refuses that the Northern (read "western") countries show African women how to fight this plague. What do you think about this? Is it possible to eradicate FGM without confronting the "otherness" and in which way do you think it is possible to build a public dialogue on FGM breaking?

BERYL MAGOKO: There are few African women who are fighting against the practice. I think we need the Westerners for support. They should be in the background to hold us while the African women should be in the frontline because it is much easier for them to confront the supporters. In my view we need help. No, it is not possible to eradicate FGM without confrontation. We have to initiate dialogues with the girls, parents and the elders who organize circumcision, so that we make them understand that circumcision has no purpose and what the effects are. We need to convince them to stop FGM and find an alternative for this rite of passage rite - but force will not work.

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