

## Thus Spoke Fatima

"... I do not recall the day of my circumcision. I have no recollection of the physical pain I was made to suffer. But what has remained engraved in my memory and what I can never forget, is the agony and affliction I began to feel when I grew up and became aware of the horror inflicted on my body, of the physical amputation I was submitted to, an essential part of my femininity had been cut off from me and tossed away.

"Beyond the physical mayhem, I felt that my whole nature as a woman had been disrupted and stained. Naturally, my realization of the horror wrought upon me did not come about spontaneously or directly without asking questions. But, over time, and little by little, I began to understand and my psychological suffering increasingly grew.

"After circumcision, I was to be put to another kind of torment. At the age of ten, I was taken to a village and left to the care of a ruthless female servant equipped with all conceivable instruments of torture. We were a group of girls, from eight to ten years old, and we had to undergo the tantalizing experience of fattening as if we were geese. We were awakened every day at 5:00 a.m. and placed before jugs containing one liter of milk each. The exercise was to have each one of us drink, under tight control, between 30 and 40 liters of milk a day.

The servant held in her hand a kind of wooden tongs that she would apply to the fingers of any girl who stopped drinking. And the clamp would grow tighter and tighter until, unable to bear the pain any longer, the reluctant girl drank up again. If any one of us threw up what she had drunk, frequently she would be forced to drink the amount of milk that she had vomited.

I shall never forget the case of a friend of mine who drank herself to death. Her body suddenly blew up. Frightened by her death, I become more obedient and, soon, grew into one of the fattest girls in the group. We used to crouch, bending over our jugs of milk, so swollen and so benumbed that we would urinate on ourselves in that position. We were also forced into skin-stretching exercises to leave more room for fat to develop on our bodies. The first stage of this fattening process went on for sixty days. Then I went back to my father's house where the stuffing continued steadily. But my stomach had, by then, grown large and I developed an ever greater craving for food. By the winter of the following year, the second phase of the fattening process began.

What is all that for? In our society, fat means beautiful: Ok! But that is not all. The other purpose behind fattening is to

turn the young girl into a docile creature, ready for the marriage imposed upon her. I, personally had the privilege of belonging to the first generation of Mauritanian girls that went to school. And, although my shape and corpulence made it difficult for me to walk between house and school, I was firmly resolved to continue my education. And so I did, assisted by continued physical exercise to lose some weight and move along with greater ease.

But try as I might, I could not escape from the third and more damaging kind of violence: forced marriage. I was given in marriage to a man much older than me. A marriage that ended in divorce, leaving me with children that I love. But, in a sense, I felt and still feel as if I were a beast. Because that which makes a woman a woman, my femininity was stripped away from me when I was only forty days old. The various forms of suffering I had to endure developed in me a strong desire to resist. I went to school. I tried by all means to make something of my life. I fought the effects of forced fattening by pursuing a diet, doing regular exercise and getting involved in all sorts of physical activity even though my body still bears witness to the crime I was a victim of.

I have gone over the anguish of premature marriage and inevitable divorce. I even feel capable of starting a new and happy life. But the worst of all forms of violence I have borne, and the one for which I have found no cure is circumcision: the loss of that essential and irreplaceable part of my body and of my femininity, and the cause of an inner pain that never lets up.

Frequent drought in Mauritania has somewhat alleviated the ordeal of the girl-fattening tradition. Fortunately enough, only a few families still stick to that tradition. Some progress is also being seen in the social attitudes toward marriage. I do not want my daughter to go through the suffering I have seen. When she was born, I fought tooth and nail against her being circumcised. I stood firmly against the diktat of the family elderlies who declared that, with no excision, the new-born girl would not be one of them and would have no right to eat from the same plate as the rest of us.

As far as I am concerned, one thing's as sure as hell: we must do our very best to ensure that the future generations be spared the violence we were put to: no to mayhem, no to the loss of physical integrity, no to impaired femininity, no to fattening and turning our girls into helpless creatures saleable and marriageable at the free will of the others."

Fatima from Mauritania  
(Public Hearing, Women's Court: The Permanent Arab Court to Resist Violence Against Women)