

Egypt making slow progress on genital mutilation

November 19 2014, by Merrit Kennedy



This undated photo provided by the Women's Center for Guidance and Legal Awareness, shows a portrait of Sohair el-Batea, who died last year after undergoing a female genital mutilation operation by Dr. Raslan Fadl, in Egypt. On Thursday, Nov. 20, 2014 a court is expected to issue a verdict in Egypt's first-ever prosecution of a doctor accused of committing FGM. Thirteen-year-old

Sohair died during the operation last year. Rights advocates say the outcome of this case could set a key precedent for deterring doctors and families in the future. (AP Photo/Women's Center for Guidance and Legal Awareness)

Raslan Fadl, the first doctor in Egypt to be put on trial for committing female genital mutilation, is still practicing even though a 13-year-old girl died after he performed the procedure. And in this Nile Delta Village, he has plenty of patients.

Young girls and their families on a recent day sat in his waiting room, where the bright yellow walls are decorated with Winnie the Pooh pictures, in the same building where Soheir el-Batea came for her operation last year. Residents call him a well-respected figure in the community, known for his charity work.

It could not be determined whether any were at his office for "circumcision," as it is known here, and Fadl would not speak to The Associated Press. But Fadl's continued popularity demonstrates the challenges to curbing the practice in Egypt, where more than 90 percent of women are estimated to have undergone it—one of the highest rates in the world. Female genital cutting was criminalized in 2008 and the most important Sunni Muslim religious authority has declared it dangerous and without any religious justification. The U.N. says there appears to be a slow reduction in the rate of the practice, but that it is still widespread.

A verdict is expected Thursday in Fadl's trial, and if convicted he could face up to two years in prison. Rights advocates say the outcome of this case could set a key precedent for deterring doctors and families in the future. Sohair's father is also charged in the case.

But even in the home village of the girl, Dierb Biqtaris, there is little outcry against the practice.

Rasha Mohammed, a friend of Sohair, remembers that the girl felt scared before the operation and didn't want to go. But Rasha chalks up her death to an accident, saying 11 other girls underwent FGM with the doctor that day and "nothing happened to them."

Sohair's grandmother declined to comment on the case, saying a year and a half has passed and she doesn't want to bring up the topic again. "It was her destiny," she said.

Emad Hamdi, a local worker, said he is still weighing whether to circumcise his daughters. He said he's heard that without it, a girl would be "sexually voracious," which could be "dangerous for her"—a common justification for the practice. A widely used Egyptian Arabic term for it translates literally as "purification."



In this Wednesday, Nov. 5, 2014 photo, relatives of 13-year-old Sohair el-Batea who died undergoing the procedure of female genital mutilation performed by Dr. Raslan Fadl, walk in front of her home, in Dierb Biqtaris village, on the outskirts of the town of Aga in Dakahliya, 120 kilometers (75 miles) northeast of Cairo, Egypt. Fadl is the first doctor in Egypt to be put on trial for committing FGM, after Sohair's death. But in this small Delta Village, not only is he still working as a doctor, but he has plenty of patients. (AP Photo/Nariman El-Mofty)

Genital mutilation involves removing all or part of the clitoris and labia minora. It is practiced in 29 countries, most of them in East and West Africa, but also in Egypt and parts of Iraq and Yemen. It is practiced among both Muslims and Christians, usually because it is seen as needed for cleanliness or to prevent a girl's sexual desire from running out of control. Social pressure is strong: Many families fear that an uncircumcised daughter will be unable to marry. Rights advocates condemn the practice as an attempt to control women's sexuality that scars girls physically and psychologically.

It was not easy getting the landmark case to trial—one indication why no cases came to court for years despite the ban. Sohair's family initially filed a police report saying she died as a result of FGM, but changed their story after reconciling with the doctor, said lawyer Reda el-Danbouki.

So rights groups had to push for trial. Prosecutors were slow, preferring "for the matter to end," he said.

Philippe Duamelle, the UNICEF representative in Egypt, said the case was an opportunity for the government to show "this crime is now taken with all the seriousness it requires."

The latest survey, conducted in 2008, showed 91 percent for women aged 15-49 have undergone the procedure. But among women ages 15-17, the rate is down to 74 percent, suggesting more families are deciding to forgo it with their daughters. Duamelle said the reduction has been significant but "doesn't go fast enough."

In southern Egypt, organizer Manal Fawzy hopes for a "sharp punishment" for the doctor as a deterrent. If the verdict is not strong, she fears the law will be seen as just propaganda.

But the ban is just one tool, she said. "To change a behavior, it's so difficult."



In this Wednesday, Nov. 5, 2014 photo, a man stands in front of the grave of 13-year-old Sohair el-Batea who died undergoing the procedure of female genital mutilation performed by Dr. Raslan Fadl, in Dierb Biqtaris village, on the outskirts of the town of Aga in Dakahliya, 120 kilometers (75 miles) northeast of Cairo, Egypt. A verdict is expected Thursday, Nov. 20 in Fadl's trial. Rights

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She runs the Assiut Childhood and Development Organization, a UNICEF partner organization that takes a community approach to getting people to abandon the practice. It operates in Assiut province, where rates are among highest in the country. The group identifies residents who are already critical of genital mutilation and gives them training and information to convince their neighbors.

"When I see a neighbor like me, and she stands against this practice and we are in the same tradition and the same village and the same place, it is very effective for them," Fawzy said. The group also calls on religious leaders and doctors to speak to residents.

The group encourages families to publicly declare their rejection of the tradition, sometimes in front of hundreds of people. There tends to be resistance at the beginning, and people are reluctant to talk about the sensitive subject, she said. But slowly the taboo is being broken, she said. "You find it's something critical for them, for their life."

In Sidfa, a village where the organization operates, The Associated Press spoke to dozens of residents about their decision to abandon the practice.



In this Wednesday, Nov. 5, 2014 photo, Egyptian school children walk on a street, near the home of 13-year-old Sohair el-Batea who died undergoing the procedure of female genital mutilation performed by Dr. Raslan Fadl, in Dierb Biqtaris village, on the outskirts of the town of Aga in Dakahliya, 120 kilometers (75 miles) northeast of Cairo, Egypt. Fadl's continued work demonstrates the challenges to curbing FGM in Egypt, which has one of the highest rates of the practice in the world, at more than 90 percent. The operation involves removing the clitoris and all or part of the labia minora, according to UNICEF. (AP Photo/Nariman El-Mofty)

Hamdiya Nazmi said one of her seven daughters was "circumcised" but she decided not to do so with the other six after being convinced by Fawzy's organization. "I spoke with people who live near me and convinced them it was wrong too." She remembers feeling terrified when she was taken to the midwife as a girl for her own operation.

Ihsan Abdel Waly, a 75-year-old local midwife who used to circumcise

girls, said she was convinced to stop doing it seven years ago after speaking to doctors.

"In the old days, it was out of ignorance," she said. "Medicine developed and people now understand."



In this Wednesday, Nov. 5, 2014 photo, women sit outside the clinic of Dr. Raslan Fadl, the doctor who performed the procedure of female genital mutilation on 13-year-old Sohair el-Batea that resulted in her death a year ago, in Aga town, Dakahliya, 120 kilometers (75 miles) northeast of Cairo, Egypt. Fadl is the first doctor in Egypt to be put on trial for committing female genital mutilation, after Sohair's death. But in this small Delta Village, not only is he still working as a doctor, but he has plenty of patients. Fadl's continued work demonstrates the challenges to curbing FGM in Egypt, which has one of the highest rates of the practice in the world, at more than 90 percent. (AP Photo/Nariman El-Mofty)

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