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Uganda FGM ban: 'Why I broke the law to be circumcised aged 26'

By Catherine Byaruhanga
BBC Africa, Uganda

🕒 6 February 2019



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Sylvia Yeko decided to undergo female genital mutilation (FGM) three weeks ago at the age of 26 - even though the practice, which used to be performed

on teenage girls, was outlawed in Uganda in 2010.

Her circumcision ceremony took place in public - she showed us a video taken on the day. It shows an excited, cheering crowd surrounding Ms Yeko and another woman, whose faces are smeared with a whitish-brown flour.

They lie on bare grass with their legs open as an older woman approaches each in turn and swiftly cuts off their clitoris.

Neither of them screams because to do so would be a sign of weakness and would nullify what this community in eastern Uganda regard as a rite of passage before a woman can get married.

"During this day I felt so proud, I just felt so excited," Ms Yeko tells the BBC as she watches the footage.

"Before I was circumcised I was taken as any other child, but now I'm someone respected."

FGM convictions

She knows she could face up to five years in prison for being circumcised, but she insists that she wants to be identified.

Those who cut her genitals could be imprisoned for 10 years.



Sylvia Yeko, seen here at her home, says she wants the authorities to know she broke the law

Since December, several of these public circumcision ceremonies have happened in the Sebei region of eastern Uganda - most of them in Kween district, which borders Kenya.

Three people have recently been convicted for practising FGM, including a 15-year-old girl and a woman. Nineteen others are in jail awaiting trial.

FGM is life-threatening. The immediate danger comes from bleeding to death after the genitals have been cut.

Then infections can set in. The women in the video also had their private parts covered with flour, and it's not clear if the same blade was used for all the initiates.

Later in life, the scars could form keloids, which are growths. Childbirth is also likely to be more difficult.

Nevertheless Ms Yeko has become a sort of celebrity in Sebei - and when I ask if she is concerned that girls and women who follow her example are putting their lives in danger, she says she does not believe FGM is harmful.

Female genital mutilation

- Includes "the partial or total removal of the female external genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons"
- Practised in 30 countries in Africa, and some in Asia and the Middle East
- An estimated three million girls and women worldwide are at risk each year
- It is commonly carried out on young girls, often between infancy and the age of 15
- Often motivated by beliefs about what is considered proper sexual behaviour, to prepare a girl or woman for adulthood and marriage, and to ensure "pure femininity"
- Dangers include severe bleeding, problems urinating, infections, infertility and increased risk of childbirth complications and newborn deaths

Source: [World Health Organization](#)

Read: [What is FGM, where does it happen and why?](#)

Watch: [The village that's eradicated FGM](#)

For her the act was not only a cultural rite but also a form of protest against the government's failure to keep its promises to help educate and advance prospects for women once circumcision was banned.

People in these underdeveloped and poor areas expected to have greater access to social services and infrastructure by giving up FGM.



Many families cannot afford to send girls to secondary school in Sebei

To make her point, Ms Yeko takes me to Kwosir Girl's Boarding Secondary School, where a plaque on the wall reads: "Presidential pledge to stop FGM".

But she says that even though the school was built in the wake of the circumcision ban and was meant to be free for all girls, costs can run up to \$90 (£69) a term and are unaffordable for many in her community.

"They better take back their school because we're not benefiting from the school and we're not enjoying anything from this school," she says.



Rural communities in Sebei struggle financially

Kween is one of the worst-performing areas when it comes to education. According to government statistics, on average about 6,000 students enrol at primary school level, but by the end of secondary school only 200 students remain in class.

Ms Yeko says she did manage to get an education, but like many young people in the East African nation she remains unemployed.

A university graduate and now the mother of a four-year-old boy, her decision to get circumcised was to make the point that she feels let down by Uganda's leaders. She even wrote a letter to the police before her cutting ceremony to make sure the authorities knew about it.

'We are treated like children'

For another woman, who spoke to the BBC about her recent circumcision, the motive was more personal.

Speaking on condition of anonymity, she said she felt ostracised because as a married woman within the ethnic Sabiny community she was prevented from doing certain things because she had not been cut.



FGM is a secret rite of passage for the Sabiny community

"In Sebei, a woman who has not been cut cannot go to the [communal] granary or pick cow dung from the kraal."

Cow dung is often used to plaster houses, a task often left to women.

"A husband can marry another wife. She might be circumcised and then starts insulting the uncircumcised woman. You are just equated to your children," she explained.

Yet the mother of three daughters does not intend to circumcise any of them as her hope is that they will be educated and less easily intimidated by the community.

'She broke the doors'

Uganda's first female Speaker of parliament, Rebecca Kadaga, has been a key campaigner against FGM over the last 20 years. She visits the region every year and commissioned the Kwosir Girl's Boarding Secondary School.



Sylvia Yeko defied her father to go ahead with her circumcision

Ms Kadaga maintains the decision to ban FGM came from the Sebei leaders themselves, who first passed a local by-law in 2009.

Ms Kadaga maintains the decision to ban FGM came from the Sebei leaders themselves, who first passed a local by-law in 2009.

"I know that they are unhappy about a number of issues. But I think injuring yourself because there's no road... it's also not right. But I think it's our duty to ensure that they have services," she says.

The ban has seen the cases of circumcision fall in Uganda. In 2011 1.4% of women were circumcised and by 2016 that had fallen to 0.3%.



Despite the ban, these girls in Sebei may still feel the pressure to be circumcised when they are older

But Ms Yeko's father, Arapkwures Chemegich, who does not support FGM, says being heavy handed about the ban will not work and has created pockets of resistance.

He should know as he tried to stop his daughter from going ahead with her circumcision.

"When we tried to stop her, she actually fought and broke the door," he says, showing me two doors inside the family hut that were hanging off their hinges.

"I think FGM should be stopped, but the method? They should not have come by force.

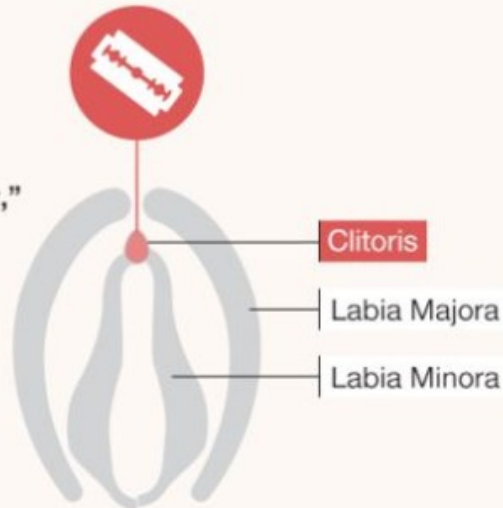
"It should be something they educate them about."

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

Four different types

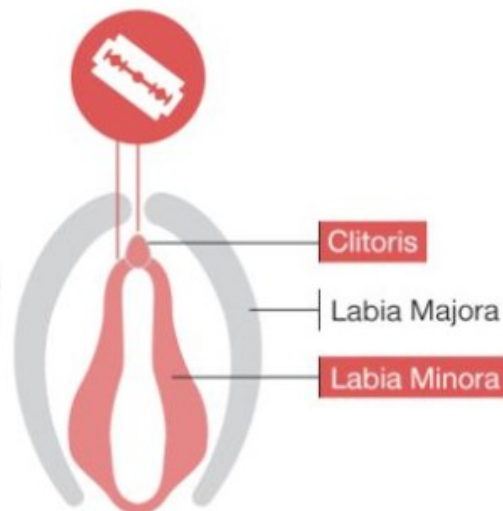
Type 1,

also known as “**clitoridectomy**,” is the excision of the clitoral prepuce (or “hood”) and may also involve excision of all or part of the clitoris



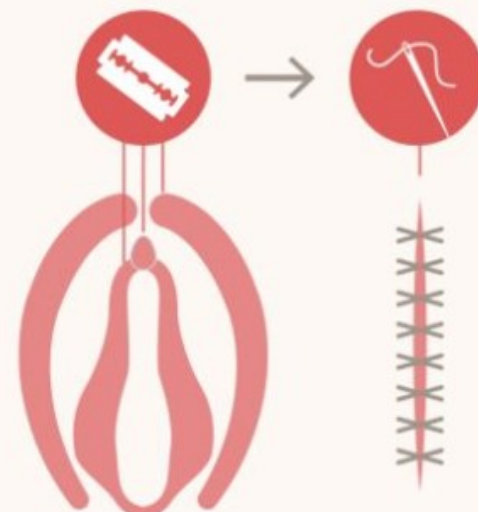
Type 2,

is the excision of the clitoris and may also involve excision of all or part of the labia minora (the smaller, inner vaginal lips);



Type 3,

also known as “**infibulation**,” involves excision of part or all of the external genitalia and the stitching or narrowing of the vaginal opening



Type 4,

this includes all other harmful procedures to the female genitalia for non-medical purposes, including but not limited to:



Pricking/
Piercing



Incising/
Scraping



Burning/
Cauterizing

Source: WHO

BBC