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Somalia: Factor 15: Human Rights

Somalia: Gender Inequality and Female Genital Mutilation

Predominately a social crisis across Asian and African countries, many women are living in societies that believe in female genital mutilation. Especially gruesome inequality comes into play during mutilation procedures. Women are forced to undergo procedures that not only damage them during the process itself, but in the many years to come. There are four central categories of these FGMs, yet they are not enclosed specifically to: partial or total removal of the clitoris/or the prepuce, partial or total removal of the clitoris and labia minora, narrowing of the vaginal orifice by cutting the surrounding skin and creating a seal, and other harmful procedures for non-medical purposes. Cultures would argue it is nothing but a tradition that has been in place for quite some time that brings honor to families in the region; all the while, men would argue it preserves the virginity of women and creates a socially accepting environment for future marriages (UNICEF, 2014).

Many spectators are under the assumption that these genital mutilations are an Islamic religious practice, when in fact, that assumption is untrue. Kenya and Ethiopia are two Christian African countries currently using these practices. Henceforth, genital mutilation is not a religious practice but a cultural.

The country of Somalia is composed of a single ethnic group. Each nuances of local lifestyles share a single language, religion, culture, and trace their heritage back to correspondent ancestors. The people had been ruled colonially for over a century: French, Italian, British, Ethiopian, and Kenyan districts were created and controlled. This rule ended after times of mass civil wars, killing many people of Somalia's society.

Men and women are held in two separate societal spheres. Men have a known respect, while women gain respect throughout their lifetimes. This is achieved by protected the virginity of their bodies, and eventually producing the highest number of children possible. A woman routinely gives birth to seven to eight children (Lewis, 1996).

Somalia is leading the boards in the percentage of women affected by female genital mutilation (FGM). Although laws against the circumcisions have been in place for many years, 98 percent of all living women in Somalia are harmed. Other women and activists in the area have begun non-governmental organizations and child protection agencies in hopes to end this tragic phenomenon, with no prevail (Ahmed M. , 2013). Nigeria has made an upset in Africa's momentum recently by outlawing female genital mutilation, of any sort, in the country on May 5, 2015. Unfortunately, this decision has not deterred Somalians and their ways.

Women who have undergone a genital mutilation are treated much better within their country. Because these procedures are a cultural expectation, the women who have had them done are the first to marry. Men consider this as the ultimate virginity of their spouse, and a woman is considered unclean if not. If a man is married to a woman to later find that she has not been cut and sewn, it is his right (in Somalia) to torture the woman due to her choice (The Associated Press: Daily News, 2014)

Genital mutilation is not the only way women are mistreated in the country. Ranking fourth in the globe for gender inequality at .776 (maximum of 1 denoting absolute inequality), Somalian women are facing many other pressing issues. Along with high rates of mutilation, rape, child marriage, domestic violence, and maternal mortality rates (1,600 per 100,000 live births) are within the top five of all nations.

Somalian culture insists that people are organized according to clans. Within these clans, payments may be put forth as well as blood transfusions after facing violence. A woman in Somalia is not allowed to be the receiver of either of the benefits, all go directly to the man of the home.

Another disadvantage the women and girls are faced with is the lack of education and/or opportunity for jobs. A shocking 36 percent of students in primary school are girls, which then dwindles to a lower <15 percent in higher education. The lack of education ultimately defers to the lack of general comprehension skills- 10 percent of Somalian girls in rural areas can read, and of all people working in the civil services, only 19 percent are women.

There are a variety of health issues faced during FGM procedures, as well as later on in their lives. Instruments often include a household knife, a shred of broken glass, or a dirty razor. Because these are often never sterilized, the surgeries are the perfect pathway for the spread of the HIV virus. The HIV virus is spread through bodily fluids. If the equipment for such procedures have not been cleaned between usages, it is of high possibility that one infected woman could infect many others after her. Compared to other African countries, Somalia has a rather low rate of persons infected by HIV virus/AIDS. Yet, for women, infections are gradually increasing (Tran, 2014). Today, almost half of people with the HIV virus are women. The young girls of their country make up the majority of those living with the disease.

If we continue to allow the people of the globe believe this is an Islamic follower issue, the problem will never be solved. The first few steps will include educating the men and women completing the surgeries on the reality of the situation. Without religion, it will be much more difficult to justify such actions (Robinson, 1998). Female genital mutilations first need to be linked to social practices. A society is much more likely to change its views of a situation rather than a church institution.

In the majority of cases, the decision ultimately comes down the mother or father of the girl. And although as society we should strive for the girl to have the right to decide, that is a nearly impossible goal to achieve in a short period of time. We, as people who are against this discrimination, should teach mothers and fathers the right to say no.

I propose we begin with education. Not only education as in schooling, but education in the importance of women as a whole. Religion of the country and society is not posing the issue. The social inequality is the root cause of this problem. These mutilations have continued over generations, so how could we, as spectators, believe that these people see any wrong-doing in their actions? Once taught, it would be important for the local governments to begin implementing the laws that have already been passed protecting women in the area. It was also, then, become the duty of local students to spread the word as teachers to their fellow peers in their communities.

Women are valuable not only to society, but the workforce as well. I propose a newfound partnership with the Global Fund for Women. The Global Fund for Women is a grant-maker and global advocate for women's rights. This fund aids in directing resources and create advocacy campaigns on critical global issues affected women and young girls (Global Fund for Women, 2014).

Both men and women alike are lacking the knowledge of respect for these valuable members of their country. With the aid of social workers, relief helpers, and women and men who believe in social equality, I would go from area to area in Somalia spreading the word of the importance of women. I, as well, realize this would not be an "overnight" process either. Deeply embedded socially in their cultures, the people of the area would likely resist any changes to be made.

I would overcome this issue by first working with those who have lost something due to this terrible practice. Whether it be a family with a loved one who has passed due to the complications, a woman who endure unbearable pain, a woman who cannot go through the process of child birth, or a woman who simply feels against herself in mutilated skin. If we could get through to a handful of women, I believe we would soon see a much larger change.

The Global Fund for Women works by giving grants to women's organizations to better their lives and the lives around them. One may ask how a humanities issue would affect a food crisis in the area. Unbeknownst to many, the women giving the surgeries often do because it is the only source of income available. Women could ultimately attribute to approximately 80% of the agricultural production of Africa, yet are held back by discriminating laws forbidding them from ownership of land and property (Global Fund for Women, 2014).

If we get through to enough women through offering education and spreading word of possible rights in their futures, we- the women, social workers, relief helpers, men and women volunteers, and I- would be able to begin an organization for those who have been affected by this same practice- which over 98% of the female population has. I do not expect nearly that many women to be open to the idea, but everything must start with one. With a tough economy here in the United States, we may run into the issue of lack of support for these foreign aids and monetary values. Women, as a whole, have gained leaps and bounds of respect throughout the last few decades, and I know that there would be women and men in our country willing to provide that in a foreign country.

Having the organization continue to process of spreading education and good-word of women, I feel there would be a strong case for potential grant money given by the Global Fund for Women. The Global Fund for Women was founded in 1986 by three strong and valuable women: Anne Firth Murray, Frances Kissling, and Laura Ledereer. Frustrated with the lack of support and funding for women's groups, they decided they would start their own- an organization that would fund women-led organization directly. With the given grant money, I would distribute the newfound wealth throughout the organization and the women involved. Of course, to make any true agricultural advances, women would need to obtain the right to own land, but we (as an organization) would hope that would be accomplished through time by education and women taking a stand.

The Global Fund for Women has previously offered over \$120,920,544 to 4,776 organizations, many of the base countries being located in Africa or Southern Asia. With aspirations to receive a good start up amount- I would separate grant money into three main dividends: local farmer's markets, teaching education and licenses, and for further human rights and aid work.

Without the right to own property, it is problematic for women to usefully assist in agricultural production. I believe creating successful local farmer's markets in the region would be beneficial. Farmer's markets have been successful in many South African countries. Fresh, organic produce is being offered to poorer communities, providing nourishment and health to people otherwise lacking due to inadequate food sources (Bax, 2013). While men harvested the crops, the women could set up times and areas to sell the fresh produce, not only giving women a new source of income, but also giving the people of the region a source of fresh and nutritious foods. In the grand scheme of farming, even with the challenges women face, they are currently only trailing 13-25% in total produce. To go even one step further, if the women achieve enough experience and gain substantial support and exposure in the area of marketing and selling, they could possibly take the produce to a national trade level.

Teaching education and licenses would be yet another huge step forward towards equality and betterment of the country as a whole. If women attained a proper education, they could use that to help pass their knowledge along. With more of the general population becoming educated, a variety of inventions could be unlocked from minds that haven't been fostered to their potential in prior years. As well, having areas of study such as sciences, young children and adults could begin working on new ways to assist in not only creating food for the region, but also successfully distributing it.

As for the organization's last priority on the budget, the continuation of a women's rights movement and aid work, we would aim to continue on a strong path and concentrated path towards success. Now, success in this situation easily varies from one individual to another, but if our organization is able to

begin an end to female genital mutilation, while educating the people of the area to better food sources and knowledge of the land, I do not believe that one could ask for much more.

Another source I feel would help in prevention and education is media. Media coverage is either negative or positive, yet the situation would be brought to light. As a young woman from the United States, I would not have known about such an issue if it had not been for an advanced sociology course. If our organization was able to reach out to the media to speak out against the problem, providing useful statistics and brainstorming, I believe we would reach many more women who have been affected, as well as other society members who want to help the cause (Ahmed I. , 2015).

Women throughout many countries have faced times of trial due to gender inequality. In some countries it is more prevalent than others, but I believe, along with many other members of society, that this is an international issue that needs to be addressed. Whether it be fighting for the right to vote, discrimination in the work place, the lack of ability to purchase or own land, dress codes, or female genital mutilation procedures, women have a variety of challenges they must face daily.

With this plan in place, I would hope that there would be enough success within the first few years to create a true change, not only within the land boundaries of Somalia, but for all of the countries women are faced with this issue. Whether it be a procedure of partial or total removal of the clitoris/or the prepuce, partial or total removal of the clitoris and labia minora, narrowing of the vaginal orifice by cutting the surrounding skin and creating a seal, or any other harmful procedures for non-medical purposes, I believe women should have the right to say no. Through proper education of their society, we would aim to have their own people speak against this ancient practice, acknowledging that it is against human rights to force a woman, of any age, to undergo such a surgical procedure. The true issue is not the stemming from the surgeries themselves, but from the ideals behind them. “No nation can rise to the height of glory unless your women are side by side with you. We are victims of evil customs. It is a crime against humanity that our women are shut up within the four walls of the houses as prisoners. There is no sanction anywhere for the deplorable condition in which our women have to live.” — Muhammad Ali Jinnah

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