

Challenging traditions

These are the experiences of Waris Dirie, a nomadic girl who became a top model and special ambassador to the United Nations Population Fund against female genital mutilation.

Waris Dirie was born in Somalia. Until she was five years old she led a difficult but happy life. Her family were pastoralists and she herded goats. Then, according to tradition, her parents decided that she should be circumcised.

When she was thirteen years old, her father wanted to marry her to a sixty-year old man in exchange for five camels. Waris decided to run away from home. Her difficult and dangerous journey took her along desert paths to the capital of Somalia, Mogadishu. A few years later, as the servant of a Somali diplomatic family in London, she was discovered and became a world famous model. She now figures in commercials for Benetton, Levi's, Oil of Olay, and Revlon.

Circumcision

In her book *Desert Flower*, Waris describes in detail her own traumatic experience of circumcision. She recounts the excruciating operation, during which a large part of her genitals were removed, and her desperately painful recovery. Long after her circumcision she still experienced intense pain during urination, menstruation and sex.

When she was thirty years old she became a mother and her life changed. In Somali culture becoming a mother brings prestige and recognition. It was then that she realised how much her own mother and other Somali women suffered. The tortures of being mutilated as small children, delivering their babies with their vaginas sewn together, and, afterwards, having their vagina sewn up again, so they remain tight for their husbands.

Any sharp object

Circumcision is common practice in 28 African countries. It is estimated that 130 million women have been circumcised, about 2 million every year. The operation

is often carried out under unsanitary conditions by a traditional midwife without any measures to ease the pain. Cutting tools consist of whatever sharp object happens to be available: a razor blade, a knife, a scissors, a piece of glass or a sharp stone.

The extent of circumcision varies according to region and ethnic group. The least impact is caused when just the tip of the clitoris is removed. This results in an incapacity to enjoy sex. The most extreme form of female circumcision is known as *infibulation*. This involves the removal of part or all of the external genitalia and the stitching or narrowing of the vaginal opening.

The operation itself can lead to severe complications including shock, wound infection, damage to the urinal tract or anus, tetanus, blood poisoning, HIV, or hepatitis B. At a later stage other complications are common, like kidney infection, sterility, nerve pain, depression and pain during urination, menstruation, and sexual intercourse.

Criticism and respect

Waris decided to publish her experiences and to start a campaign against female genital mutilation. The United Nations Population Fund offered her the position of special ambassador against female genital mutilation.

Having a critical attitude towards genital mutilation does not mean that Waris has no respect for her own culture. In her book she writes that she thanks God every day for being an African. Presently she lives in New York and, when she observes the lack of community and family life there, she is proud to be Somali.

She remembers the moments with her family: the evenings around the fire when stories were told and people sang, clapped their hands and laughed. When

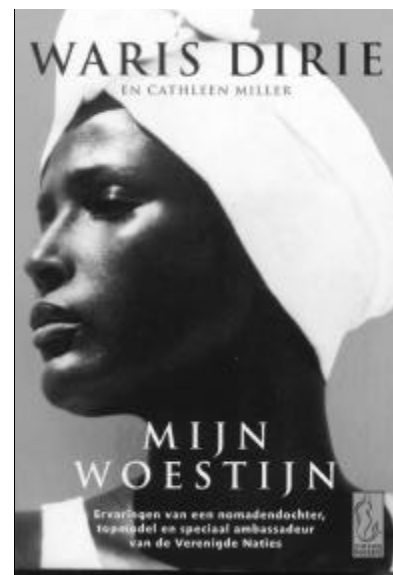


Photo: cover book

the first rains started, they were celebrated. Who bothers with something as essential as water in the West? It comes from the tap and you can let it run even if you decide to leave your kitchen. In Africa people have to struggle for food, while in the USA watching your weight is a major preoccupation.

Why circumcision?

Waris argues that neither the Koran nor the Bible mention circumcision. She maintains that the custom originates from the desire of ignorant and egocentric men who are determined to safe-guard the sexual favours of their wives. Mothers accept this custom because they are afraid that their daughters have little chance of marriage if they remain uncircumcised.

Her childhood in Africa taught Waris to appreciate the simplicity of life and its essence. It protected her from taking success and celebrity too seriously. Living in the West has had one great advantage: peace. There maybe criminality but at there are no wars, like the ones that plague Somalia and many other African countries. Warfare, like genital mutilation, is the result of a male obsession with territory and possessions. In these societies women are counted among these possessions.

Waris does not blame her parents for what happened to her. They were the victims of their own education and ancient cultural practices. She writes: "We now know that that women are not sexually obsessed beasts. Their loyalty can be won by tenderness instead of barbarian rituals. Time has come to leave ancient forms of suffering behind".

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