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Thirty Million Mutilated Women

On the front page of the world-renowned magazine *le Monde* a report was published bearing the title: "30 million mutilated girls and women in Africa". It was the report of a seminar on "Traditional practices affecting the health of women and children" held by the World Health Organization in Khartoum, Sudan, Feb. 10-15, 1979. Of this report we publish the following excerpts:

They are now thirty million, according to reports that surely under-estimate the facts. Thirty million women and young girls excised, sewed, infibulated with razor blades, knives, bottle fragments, stone pieces, acacia thorns. Thirty million "erotic invalids", quoting the expression used by Benoitte Grout. It is to protest against feminine sexual mutilations that an international conference, attended by less than 60 delegates, was discreetly held in Khartoum, Sudan, at the initiative of the Eastern Mediterranean regional bureau of the World Health Organization (Alexandria), aided by the Sudanese government.

That these facts could have been disclosed, no matter how discreetly and in the presence of such a restricted audience, carries a particular significance. After the Khartoum Conference, it will be surely difficult for the governments of the countries concerned to keep an attitude of prudent neutrality toward aggressive practices touching half of their populations.

The meeting took place in a small auditorium which forms a part of the immense "Friendship Hall", built at great expense a few years ago along the borders of the Nile. Its theme was priggishly labelled: "Traditional practices affecting women's health," and under this expression the WHO grouped several topics: nutritional taboos during pregnancy and lactation, precocious marriages and, finally, excision and infibulation (i.e. the feminine genital mutilations which are perpetrated in the majority of African countries and, in a lesser degree, in

the Near East). This last theme must have eclipsed all other themes because of the factual intervention it involves and the horror that such an intervention implies.

The operation takes various forms according to differences in culture and race. The milder form is the removal of the top of the clitoris with a sharp instrument, usually a razor blade. The other form, widely spread in Africa, consists of complete excision of the clitoris, including the labia minora and, very often, the interior part of the labia majora. In certain tribes, the clitoris is cauterized with fire or rubbed out with a particular sort of thistle.

"This second form of excision," says Ms. Fran Hosken, a delegate of WHO and an experienced researcher on this topic, "is practiced in more than 26 countries, from the African Horn and the Red Sea to the Atlantic Coast (Senegal and Mauritania) and, in the North-South direction, from Egypt to Tanzania, including the larger part of Nigeria. The two Yemens and Saudi Arabia are equally touched. According to the author Awa Thiam (from Senegal), Iraq, Jordan, Syria and South Algeria are also partly involved. (From WIN NEWS, Fran Hosken, Editor, Press Release, Apr. 1979)".

AWP (Association for Women in Psychology) Newsletter of April-May 1979 reported the recommendations of the Khartoum World Health Organization Seminar held in Feb. 10-15, 1979, in an item which we here reproduce as follows.

"At the Khartoum Seminar, representatives of eight African countries (Egypt, Sudan, South Yemen, Oman, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria and Upper Volta) agreed that: (1) traditional genital operations on females should be abolished; (2) national commissions should be set up in every country to work toward that end; (3) a broad-based information campaign for the general public is necessary; (4) traditional and modern health practitioners should be educated concerning the health damage done by traditional operations, and cooperation should be enlisted in opposing them."

(1) See al-Raida 5, p. 10.

SINGLEHOOD

Margared Adams writes about the stresses that single people experience because of their deviance in a married society and about the compensatory supports available to them. For instance, the terms "old maid" and "spinster" are both highly derogatory and almost invariably coupled with "neurotic", although statistical evidence indicates that, relative to other groups, never-married women rank high in mental health.(1).

Here it seems appropriate to add that the old term "spinster" in

Arabic means according to the Arabic dictionary "a woman who has stayed a long time in her father's house without getting married." This definition no more applies to single women of today, who generally leave their parents' house to work outside and lead their own lives. Hence it is more appropriate to use the term "single woman" or "unmarried woman" instead of the old derogatory terms.

(1) From a "Survey of Research Concerns on Women's Issues" by Arlene Kaplan Daniels, (Association of American Colleges), p. 26.

Women & Work

"As many as 30 per cent of all families around the world are now headed by women. Women produce over 40 per cent of the world's food supply and in some places as much as 80 per cent. Larger proportions of women than ever before are seeking wage employment because of financial necessity, yet most continue to be placed in the lowest paying positions."

"Planned development programs have not been uniformly meaningful nor beneficial to women".

(NFE (Non Formal Education), Issue no.13, 1978 - 3)