

Trial sparks debate in immigrant communities

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Body

Feelings are running strong in metro Atlanta's African **immigrant communities** over the verdict in an unusual case of female genital mutilation.

A Gwinnett County jury Wednesday found Khalid Adem guilty of circumcising his young daughter when she was 2 years old. Adem, a native of Ethiopia, was sentenced to serve 10 years in prison and five years' probation for using scissors to circumcise his daughter. Adem had denied he committed the act.

"This sends a strong message against FGM [female genital mutilation] and that it is just not acceptable," said Dil-wonberish Abera of the verdict. Abera is a native of Ethiopia who works with refugee and **immigrant** women locally.

Female genital mutilation, also referred to as female circumcision, is not an uncommon practice in some African countries, primarily in more traditional, rural **communities**.

Adem was arrested in 2003 after the South African-born mother of his daughter accused him of circumcising the girl. The act had occurred two years earlier. The girl told Gwinnett authorities in 2003 that her father had done it.

The Adem **trial** drew out a lot of **debate** in the metro African **immigrant communities**. Teddy Dagne, host of a popular Ethiopian radio program, said the phone lines have been "swamped" with people weighing in on the case.

The majority of callers believe Adem is not guilty because the practice is not that common.

"Some people who stick to old traditions might do it, but many people frown on it," Dagne said. Back home "they know it is harmful and not good for the children.

"They may have had it done to them but they don't want it for other generations."

Dagne said some in the local Ethiopian **community** want to raise funds to help Adem mount an appeal.

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But Ntombiyomusa Msimanga, a South African who received her doctorate degree from Georgia Tech, was appalled by the case. She said she did not hear of the practice until coming to the U.S. and she thinks the verdict makes it clear that FGM must stop.

"If we didn't get this sentence, if they didn't find him guilty, then people would think that we are a people who practice this," Msimanga said.

Nigerian-born Glory Kilanko, director of Women Watch Afrika, doubts the father's guilt and said the verdict paints a negative picture of the African **community**.

"Part of the issue being discussed is that now they are portraying this as every African woman that walks on the streets in Georgia has been circumcised," Kilanko said.

"It's bringing an embarrassment and discomfort."

The vast majority of African **immigrants** are well aware that FGM is against U.S. law, said Sandra Mullins, director of Refugee, Resettlement and Immigration Services of Atlanta. Reliable figures on how widespread FGM is in metro Atlanta are hard to come by.

But the practice isn't unheard of here.

The DeKalb County Board of Health began an outreach program in August for FGM through their Center for Torture and Trauma Survivors.

The center's director, Kitty Kelley, said a Somali case worker brought the need to the center's attention after noticing "a number of [clients] were complaining about infection, pain, inability to go to work, shame."

Kelley said some of the women underwent FGM in their native countries while others had the procedure here.

Graphic

Photo: NICK ARROYO / StaffMany local **immigrants** don't believe Khalid Adem, who was convicted and got a 10-year sentence for circumcising his daughter, is guilty because they say the practice is not common.

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