



Female mutilation: A model's story of ritual torture

She no longer hides her sexual amputation

By Lisa M. Hamm, Associated Press writer

NEW YORK -- Waris Dirie is a study of sultry eroticism in her modeling portfolio: back bare, her face in profile crowned by a sexy tangle of braids; topless, her dusky eyes looking into the camera.

But the come-hither glances hide a dark secret. Where most women have genitals, Ms. Dirie has a scar. More than 20 years ago, when she was just a child, her sex was stolen from her in an ancient African ritual.

"It's like being crippled," she says. "That's it, the rest of your life, crippled, that section of your body."

Much has been written about female circumcision. Women have fled Africa to escape it; human rights activists have decried it.

But there remain as many as 120 million who have suffered the mutilation. Most do not speak out, accepting circumcision as something their grandmothers and mothers endured, something their daughters and granddaughters will endure.

Ms. Dirie is different. She left Somalia behind long ago. She has traveled the world, lived in Paris, moved to New York, graced numerous ads and magazines. And she is in a position to fight the tradition of genital cutting.

"Why am I here today talking to you, from herding my camels in the desert?" says Ms. Dirie, clad simply in a white blouse and black slacks, her face devoid of makeup. "I know what that reason is -- it's to do something about it, to speak for those who can't!"

In some ways, Ms. Dirie has never left Somalia. She wears no watch, telling time by the length of shadows. She sniffs the air to check if it will rain.

She thinks she is 28. She comes from a small nomadic clan that survived by pursuing rain across the desert to support its camels. Men were the leaders, and women existed to serve and please them.

She remembers when she was about 4 or 5. Her sister had been circumcised a year or two earlier, and Ms. Dirie was envious.

"She used to tell me, 'Oh, I'm a woman now. I'm not a girl anymore,' " she recalls. "I said, 'Mama, when are you going to do to me what you did to her? I want to be a woman!'"

"Of course, my time came and it wasn't the greatest like I thought it was going to be." She pauses. "It was nothing but torture."

The night before, Ms. Dirie got a full glass of camel's milk at dinner -- an unheard-of treat in a clan where an entire family usually shares a single glass. Her mother said, "Tomorrow morning, you're going to be a woman." Ms. Dirie was so excited she could hardly sleep.

Ms. Dirie's mother woke her before dawn. The two met an old gypsy woman and walked into the desert to a large, flat rock.

"My mother looked at me and said, 'I haven't got the strength to hold you down. Don't



fight me,' " recalls Ms. Dirie, her low voice dragging. "She stuck a piece of root between my teeth. She said, 'Just hold onto your pain there.' "

The gypsy woman took out a small, dull blade. Suddenly, Ms. Dirie felt a searing pain, followed by seemingly endless agony.

"I didn't move," Ms. Dirie murmurs. "I just shivered.

There was no painkiller, no anesthesia, no nothing.

"I don't really know when it was over. I passed out."

There are many forms of female circumcision. In some cases, the woman's clitoris -- the primary organ of sexual pleasure -- is nicked or its foreskin is cut off. More often, it is amputated.

The most severe form -- known as infibulation, and performed about 15 percent of the time -- is what happened to Ms. Dirie.

All of the external sexual organs are scraped away, and the wound is sewn closed with acacia thorns, catgut, silk or a homemade glue, with a matchstick-sized hole created to pass urine.

Survivors endure a lifetime of aftereffects -- difficulty urinating and menstruating, painful intercourse, repeated infections, sometimes infertility. Women are cut or forced open on their wedding night, cut open more to give birth, then sewed up again.

In a way, Ms. Dirie was lucky -- she survived. One of her sisters and a cousin didn't. Many girls die from hemorrhaging, shock, infection or tetanus.

In the aftermath, Ms. Dirie was severely depressed. Her legs were tied together from hip to ankle for weeks to keep her from ripping open the wound. Urination was excruciating, and she became infected. She couldn't eat for a month.

As she grew older, Ms. Dirie refused to accept her fate as a Somali woman.

When her father arranged for her to marry an elderly man in exchange for five camels, she ran away from home. Just 13 years old, the skinny girl walked 300 miles across Somalia to the capital, Mogadishu, drinking from camels in the desert to survive.

Once, she collapsed under a tree, exhausted, and awoke to find a lion staring into her eyes. She lay immobile, frozen with terror, until the great animal finally ambled away.

Ms. Dirie found a home with her mother's sister, Harima. Then an uncle who was Somalia's ambassador to Britain came looking for a domestic servant for his London household. Dirie won the job.

In England, the first thing she noticed was that the people all looked pale and very ill. "I never saw white people before!" she says, laughing.

Then she discovered that her cousins weren't circumcised.

"I figured out that what happened to me wasn't right," she says. She said nothing, but embraced Western culture, learning English from television.

When her uncle and his family returned to Somalia three years later, Ms. Dirie buried her passport in the yard a week before their departure and claimed she lost it so she wouldn't have to go.

Suddenly she was 16, alone and homeless in London. But she met a Somali woman who invited her to share her YMCA room, and got a job cleaning the grill at McDonald's. A photographer saw her and suggested she try modeling.

Ms. Dirie eventually dropped into a modeling agency and was immediately sent out to

audition for the prestigious Pirelli calendar. When the photographer asked her to remove her top, she stalked out, thinking he wanted to sleep with her. But the agency explained the earning potential of modeling compared to McDonald's, so she returned -- and landed the cover.

That was almost 10 years ago.

For all those years, this woman who embodied sex hid her own sexual amputation.

She finally broke her silence this summer, telling her story to Britain's Marie Claire magazine. The many supportive letters and phone calls she has received from readers have strengthened her resolve to act.

Ms. Dirie lives every day with the consequences of her own cutting. A doctor in England surgically opened her scar when she started menstruating, but painful periods still send her to bed for days.

She says she has "been chaste all my life," believing sex belongs in marriage, and is engaged to marry jazz drummer Dana Murray.

Many cut women, with encouragement from a loving partner, are still able to enjoy sex because the scar area and other parts of the body can be quite sensitive, says Hanna Lightfoot-Klein, a sexologist who interviewed 400 infibulated women in the Sudan in the early 1980s.

"There's nothing I can do but live with it, heal myself," Ms. Dirie says after climbing a spiral staircase to her modeling agency's rooftop for a photo session.

She pauses, lost in thought, and looks out over the city streets. It seems her gaze reaches across an entire ocean.

"You know, thinking about it, looking out, there're little girls it's happening to today, right now, as we're speaking, somewhere," she says, her voice almost a whisper.

"It's definitely got to stop! It's just got to stop."

AT A GLANCE

Facts about female genital circumcision, also referred to as female mutilation:

ORIGIN Researchers believe it started 4,000 years ago, before the advent of organized religion.

WHO Performed primarily by Muslims because of widespread misconception it is required by Islam. Also practiced by some Egyptian Christians and Ethiopian Jews. Estimates run as high as 130 million women, with 2 million more girls cut each year. Most are circumcised between ages 4 and 12, but some as infants.

WHERE Twenty-three countries in Africa. Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, Somalia and Sudan account for 75 percent of cases. In Somalia and Djibouti, 98 percent of girls are cut; in Ethiopia, Eritrea and Sierra Leone the number exceeds 90 percent. More than 50 percent are cut in Burkina Faso, Chad, Ivory Coast, Egypt, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Kenya, Liberia, Mali, Nigeria and Togo. Practiced on a lesser scale in Asian countries of Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan and India, which have sizable Islamic populations.

WHY Families believe it makes daughters more marriageable by certifying their virginity, protecting them from their rampaging sexuality and ensuring marital fidelity. In fact, men often will take only circumcised brides, and uncut women are considered prostitutes. Old wives' tales abound that intact female genitals are dirty, that circumcision makes marital sex better, women more fertile and delivery of babies safer. In every case the opposite is true.

OPPOSITION Pressure growing among women's, human rights and child welfare groups and professional organizations to stop the practice. African countries that have criminalized it, to little effect, include Sudan, Ghana and Egypt, although the Egyptian ban is on health-care workers only. Other bans have passed in the United States, Belgium, Britain, Denmark, France, Norway and Sweden. Canada is considering a ban.

Photos by The Associated Press

Top: Model Waris Dirie reflects on her life as a child in Somalia during an interview in New York. As a six-year-old she was forcefully circumcised according to family tradition in her homeland. Bottom: Waris Dirie, with New York's World Trade Center in the background, is searching to find how and why the practice of female circumcision began. "Where did it come from?" she asks.