

U.S. TRIBUNAL GRANTS ASYLUM IN GENITAL MUTILATION CASE

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The highest administrative tribunal in the U.S. immigration system granted political asylum Thursday to a 19-year-old woman from Togo who said she had fled from her homeland to escape having her genitals cut off.

The decision of the Board of Immigration Appeals in the case of the woman, Fauziya Kasinga, is the first to recognize the fear of genital mutilation as a legitimate ground for asylum.

The rite is practiced on millions of women in 26 African countries.

The ruling sets a precedent that is binding on the 179 immigration judges across the country. The few who have handled such cases have been divided in their rulings.

The board, part of the Justice Department, rejected the argument of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, also part of the department. The immigration service had argued that, although genital mutilation should be a reason for asylum in carefully defined circumstances, Kasinga's case should be sent back to an immigration judge to consider what the immigration service said were inconsistencies in her story.

Immigration law calls for asylum to be granted to people who can show that they have a well-founded fear of persecution because of their race, religion, nationality, political opinions or membership in a social group.

The ruling, written by the chairman, Paul Schmidt, said genital mutilation as practiced by the tribe to which Kasinga belonged, the Tchamba-Kunsuntu, constituted persecution.

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