

4 Feb 2018

I just listened to the BBC Inquiry podcast <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/w3csvsyj>. I've been aware of the Female Genital Mutilation issue for some time, so it was interesting to hear an update.

However, I thought the story could have been improved in a couple of important ways. I tried to post this on the BBC site, but the podcast does not have a comments section, and the general "submit comment" form severely limits the length of comments. So I'm posting here in the hopes that others will send similar short comments to the BBC, and they will eventually improve things :).

First, they should have talked to some men. FGM survives because some men require it for their wives. If all men stated that they would not accept mutilation for their wife, the practice would stop tomorrow. So asking some of the men involved why they have not made that statement (or finding a softer related question to ask that they would be willing to answer) is important.

Second, one of the African women said the current practice in her tribe (? village? not clear) is to include the mutilation in a larger ceremony, and that she is trying to promote that ceremony without the mutilation. The story did not say the result of that, but did say that in general the mutilation is being driven underground, and losing any associated ceremony. This is a very clear signal about what is important to the people in power; mutilation, not ceremony. Again, talking about this specifically with the people in power is important.

Some of the people in power are elder women, who have been involved in mutilation their whole lives. They now face the very difficult choice of renouncing the practice, and thus admitting that they were monsters, or continuing to support it. Thus any program to change the practice must include an element of forgiveness for these women; it is never too late to realize you can do things differently.

Finally, the doctor in Switzerland was legally forbidden to talk about whether pricking is safe. Clearly restricting conversations with doctors about medical issues is a bad idea. Pricking is clearly safer than more advanced mutilation; it should be tolerated as a transitional step, similar to accepting vaping tobacco instead of burning it. Also, the doctor said the reason for pricking was to have some blood in the ceremony. Perhaps menstrual blood would be a good replacement; celebrating a girl's first menses is done in many cultures, and would be an excellent replacement for celebrating mutilation.

– Stephen Leake