

Africa Day and the United Nations Day for the Family

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By David and Patricia Earle

Some of the very real situations faced by African women and girls, and in particular the horrific practice of Female Genital Mutilation, were discussed in the most recent Women's Peace Meeting, recognising the UN Day for the Family and Africa Day. Disturbing new statistics published by UNICEF show that at least 200 million girls and women alive today have undergone barbaric, ritual cutting, with half of them living in just 3 countries, Indonesia, Egypt and Ethiopia. Somalia has the highest prevalence of women and girls who have been cut – 98% of the female population between the ages of 15 and 49. In Guinea, where the figure is 97%, a 5 year-old girl recently died from her injuries. And all of this happening in spite of the fact that the practice was officially banned in numerous countries many years ago.

One hundred and twenty women gathered together at 123 Bournbrook Road to hear about, and discuss, this very emotive topic, comprising our now familiar 35 to 40 nationalities, and representing all cultural, racial and religious backgrounds. We have more and more young women participating, which is very encouraging, and around twenty women attending were coming to the meeting for the first time.



Our first speaker, Tabassum, a registrar in obstetrics and gynaecology, described her work in looking after pregnant women and the serious, often life-long, problems which FGM causes. She spoke about the predominance of the problem in Africa, where cutting is widely regarded as a rite of passage, especially by the elderly, such that grandparents will often insist on the practice in spite of the parents' objections. The severe physical and psychological problems can persist from giving birth all the way into old age. In the UK, cutting is illegal and a form of abuse. When an African woman presents herself as pregnant, and is expecting a girl, a safeguarding notice often has to be raised. Tabassum mentioned that in the UK's National Health Service many consultants are white, middle class and do not fully understand the cultural background to this problem, or have the knowledge and ability to deal in a constructive way with the potential danger to girls and young



women. She recommended substantially increasing the level of education in this whole area for all medical professionals.

Our second speaker was Nura Ali Dhuul, executive director of the Allies Network, and a voice for East African women in the West Midlands. She said that FGM was not at all a new thing for her, as everyone in her family had been mutilated. "If I smile a lot it's because I have become used to this problem. I am still very compassionate towards FGM survivors." Agreeing with Tabassum, she echoed the importance of understanding African culture as a key factor in all of this. "Humans have difficulty supporting people from cultures which they know little about" she said. "There is very little 'African' in Birmingham Museum to educate people, and there are no 'African Studies' for children in schools. Until there are changes, the problem will continue." She suggested the need for actual workshops, rather than mere on-line



training - community workshops and workshops for professionals. "On-line training cannot tell you how to build rapport with people, what questions to ask, and how to ask them. It's such a sensitive issue." The Allies Network tries to deal with this, and there are other routes into the problem, such as the 'West Midlands FGM Task Force' and 'Birmingham against FGM'.

individuals but has far-reaching consequences for relationships within the family, often contributing to isolation, individuals being ostracised and resulting in family breakdown.

helped to maintain the momentum of the Women's Peace Meeting, discussing issues which affect all of us and then turning our heart of concern into some kind of action which can help others. Several women on this occasion also expressed the desire to become involved with the issue of FGM, and spoke to Nura afterwards to discuss ways in which they might help.



Hawa, a victim of FGM, could only speak briefly such was her emotional pain, and the difficulty of describing the impact on her childhood, adolescence and adult life. An impression of the pain inflicted on so many girls and young women can be seen in the short video at the following website: www.theguardian.com/society/video/2016/feb/05/mummy-why-did-you-cut-me-survivors-share-pain-fgm-video

Pauline, our fourth speaker, described a different project which she has been involved in recently, helping women, particularly widows, in West Africa. A chance conversation two years ago led her to join an existing project, Shepherd Food Ministries, and travel to Nigeria to see if she could use her skills in counselling to support the initiative in some way. She accompanied a friend who was training women in jewellery and bead-making, and found that she could make a valuable contribution through listening to the women, learning of their struggles, and helping them with personal development skills. There had been plans in 2014 to help 30 women, but 54 women turned up to the programme. All of them were somehow accommodated, and since then money has been raised to open a Vocational Centre in the Anglican Diocese of Osobijgbo. Pauline was soon to depart for the official opening in July.

In the discussions which followed, many points were made and questions asked from the floor. The themes of 'raising awareness', 'cultural sensitivity' and 'education of teachers and health care professionals' were prominent. Our collective concern and emotional engagement with the topic carried over into the quiet time of reflection and prayer, and we had beautiful musical offerings from Paulina, Viola, Chitra and Maureen.

Hawa chose to express her heart and feelings by singing a Christian song, and all could feel her suffering, empathising with someone whose life had been so severely affected by the whole trauma of FGM. Through the sharing of our speakers, especially with this event commemorating both Africa Day and the UN Day for the Family, it also became clear that the damage caused by FGM is not just limited to its impact on

We made a collection after Pauline spoke and £250 was raised to help the project. Practical outcomes such as this have

All of this allowed us to conclude with an overall positive feeling and outcome, in spite of the deeply emotional and painful issue we had been sharing about together. We finished the evening in our usual way, sharing food and refreshments, much of which had been brought by the ladies themselves, and engaging in conversations which continued for some considerable time after the meeting had officially come to an end. Through all of the sharing, both during the meetings and afterwards, we forge deep bonds of heart with one another, developing friendships which sustain us in what can be a very difficult world.

