

BY JORDAN LITE

An American atrocity

While activists fight to end the gruesome ritual of female circumcision overseas, it's being ignored right here in the United States. Why aren't authorities cracking down?

FORTUNATE ADEM TOLD HER STORY in a soft voice that made her sound as if she weren't much older than the toddler whose custody she was fighting for. "We had just finished celebrating her third birthday party," she said last August, on the stand at her divorce hearing in a Georgia courtroom.

It was September 2002, she testified; the Adems were living in an apartment in Duluth, a middle-class suburb of Atlanta, when Khalid Adem, an Ethiopian immigrant, told his wife he wanted their daughter to be circumcised. This ancient and excruciating rite of passage is common in his homeland.

Fortunate balked. A native of South Africa, she had lived in the United States since she was 6 years old; female circumcision wasn't part of her world. "I thought he was sick," she said. They argued. Then she became paranoid. No way was she letting Khalid near their little girl.

The couple split up. But four months later, Khalid called. His mother was visiting. Could they spend some time with the child? Haunted by their argument, Fortunate said no: She was afraid he would mutilate the girl. According to her testimony on the stand, Khalid laughed at her. "You're so stupid," she recalled him saying. "What makes you think I haven't already done it?"

Fortunate took the girl to the doctor. Months earlier, the pediatrician had diagnosed her with a severe diaper rash; she squirmed and cried whenever anyone tried to examine her too closely. Now the doctor called in a specialist in child abuse, who confirmed Fortunate's



A Somali Bantu in upstate New York; experts fear natives of cultures that believe in genital cutting are practicing it here.

greatest fear: Her daughter's clitoris had been removed.

Like Fortunate Adem, most Americans have only heard of female genital mutilation (FGM) in news reports, as something that happens halfway across the world in at least 28 African countries and pockets of the Middle East and Southeast Asia. Yet as her experience suggests, this deeply rooted tradition—which doctors compare not to male circumcision but rather to removing most or all of a man's penis—has quietly migrated to the United States as the population of refugees from these regions has grown considerably. In 1997, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta estimated that 168,000 women and girls living in the United States have had their genitals cut or are at risk of suffering procedures variously known as female circumcision, female genital cutting and FGM.

While American activists have successfully persuaded some communities abroad to put an end to the practice, little has been done to address the threat at home. CDC officials told SELF they have not tracked the problem since

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the 1997 estimate because they have no mandate or funding to do so. And in the eight years since Congress banned FGM here, no one has ever been prosecuted for the crime. Senator Harry Reid, the Nevada Democrat who spearheaded passage of the FGM ban, says he is disappointed no action has been taken. “If ever there was an example of brutality to women, this is it,” Reid says. “We need to send a message to immigrant communities that you can’t do these things to little girls in America.”

ANTI-FGM ACTIVISTS ARE LOOKING TO GEORGIA to sound the alarm. It is there that court testimony alleges Khalid Adem, a 28-year-old gas station cashier who moved to the United States around 1991, cut out his daughter’s clitoris with scissors as another man held her down. After Fortunate called the police, they speculated in the arrest warrant that the mutilation had occurred in the fall of 2001, long before she says Khalid mentioned the idea. (The girl’s pediatrician, Rose Badaruddin, M.D., testified there are reasons to think Fortunate would not have noticed the removal of her daughter’s clitoris. It is not always visible on a toddler, she said, and most girls resist being scrutinized to that degree.)

At the August divorce hearing, Khalid denied any part in the mutilation, contradicting Fortunate’s account of his actions and beliefs. “I did not cause anybody to do

this on my own daughter. I do not want anybody to do this,” he testified. His lower lip trembling, he began to cry, and his nose grew red. “It is killing me to know that my child is mutilated in the United States of America.”

The assistant district attorney working on the case says the state intends to prosecute, but nearly a year after his arrest, Khalid has yet to be indicted and remains free on bond. Fortunate, who works as a cable and Internet repairwoman, was awarded sole custody of their daughter at the hearing. She testified that the girl wakes up from nightmares once or twice a week. “She’ll hold on to me and say, ‘Mommy, I see monster,’” Fortunate said. “I say, ‘What monster?’ and she says, ‘Daddy monster.’ I just try to hold her and comfort her.”

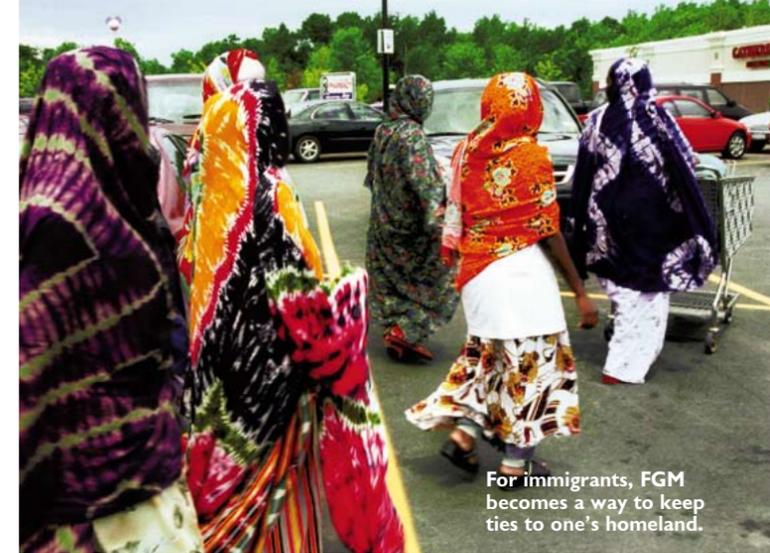
Doctors say the long-term health effects of genital mutilation can be severe, even life threatening. There are several types of FGM, including clitorectomy, the partial or total removal of the clitoris, and excision, in which the clitoris and part or all of the inner folds of the vulva are cut out. In the most extreme version, infibulation, part or all of the external genitalia is removed, and the remainder is sewn together, leaving an opening the size of a pinkie.

The procedures, performed mostly on prepubescent girls, are extraordinarily painful. Not only do they affect the clitoris, an organ full of nerve endings, but they are also

usually done without anesthesia or sterile instruments. A girl may develop deadly hemorrhaging and infections. Later in life, she could confront sterility or childbirth complications. Urinating can take half an hour because the urethra may be partially obstructed; menstruation can go on all month because the vaginal opening is too small. And girls and women who have suffered the makeshift surgery may be traumatized, angry, depressed and unable to enjoy sex. “The culture doesn’t consider it mutilation, but it is,” says Terry Dunn, M.D., a gynecologist who has treated women for aftereffects of FGM at a clinic in Denver.

THE ADEM CASE EXPOSES AN ISSUE SHROUDED IN shame and secrecy. Refugee resettlement workers and women’s rights activists say they have heard for years that circumcisers are cutting girls in the United States, and that immigrants sometimes pool their money to fly a circumciser into the country to perform multiple procedures during one visit. But owing to the nature of the crimes, the insularity of the communities in which they happen and Americans’ reluctance to appear racist or to challenge immigrant traditions, it has been next to impossible to find these circumcisers.

Indeed, the Adem case is unusual in that authorities learned about it at all. But it is not the only known case. Three years ago, a Massachusetts couple were jailed



For immigrants, FGM becomes a way to keep ties to one’s homeland.

after doctors found their 3-year-old daughter’s genitalia in shreds. Among the 25 victims of FGM Dr. Dunn has seen, she is certain at least one was mutilated on U.S. soil. Though the teenage patient ran away before Dr. Dunn could get help from the police, reports of the case prompted the Colorado legislature to pass its own law against FGM, one of only 16 states to have done so.

With federal prosecutions lacking, activists hope the states will step up. But in Georgia, there is no state law banning FGM. The Adem case inspired a state senator to introduce such a bill in January. Critics say if Khalid Adem is tried in state court, the absence of such a law could weaken the prosecution’s case, implying to jurors that FGM is a legally protected cultural practice. (Continued)

But it will take more than legislation to end a ritual rooted in thousands of years of culture. In communities that practice it, FGM is said to reduce a girl's sexual desire and safeguard her virginity. Some believe FGM ensures a woman will join ancestors in the afterlife (though it's not called for in Islam or any other organized religion). Others claim the clitoris must be removed because it hurts a man's penis during sex or harms a baby during childbirth.

Among immigrants, FGM becomes a way for parents to keep their children tied to their homeland. Mothers may feel a powerful urge to take their daughters through the same rite of passage they endured, says Safia Jama, a Somali immigrant and mother of nine who works at Refugee Resettlement and Immigration Services of Atlanta, a nonprofit group in Decatur, Georgia. Jama says many proponents see FGM as "an act of love. They are trying to protect their child," she explains, because an un mutilated woman "will not be married; she will not be accepted by her age group."

ACTIVISTS ARE URGING doctors, teachers and social service workers who spend time with refugees to reach out to mutilated mothers and encourage healthier rituals for their daughters, such as the "circumcision with words" that is slowly catching on in parts of Kenya. In this ceremony, girls learn about their responsibilities as women but are not mutilated. In Great Britain, social services workers have prevented mutilations because the government has an established process for intervening when teachers or doctors suspect a girl is at risk. But there is less awareness in the United States, and no protocol for dealing with FGM cases, says Taina Bien-Aime,

executive director of Equality Now, a human rights organization in New York City. "We are way behind in the ball game, unfortunately," she says. "If there are no statistics kept on FGM and no cases reported, then it is difficult to pressure the government. That's why breaking the silence is so important."

There are some encouraging signs. In Denver, Dr. Dunn recently reversed the infibulation of an Ethiopian woman at the request of the woman and her husband, who seemed unhappy that sex was painful for her. Last summer, Equality Now convened a dozen international refugee workers

Women in Georgia fled to a safe house to save their daughters from FGM.

and women's rights activists to discuss the issue. And as a result of inquiries from SELF, aides to Senator Reid say they plan to ask several government agencies, including the State Department and immigration services, to report to Congress on their progress in fighting FGM.

A handful of mothers, too, have stepped forward to protest. In Georgia, at least two women fled to a safe house last year to protect their daughters from threats of FGM. And on the West Coast, a 38-year-old immigrant (who asked that her name not be published) says she also ran away and now lives in constant fear that her in-laws will find her and take her 11-year-old daughter back to Kenya. There, in a numbingly cold river, one relative would hold the girl down while another cut her with a razor. "It tears my heart," she says, weeping. "She's so little...her life is waiting for her."

Behind her tears, she is defiant. "I don't believe what they say, that [FGM] is about upholding cultural norms," she says. "It's a way the community uses to let a woman know her place. It's all about control. It's cruel." ■

New York City journalist Jordan Lite has reported on health issues from Africa.