

# Kenya girls flee homes to avoid a ritual 'cut'

Despite legal ban, a traditional and risky circumcision procedure still flourishes in many tribal communities

BY JOSEPH ADERONGALA

(NAIROBI, KENYA)

Young girls from some communities in Kenya are fleeing their homes by the hundreds to avoid undergoing a traditional female-circumcision procedure.

Many have sought refuge at the Center for Human Rights and Democracy near Eldoret. Sixteen of the girls, Catholics who came from the Marakwet district in western Kenya, have asked the courts to protect them from the ritual.

Some girls have asked a Kenyan court to protect them from the ritual.

The procedure, known as female genital mutilation (FGM), consists of the surgical removal of all or part of the clitoris and often part of the vaginal labia as well.

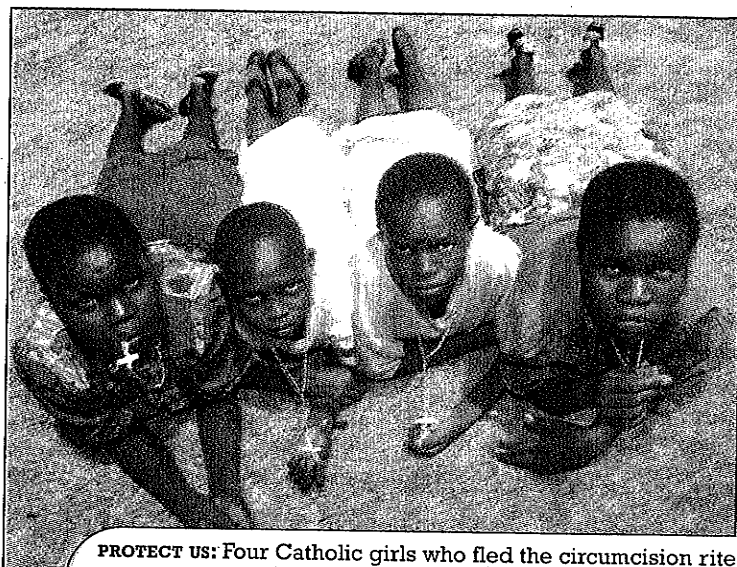
In some cultures, the cutting is more extreme and is followed by a stitching and narrowing of the vaginal opening.

The mutilation, practiced in various forms in many communities throughout Africa, is seen as a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood in many Kenyan tribes. It is meant to reduce a

woman's sexual desire so that she will be more faithful to her husband. Often, girls who do not undergo "the cut" are ridiculed or ostracized by others.

Yet often neither the victims nor the practitioners of this outdated rite seem aware of the dangers of FGM. Besides the psychological torture the initiates undergo prior to being circumcised, there is also the indescribable pain they endure while being cut and the risk of dying in the hands of tribal surgeons who operate under unsanitary conditions. Medical experts warn that those who undergo FGM are likely to face problems in childbirth and suffer irreparable physical damage (see box).

Although ritual circumcision is meant to prepare the girls for marriage, it also makes the girls objects of desire for men. "A girl is free to have sex with any man after she is circumcised, and men take advantage of that," Priscilla Nangurai, headmistress of a girls' boarding school in Kajiado, told the Nation, Nairobi's daily newspaper. "It is



PROTECT US: Four Catholic girls who fled the circumcision rite

not in our culture to refuse a man." Consequently, many young girls drop out of school or marry young due to pregnancy.

### LONG-AWAITED BAN

Until recently, there was no law banning FGM in Kenya. President Daniel Arap Moi had declared the procedure outlawed on more than one occasion, but his position was unenforceable because Parliament had not passed a similar ban, and Kenyan law operates on the doctrine of *nulla poena sine lege* — "there is no punishment without law."

Kenya's 20-year Plan of Action, which went into effect in November 1999 and pertains largely to women's rights, called

for an eventual national elimination of FGM. Parliament finally passed a ban on the procedure in December 2001.

Some 100 million women have undergone the rite in Africa, and about 2 million still go through it every year, with war-torn Somalia topping the charts.

In Kenya, the practice remains prevalent among the Kisii, Kuria, Maasai, Kalenjin and a section of communities in Taita Taveta. Even in communities that have greatly reduced the practice, such as the Kikuyu and Kamba, about 18 percent of the girls still face the cut.

### 'UNGODLY AND BARBARIC'

Father Joachim Omoli Ouko, a priest of the Apostles of Jesus, told Our Sunday Visitor that in the year 2000, some 2,000 girls underwent the procedure in the Rift Valley region of the Markwet district — the same area from which many girls fled for safety to Eldoret earlier this year. That number was up from 800 the year before, he said.

With the ban now in effect and no reporting protocol in place, tracking FGM statistics will likely be more difficult.

Last year, Archbishop John Njenga of Mombasa said that parents who force their daughters to undergo FGM were breaking one of their children's greatest rights and should be prosecuted.

"A body of a human being, especially of the female, should be respected and not tampered with," said Archbishop Njenga. "By exposing your daughters to female genital mutilation, it means you do not respect their bodies."

He also urged religious leaders to be at the forefront in the fight against FGM, which he called "ungodly and barbaric."

"The Catholic Church is opposed to this," he added.

Archbishop Njenga urged children to report parents who force them to undergo FGM, and assured that the Catholic Church would do everything to help them. □

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## Education the key to reversing a troubling tradition

The ill effects of female genital mutilation (FGM) are many, according to health officials.

Apart from the extreme pain involved, the procedure can result in severe hemorrhage and damage to a woman's sexual and reproductive organs, chronic infections, intermittent bleeding, abscesses and tumors. Other serious conditions that may result include urinary-tract infections, kidney damage, bladder stones, infections due to obstructed menstrual flow, excessive scarring, keloids, cysts and more prolonged and painful childbirth.

But despite these risks and the recent national ban on FGM, many Kenyan parents are still risking jail terms and heavy fines to continue the traditional ritual with their daughters. Some are now circumcising their daughters at a younger age to avoid government intervention and possible opposition from the girls themselves, according to a report in National Geographic Today.

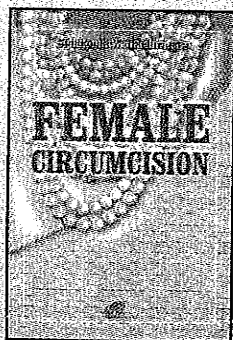
In April, handwritten leaflets alleged to have been produced by the Mungiki sect, also known as the Tent of the Living God sect, were distributed in some parts of the Kiambu district. The leaflets said that all women between the ages of 13 and 65 who have not undergone FGM by July 7 will be forcibly circumcised.

Sect members have denied responsibility for the threat and have called the allegations malicious.

Loreto Sister Ephigenia Gachiri, a member of the Kikuyu

tribe, has written about FGM in "Female Circumcision" (Pauline Publications Africa, \$4). Sister Gachiri founded and directs the Loreto Outreach, an educational project to end FGM.

Her 135-page book includes vivid testimonies from victims of the rite and offers its historical background. She notes that female circumcision originated thousands of years ago in Egypt and Ethiopia, has been practiced in various forms worldwide and was used in England and the United States as recently as the 1950s to treat such conditions as hysteria, lesbianism and masturbation.



It is perpetuated today, she says, by factors such as poverty, a male-superiority complex and issues of power and control over the woman exerted by husbands and mothers-in-law.

Anglican and Catholic missionaries were among the first to take a stand against FGM, Sister Gachiri notes. But she believes the Church can do more today to educate people to oppose the practice.

"Many associations for men, women and youths, down to the basic Church organs, are ready-made forums for training trainers for the campaign against female circumcision," she writes. » By OSV staff from news reports. Sister Gachiri's book can be ordered online at [www.paulinesafrica.org](http://www.paulinesafrica.org), or by writing Pauline Publications Africa, P.O. Box 49026, Nairobi, Kenya