



*2 PARTS
OF DESIRE*

Celine

As a lawyer working with the Jesuit Refugee Service, I do come across cases of women who suffered female genital mutilation back in their home countries. I've also met with women, and men, who are terrified of returning home out of fear that their daughters will be forced to pass through the terrible pain and suffering they know so well. Yes, of course it's still widely performed. Just to give you an idea, at the moment there are around 140,000,000 women and girls living with its consequences. You really don't want to know how it happens, because it's quite atrocious. And anyway the name says it all, it mutilates the female genitalia.

We've often asked victims why it's performed, & the reasons they give vary. Some mention religious norms, others say it's an accepted social practice. Parents speak as if under an enormous pressure to make sure their daughters are cut. What is sure is that it is never done for medical reasons.

It is definitely a sort of ritual passage to adulthood, the only way a young girl can become a woman. That's why parents feel the pressure...if uncut, their daughter will not be welcome in the group. She might not find a husband. But it's not only that. There's also the idea that it guarantees proper sexual behaviour, that a cut or sewn woman is in fact a virgin before marriage. And that during marriage she is faithful to her husband. With no physical pleasure at all, the libido is totally killed off! How better to ensure virginity and fidelity than by reducing or eliminating all sexual sensations?

A victim's body rarely recovers from the procedure, & we've seen its effects on the woman's bodily functions well into adulthood. What I've noticed is that once removed from her community, the victim seems to suffer immense psychological turmoil in coming to terms with the uselessness of the practice. Victims tell us that with such damaged bodies they simply don't feel like women any longer. As a lawyer, the support I can offer is in fact limited. I try to focus on those cases where I could possibly prevent a girl from being cut, if returned home. As a woman, it's the most pernicious practice I encountered, a supreme form of gender based violence, harming women when at their weakest and taking away their dignity, ruining their prospects of fulfilment as women.

Some of my clients have had enough. They want their bodies back. They want their dignity restored. They desire to be women. These women keep us fighting.