

Asylum for mutilation victims

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Body

At last, U.S. immigration law has come to recognize that victims of sexual persecution deserve refuge in the United States just as much as people who are mistreated for reasons of race, religion or politics.

Last week, the federal Board of Immigration Appeals set a precedent for all U.S. immigration judges by granting asylum to Fauziya Kasinga, a 19-year-old woman from Togo in West Africa. Kasinga left Togo two years ago to escape an arranged marriage and a more to the point a to avoid the ritual genital mutilation that her ethnic group's traditions require.

The sad fact is, by United Nations count, at least 85 million women have been subjected to procedures like this. The custom, common in parts of Africa and the Mideast, is intended to suppress a woman's sexual pleasure and thereby deter marital infidelity a at least, infidelity by women.

Performed without anesthesia or sterile instruments, the procedure is excruciating and frequently leads to infection. Some women and girls don't survive it. Those who do often lead lives of discomfort and recurring infection.

Kasinga grew up expecting that her wealthy, Westernized father would protect her from submitting to this custom. But he died in 1993, leaving her the ward of a tradition-observing aunt, who arranged for Kasinga to become the fourth wife of another wealthy Togolese.

The appeals board recognized, correctly, that Kasinga was singled out for mistreatment because of her sex. If she refused the procedure, she would face the prospect of detention, physical violence or, at the very least, constant harassment. The United States welcomes other political dissidents who suffer similar consequences.

Does this ruling open the United States to a flood of female asylum- seekers? Not if the experience of Canada is any guide. Immigration authorities there set a similar guideline in 1993; as a result, fewer than 500 women had been granted asylum as of Dec. 31, 1995.

One other thing: Kasinga may have escaped a nightmare in Togo, but she was made to endure an inexcusable ordeal in the United States. Imprisoned for 18 months awaiting an asylum decision, she was treated like a hardened criminal a shackled, strip-searched, locked up with convicted felons. The U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service must find a more humane way to detain petitioners for asylum.

Graphic

Photo: Fauziya Kasinga was granted asylum in the United States after

fleeing Togo to escape genital mutilation.

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