

FGM: at last, the 'dangerous silence' is lifting

Cultural attitudes have changed since the BBC's groundbreaking exposé in the Nineties



A sign in southern Ethiopia. 'Women who had themselves been cut explained they were keen to protect their daughters from such treatment and see the practice brought to an end' Photo: ALAMY

By Joan Bakewell

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We were used to audiences of more than two million for our television series: it was called *The Heart of the Matter* and it dealt with moral dilemmas thrown up by current affairs. It ran throughout the Nineties, and somewhere within that span we broadcast an episode called "A Dangerous Silence". What a fateful title that was, and how unfortunate that it became all too tragically true. Because "A Dangerous Silence" dealt with female genital mutilation: now breezily referred to as FGM, but in those days spoken of in whispers among the few who knew about it.

We came by our stories in the way most journalists do, drawing extensively on newspaper reporting, contacts, rumour and our own instincts. My memory – increasingly prone to error – tells me that a schoolteacher who wished to stay anonymous rang to tell us about her anxiety about some of her young pupils. It seemed a surprising number of them were going off back to their country of origin for an extended holiday throughout the summer, and she had a suspicion it was because families were planning to have them "cut". We began to follow up the story.

We found our way to a hospital in the East End where a gynaecologist explained that in certain local communities, pregnant women were coming in who had obviously been severely damaged as young girls and now presented as having great difficulty giving birth. The birth passage had been narrowly reduced by stitching. Not only that, but once their babies were born the doctors were asked to restore their bodies to the way they were... literally to stitch them up again. This posed a dilemmas for the medics, who were all too aware of the conflict of loyalties involved.

The final programme featured, among others, members of a Somali women's group, a Horn of Africa community group and the consultant obstetrician and gynaecologist who had explained what was going on. The women who had themselves been cut explained they were keen to protect their daughters from such treatment and see the practice brought to an end. They explained that their greatest enemy was their own mothers, who saw themselves as the upholders of an ancient tribal rite against the corrupted notions of their Westernised daughters. None of these grannies would be interviewed.

Instead, to put the other side of the argument, I talked to the novelist Buchi Emecheta, who declared this was a proud custom of her Nigerian heritage and would we Westerners kindly mind our own business. But she didn't say "kindly". In fact she was resolutely angry that our culture was invading her own and she would have no truck with suggestions of cruelty and choice. The times were such that multi-culturalism held full sway, and it was indeed considered an outrage to impose one culture (ours) on another (theirs).

The programme also had another feature: an actual outline diagram of what FGM involved. I recall men on the team being squeamish at the idea, but the women insisting that the full truth be made clear. As I recall, this part of the programme required clearance from higher up in the department because it was so explicit and shocking. But it went out on BBC television.

From that moment on, we should have known what was going on. But no action followed. Why? The answer reflects the cultural shift that has occurred within some 15 years. First, there were plenty of things our society was happy to let stay in the shadows. People didn't want to confront unpleasantness, and certainly anything concerning genitals was pretty much taboo. Yet here we were speaking out on a cosy Sunday night on BBC1, diagram and all. It's my hunch that the moment I set out the parameters of the programme at the beginning, the switch-off began. Our viewing figures were conspicuously down. (Interestingly, the only other programme subjects that lowered our ratings were ones about the conflict in Northern Ireland. People don't want to be disturbed by bad news.)

The second reason is that we were still unclear about which values should prevail. There was a great deal of racism about and people were slow to realise what problems would crop up with so many different cultures living side by side. In striving to be fair to everyone, the most generous impulse was the defensive "live and let live". If strange cultures had strange customs then we should be defending their autonomy, not depriving them of it.

Since then things have changed fast. The globalisation of values has been speeded up by social media. There is more universal appreciation of a sense of right and wrong. Inflicting cruelty on children and the old is universally deplored. An abhorrence of rape is reaching across the globe. Now the world merely has to stop them happening. Tough call. But surely we can at long last make a start with FGM.

How we moderate

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