Why circumcision cannot be wished away

Concerns have been expressed regarding

the hygienic conditions

under which circumcision is carried

out.

Indeed, the inevitable infections

which occur during traditional

circumcision are themselves

fertile ground for the

transmission of the HIV virus.

Our aids against Aids lie

in training traditional

circumcisers in hygienic procedures. In communities where circumcision

has been part of preparation

for marriage and family life, it has

been performed at puberty for

many centuries to signal the end

of childhood and the beginning of

adolescence and readiness to start

assuming adult social responsibilities.

In some communities, circumcision

is performed with other activities

for marriage preparation.

Furthermore, circumcision is

valued by the communities that

practiced it.

One of the reasons why it has

been difficult to eradicate female

circumcision is because the fight

against it has been medical and religious,

and this has not taken into

consideration the deeply-held cultural

values attached to it.

The condemnation has led to

strong reaction, making the practice more entrenched and

continues secretly.

In such situations, those condemning

circumcision have failed

to recognise that these operations

are performed as a puberty rite to

symbolise specific marriage preparation

activities.

The adolescent girls are thereby

made physically and psychologically

aware of having changed at

puberty from childhood to adolescence

and young adulthood and

instructed on how to behave in

marriage.

Similarly, the young man will

also have been initiated and culturally

programmed to look out for these behaviour and physical

changes. For such a strongly entrenched

custom, the question

therefore remains as to what can

replace it and with as much appeal

in stabilising the bond between a

married couple. To abolish the custom, it will be

necessary to develop alternative

programmes which are consistent

with modern education and lifestyles

and whose basis is appealing

to the people who are involved

in the change. The role of religious education

and social ethics in our school system

should be to propagate these

ideals.

Our aids against Aids lie

in enabling parents at

home and teachers in

schools to impart knowledge

and values to guide

sexual maturation

Traditionally, reproductive functions

have had the highly 'cherished

value of the survival of society.

This is one of the reasons why

cultural activities that accompany

circumcision have such strongly held

religious significance. This is one of the reasons why

various attempts to stop the practice have been resisted as it is seen as a threat to the social fabric

of the community which practises it.

There are, however, four problems which may be associated with the spread of Aids through circumcision:

The problem of unhygienic conditions under which the operation is carried out;

The circumcised males and females take their new status as a license for engaging in promiscuous

sexual activities;

The circumcision period is accompanied

by excessive drinking

of alcohol which leads to drunkenness

and irresponsible sexual

behaviour;

The actual lessons which have

been given to the young people

and symbolised physically by circumcision are no longer being given effectively. This is because

the parents and the community assume that they are being given through formal education.

Our aids against Aids lie in ensuring that the real

lessons on adolescent development, courtship

and marriage are given effectively whether

there is circumcision or

not.

Pandemic rises among women

NEW YORK. Wednesday

The Aids pandemic in the developing world

has spread dramatically among women and

girls, the United Nations Children's Fund has

said.

"What was once a predominantly male

disease has become a heterosexually spread

pandemic which is now consigning tens of

millions of girls and women to a cruel, slow

death due to Aids" Unisef Executive Director Carol Bellamy said in a statement.

According to Unisef statistics, women and girls now account for 43 per cent of the estimated

33 million people worldwide living

with HIV/Aids.

In Brazil, in 1984, only one woman was

HIV-positive for every 99 men infected with

the virus. Today. women account for one fourth

of all those infected with HIV.

In Africa, the risk for girls aged 15-24 is

two to one, compared with boys. In sub-Saharan

Africa, infected women outnumber

men six to five.

In Western Kenya, almost one in four girls between 15 and 19 is living with HIV, compared

to only one in 25 youths in the same age

group. In Zambia, 16 times as many girls are

infected as boys.

Ms Bellamy said the spread of HIV/Aids

among women is being helped by an atmosphere

of pervasive gender-based discrimination,

and cannot be divorced from sexual coercion

and the fact that between 16 and 52 per

cent of all women worldwide suffer abuse

from an intimate partner at least once in their

lives. (AFP)