A MOTHER'S DILEMMA;

AS THE TWIN CITIES BECOME HOME TO MORE IMMIGRANT WOMEN, SOME OF THEIR MOST PERSONAL SORROWS - SUCH AS FEMALE CIRCUMCISION - ARE BECOMING MORE PUBLIC.

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Body

Some call it "cutting the rose."

The term is a veiled reference to a widespread practice of paring away parts of a girl's genitals - usually in crude conditions and without anesthesia - to render her "clean" in her culture's eyes.

Practiced in many African, Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian countries, the procedure that affects an estimated 130 million of the world's ***women*** is ***more*** often called ***female circumcision***. A growing number of people who advocate against it use a harsher term - ***female*** genital mutilation.

With the recent influx to Minnesota of thousands of African ***immigrants***, the practice is no longer a concern that looms half a world away. Now, a group of ***Twin Cities*** ***women*** is using grass-roots theater to help bring the issue ***home***.

"My pure and innocent daughter, I will not have you suffer the same pain and suffering that I have suffered," a ***woman***'s voice calls. "But how can I prevent it?"

The voice is a ***female*** actor's in a play and puppet show to be staged Saturday during a workshop as part of International ***Women***'s Day on the University of Minnesota's St. Paul campus. Participants will be challenged to answer her perplexing question.

"We're not trying to interfere in anyone else's culture," says Marilyn Cuneo, who heads the play's artistic crew. "And we don't plan to come to a conclusion. But we do want to educate, to make people aware of what's going on. This is not something occurring way over there, but in our own community."

Insome traditions' belief, the clitoris is an "impure organ" that can lead ***women*** into promiscuity. Altering or removing it, which diminishes or kills sexual pleasure, is a rite of passage to womanhood often required for marriage and community acceptance. Infibulation, the ***most*** radical form of ***circumcision***, includes sewing shut the labia, or outer genital skin, leaving one opening through which both urine and menstrual blood must flow. The practice is believed to increase male sexual pleasure and promote marital fidelity.

A mother must choose her young daughter's fate: rejection by her culture or the agony of crude surgery without pain-killers and risk of after-effects circumcised ***women*** know too well.

"In the play, the ***woman*** is relating her own story, because that's the way this all began, with a story submitted to us by two ***immigrant women***," says Cuneo, of Minneapolis. She is producing it with other members of the ***Women***'s International League for Peace and Freedom, one of ***more*** than 50 sponsors of the Saturday event.

The story was written by Selamawit Yohannes and Purna Kumari Gurung, 20-something ***women*** who live and work in the ***Twin Cities***. Yohannes is a native of Ethiopia, where 90 percent of ***women*** are circumcised. Gurung came here from Nepal. The play's production crew hopes to repeat the 25-minute presentation and a discussion in other community settings.

The quandary the mother faces - whether to have her daughter circumcised - is a complex issue colored by traditional, medical and ***women***'s rights perspectives. The issue has been compared to male ***circumcision***.

"But we are making a distinction, " Cuneo says. "***Female circumcision*** is like cutting off the penis."

Male ***circumcision*** in this country was declared unnecessary earlier this week by the American Academy of Pediatricians.

In the U.S. ***immigrant*** community, an estimated 160,000 girls and ***women*** have been subjected to some form of ***female circumcision*** or are at risk of it, according to a recent report from the U.S. Health and Human Services Department. Because the practice is shrouded in secrecy and against the law, there is little documentation of its occurrence in this country. ***Twin Cities*** researchers say they have heard second- and third-hand accounts of ***women*** taking their daughters to Africa, Europe or Toronto, where there is a large Somali population, for ***circumcision***.

A 1994 Minnesota law bans ***female circumcision*** except for medical reasons. It sprung up after a young ***immigrant*** girl was taken to a ***Twin Cities*** hospital with severe bleeding after being circumcised, according to information from the office of Sen. Ellen Anderson, DFL-St. Paul, the law's author.

"People aren't going to talk about ***female*** genital mutilation here, where it's illegal," says Yohannes, who researched the practice as part of her college studies. "That's one of the reasons it's going to be hard to enforce the law, because people will do it undercover. The main issue is not that it prevents sexual pleasure, but that kids are hurt and can die from it. So the best thing to do is to educate people about the dangers."

Clash of cultures

The ***most*** common form of ***female circumcision*** is clitorectomy, removal of all or part of the clitoris, a procedure that usually leaves a ***woman*** unable to achieve orgasm. In a ***more*** invasive procedure, all or part of the inner labia also is removed.

Much ***more*** radical is infibulation, which includes sewing the outer labia together, leaving a single, small opening - often the size of a straw - through which urine and menstrual blood must pass. The practice leads to bladder and kidney infections, causes pain during menstruation and sexual intercourse and heightens pain during childbirth.

Infibulation is done on nine out of 10 ***women*** in Somalia, from where about 12,000 people have recently immigrated to the ***Twin Cities***.

As part of a 1997 study for the Urban Coalition, registered nurse and study author Keyah Davis of St. Paul met with 30 to 50 Somalian ***women*** whose job it has been to perform ***circumcision***.

"They were angry," Davis says. "This is their culture, they said. You can write this law, but it doesn't stop us from circumcising our daughters if we want them circumcised."

Some Somalian ***women*** told Davis that when they returned to Africa to visit, family members abducted their uncircumcised teens and infibulated against them against their parents' wishes. Many ***immigrant women*** wrongly assume that ***circumcision*** is dictated by Muslim religion.

"It really is a process of male power and control that has been turned over to ***female*** gatekeepers," Davis says.

Infibulation guarantees a ***woman***'s virginity and, when a girl is married, the small opening in a girl's outer labia is enlarged, often to her husband's specifications. But ***most immigrants*** now understand that infibulation is not necessary for a ***woman*** to be marriageable in America, she says.

"Some of these men are having sex with American ***women***. And only the ***most*** battered American ***woman*** would allow herself to be infibulated."

An ***immigrant woman*** who is isolated from the community is ***more*** likely to subject her child to ***circumcision***, Davis says. ***Women*** who work outside the ***home*** often change their perspective on ***female circumcision*** fairly quickly.

"It is not the custom in America. It's frowned upon. A lot of people see this as a practice of violence. Once ***women*** are heavily exposed to that opinion, ***most*** make the decision to set ***circumcision*** aside."

Twin Cities doctors now face the question of resuturing Somalian ***women*** after they give birth in metropolitan-area hospitals. Davis' research indicates that ***most*** doctors comply with a patient's wishes, she says.

Karima Bushnell, an international researcher and trainer who also has researched ***female circumcision***, says some doctors have been reluctant. "But how can you do transgender surgery for one ***person*** and not do this for another?" Bushnell asks.

In the Urban Coalition study, health professionals at 31 ***Twin Cities*** clinics reported treating ***immigrant women*** and girls - some as young as 12 - with complications of ***female circumcision***.

The age at which girls are circumcised varies widely, says Agitu Wodijo, a registered nurse from Ethiopia and founder of the Minneapolis-based International Self-Reliance Agency for ***Women***.

"It is done on infants and girls 5 or 6, or sometimes 12 or 13," Wodijo says. "Some do it on marriage day. Some believe that without ***circumcision***, girls will be hypersexual and that will spoil a lot of their lives. Without it, some don't get acceptance for marriage. Some nurses say it's mostly the ***women*** who support ***female*** genital mutilation."

Wodijo opposes ***circumcision*** and has directed workshops in Ethiopia that train midwives who make their livings doing ***circumcisions*** for other kinds of paying jobs. Grass-roots movements have sprung up in many African countries to reduce ***female circumcision***.

Matter of choice

A native Minnesota ***woman*** who had a partial clitorectomy at age 6 on advice of medical doctors adds an intriguing twist to a discussion hinged on the power of cultural beliefs.

Her surgery was recommended, she says, because the size of her clitoris didn't conform to a cultural norm.

"In this country, ***female circumcision*** is done because it doesn't pass a cosmetic test," says Martha Coventry, 46, a Minneapolis writer. "But it is no less culturally imposed."

The procedure, which doctors call inter-sex surgery, is often recommended for girls - and sometimes boys - whose genitals appear ambiguous, neither perfectly male or perfectly ***female***. In Coventry's case, her clitoris extended a half-inch outside her labia. When she was a child, no one told her why the surgery was done, even when she asked.

She was left with a nagging, shameful feeling about her body that led her to write a memoir centered on that experience. A publisher is considering the book for publication. She advocates that children with ambiguous sex organs be allowed to decide for themselves whether or not to have surgery when they are old enough. Some medical doctors now agree, she says, that the psychological toll of childhood inter-sex surgery exceeds that of growing up with a medically defined genital imperfection.

"The ***most*** important thing is there's no need for this to be done to children," she says. "No one demands it, but the culture."

The larger ***female circumcision*** issue stemming from tribal tradition is part of the U.N. Platform for Action derived from the Fourth World Conference on ***Women*** in Beijing, China, in 1995. It is a subject on the table at meetings of people concerned with ***women***'s rights around the world, says Cuneo of the play's artistic crew.

"Since ancestral times, in silence, we have surrendered our bodies for society to grow and prosper," says a voice in the ***women***'s play.

"But has no one stopped to consider the pain and suffering of girls and ***women*** of our society?" another voice asks. "The moment has come to break the silence."

A little girl's story

EDITOR'S NOTE: The following text contains graphic material that may be offensive to some readers.

It is an excerpt from the short story "I See Hope in Her Eyes," by two ***immigrant women***, Selamawit Yohannes and Purna Kumari Gurung. Their story has been adapted as a play and puppet show to raise awareness of ***female*** genital mutilation.

The story is a fictionalized account of a 4-year-old girl's infibulation - genital surgery without anesthesia to cut away her clitoris and inner labia and sew the outer skin together, leaving one small opening for urine and menstrual blood to pass. Infibulation is the ***most*** radical of various forms of ***circumcision*** that have been performed on an estimated 130 million girls and ***women*** in various parts of the world.< From 'I See Hope in Her Eyes'

"Are you ready to be a big girl?" the old ***woman*** whispered in my ear, and I replied, "Yes." The ***woman*** started to undress me. At this point, I was a willing participant as I hadn't the slightest clue what was going to happen.

"Then I heard the ***most*** terrifying noise, the sharpening of a knife. I felt the ***woman*** touching my private part. … Other village ***women*** who had gathered started to chant and sing, and I could hear a drum beating in the background.

"Then I felt the knife slicing away at my flesh as I felt pain take over my body, a pain so excruciating that tears started to well in my eyes. I opened my mouth to scream, but the shock and surprise were too much. No sound came out. I felt the old ***woman*** slicing again. I let out a terrifying scream that faded away among the chanting and the drumming. I started to turn and twist, but to no avail. The hands that held me down were too strong. "Don't scream, be strong. Make your mama proud," one of the ***women*** said.

"I don't know how long this went on. All I could hear were my own screams and cries for help: 'Mother, help me! Mother, help me!' By this time I was so exhausted that I must have passed out. When I came to, I had been washed and my legs tied together so I couldn't move. I saw the beaming village ***women*** telling me that I was a real girl now and that they were proud of me. I looked for my mother among the faces. She was looking down at me, and I could see the pain in her eyes."

EVENT: "***Women***'s Voices," the fourth annual celebration of International ***Women***'s Day

WHEN: 9 a.m. to 3:15 p.m. Saturday; registration begins at 8:30 a.m.

WHERE: Student Center on University of Minnesota's St. Paul campus, 2017 Buford Ave., St. Paul

COST: Free; donations are accepted to offset conference costs.

ABOUT THE EVENT: Sponsored by Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights, Minnesota ***Women***'s Foundation and ***more*** than 50 other ***women***'s organizations and agencies, the event offers workshop sessions focusing on ***women***'s issues at ***home*** and around the globe. They range from the challenges of ***immigrant women*** to girls' self-esteem, ***women*** and girls in sports, safety, economic security and the challenge of balancing work and family life.

ABOUT THE PROGRAM: A play and panel discussion open the program. At both 10:30 a.m. and 1 p.m., participants may attend any of 10 simultaneous workshop sessions on various topics. A break at 11:40 a.m. will include arts performances and breakout sessions for girls and ***women***. Lunch may be purchased. A puppet and mask performance will start at 2:25 p.m., and a call to action will end the program.

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Correction

Friday, March 5, 1999

A story in Thursday's Express section inferred that ***female circumcision*** proliferates among Muslims. A cultural rather than religious tradition, it is practiced by some Muslims but opposed by other Muslims in many parts of the world. Christian and Jewish ***women*** also are subjected to it in some regions of Africa, Southeast Asia and the Middle East.
Correction-Date: March 5, 1999

Graphic

Photo:Chris Polydoroff, Pioneer Press

A story by Selamawit Yohannes, left, and Purna Kumari Gurung has been

turned into a play about ***female circumcision***.

Graphic:Pioneer Press Graphic

Female circumcision: Each year, about 2 million girls have their

genitals ritually altered, primarily in many nations of Africa.

[See microfilm for details]

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