

'FGM happened to me in white, midwest America'

A Christian doctor removed my clitoris when I was three years old as a 'cure' for masturbation, writes Renee Bergstrom

. Video excerpts from the feature documentary by John Chua #StopGlobalFGM

Dr A Renee Bergstrom

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In 1947, when I was just three years old a doctor removed my clitoris. Female genital mutilation is mostly associated with African cultures, and non-Christian religions, but my FGM happened in white, midwest America. It took place in a church clinic that used a scalpel on girls who masturbated.

I remember the excruciating pain and feeling betrayed. I was told not to talk about it, but keeping the secret meant I was alone with my questions as I grew into puberty: what was missing? What would it be like to be "whole"?

At 15 I consulted a doctor regarding a tugging sensation from my scar tissue. Unknowingly, I went to the same clinic where the clitoridectomy was performed and the doctor shamed me with a booklet entitled *The Sin of Self-Pleasuring*.

My first child and I could have died – an almost universal impact of FGM is difficulty giving birth. I, like so many women around the world, did not know genital scar tissue does not stretch. I wanted to be fully awake to experience giving birth, but my obstetrician performed an extensive episiotomy under anaesthetic that took months to heal. He was compassionate and shocked to hear the origin of my scar.

Unfortunately, he was no longer available for my next two pregnancies and my new obstetrician saw me as a scientific experiment. Another surgeon offered to remove one of my nipples to create a faux clitoris. I found these proposals repulsive, and declined them both. Discomfort continued for 50 years until the scar separated during menopause.

Forgiving does not mean forgetting

I no longer have that daily physical reminder and I have forgiven all those involved. However, forgiving does not mean forgetting. Today I work with women who have experienced FGM. Along with my friend, Filsan Ali, I created a brochure for pregnant infibulated Somalian women. It is designed for women to share with their clinicians to initiate a conversation about opening the scar to prevent unnecessary caesarean sections.

The impetus for my writing is concern regarding increased hatred and disrespect toward women, other cultures and religions – as if Christians in the United States had a flawless history.

FGM is not my shame, it is my story. I witnessed Christian religions declaring masturbation a sin, “some Christian leaders and doctors” recommending circumcision to prevent it, physicians carrying out the practice and our American culture first accepting this form of sexual abuse and then denying it ever occurred.

My resilience stems from love, respect and caring from my husband, my family and many people throughout the world who stood in solidarity with me as I progressed on my healing journey.



Flying Free From Abuse. Illustration: Renee Bergstrom

Honouring pain through art

About 30 years earlier, I painted an image of a woman flying free of all forms of oppression and abuse. Little did I know then that the artist in me was knocking.

In the early 1980s at a Swiss art gallery I saw a statue of a man who looked just like my brother Phil who died while I was in college. The overwhelming grief created a portal for me to mourn another great loss in my life. I felt this statue was a distinct sign, a blessing, if you will, of the work I had begun to undertake toward elimination of FGM.

My desire for our country is that we be known for our compassion and fair treatment of all those who have suffered and continue to suffer. My dream for the world is that practising cultures end FGM so women everywhere can experience wholeness, as I believe our Creator intended. My hope is we can fly free from oppression and abuse. At 72, I, Renee the Artist, add my voice to those who have risen above social and cultural pressure to remain silent.

Video excerpts from the feature documentary by John Chua *The Cut: Exposing FGM Worldwide*
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