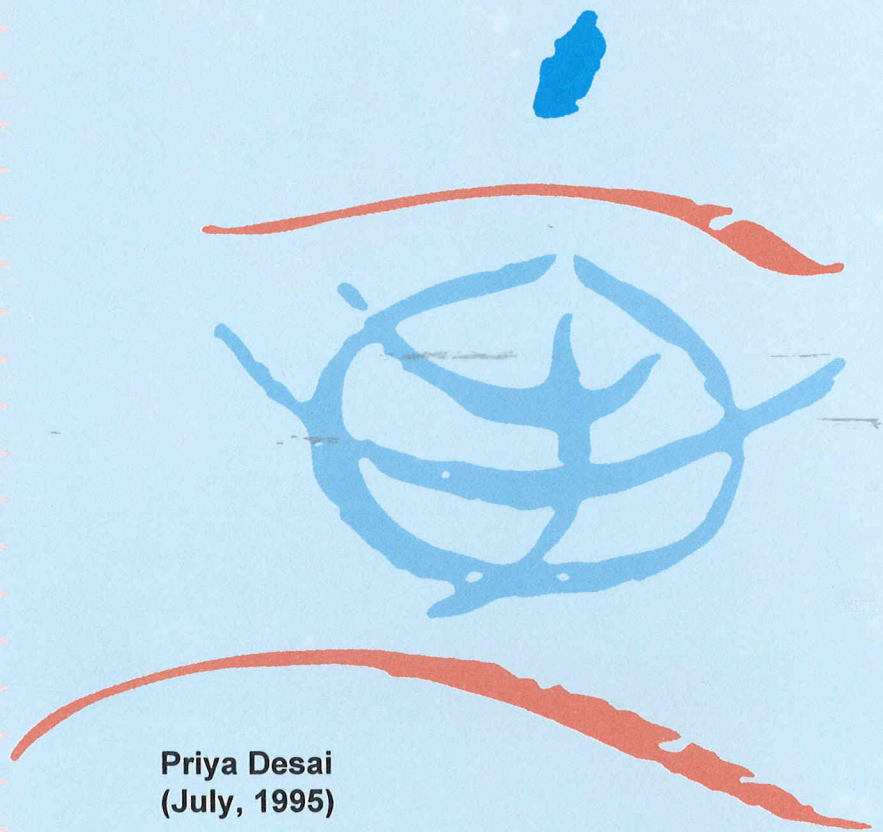




TRADITIONAL PRACTICES AFFECTING THE HEALTH OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN



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Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children - Female Genital Mutilation.

I)Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is a practice that damages the health and lives of an estimated 85 to 114 million girls and women. It is estimated that each year about 2 million or more girls undergo this practice, (WHO: Division of Family Health, Female genital mutilation, 1994) and that each day approximately 6000 girls are at risk.

More painful still is the fact that with a rapid population growth, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, the total number of mutilated women is constantly on the increase and many more very young girls are excised each day.

I1)Descriptions of the practice of FGM

Here is a description of the ceremonies which accompany the practice of female genital mutilation. (FGM).

"A little girl about six or seven years old is prepared for circumcision. She gets some fine, bright new clothes and shoes. A day or two before circumcision day her friends paint henna on her hands and feet. They have a little party in preparation for the event. On the circumcision day itself she is adorned with jirtig, a ritual widely practiced on wedding occasions. An older women puts jewellery on the feet and winds red silk threads around her wrist. This custom is connected with an old belief that jirtig is necessary to drive away evil and keep angels by the side of the betrothed or the circumcised.

The child is then taken to a midwife's house, where most operations take place. In smaller towns a midwife may come to the family's home, especially when a group circumcision is to take place. The family may circumcise several girls from the same family on the same day. The scene on circumcision day, whether in the villages or in the city, is more like a funeral than a party. Despite the new clothes and the bridal appearance, complete with firka, a bright silk cloth covering the bride, little girls are not impressed or persuaded. Apparently they all know that some type of amputation will take place.

Afterwards, a feast is given. It includes men if boys are circumcised on the same day. The size of the feast depends on the financial ability of the family. Amid the tears of the pain ridden child, festivities go on, and children's tunes are played. The child is told that she will soon be better and should join the festivities. Women relatives and neighbours come to say congratulations, implying that what happened to that little girl calls for celebration; it is a happy event! Those offering felicitations usually give the girl a sum of money, which she is free to spend as she wishes."¹

However, a description of the actual procedure carried out during FGM reveals the dreadful injustices of the practice:

