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CHIME THROUGH THE YEARS

“TWO STEPS FORWARD” BY TECEE BOLEY

CHIME FOR CHANGE Through the Years: The Female Fabric is a series curated by CHIME Managing Editor Mariane Pearl featuring stories from the CHIME journalism platform archives by women around the world.



Liberia: The first woman to win a conviction against female genital cutting and many don't like it.

When Ruth Berry Peal embarked on her long battle for justice she wasn't thinking about history. She just wanted to end the harassment that had torn her family apart and nearly cost her life and that of her newborn twins.

Ruth is a member of Liberia's Kru tribe, one of six of the country's 16 tribes that do not belong to the traditional secret society known as Sande. Female genital cutting (FGC) is part of Sande initiation rites. But the upheaval of Liberia's 14-year civil war that killed 250,000 people turned this society upside down. Half Liberia's population fled their homes, leaving many far from their traditional lands. Ruth found herself in a remote rural town – in the heart of Sande country.

Ruth got into a small dispute with some local market women in October 2010. She hoped her husband would sort it out as is common in this area. But then one day when her husband and six older children were away, the women broke into Ruth's house, pulled the nursing twins from her breasts, drugged and beat her. They dragged Ruth into the bush where they were joined by others who held her down as the women savagely sliced off her genitals with a rusty blade. Ruth says the pain was indescribable.

"It was too much," says Ruth. "They did not do it the way they do it to other people," says Ruth. "They wanted to punish me."

For the next 6 weeks Ruth slept on the floor of a hut hovering in and out of consciousness, ravaged by shock, blood loss and infection. Her family did not know where she was. In lucid moments, she pondered escape but there was no way she could move. Even if she could walk, she says, she had no idea where she was and could not have found her way. At home the twins, who had been torn suddenly from their mother, grew weak.

When the women finally returned Ruth to her village, she spent another month in a local hospital. Her physical injuries have never fully healed.

But things got worse. The women had robbed Ruth's house and stolen items she sold in a small shop. The local chief was eyeing the plot of land she had bought five years earlier to grow food to sell. Her husband was accused of "going against the Sande culture" and his job was threatened.

When Ruth and two teenage sons demanded their property be returned, local police accused them of disrupting the peace and threw them in jail. Finally, Ruth fled to a slum in the capital to escape the harassment. Without her and her income her family is struggling to survive.

It was not supposed to be like this, says Ruth. "If this thing was not going to happen to me my life was going to be all right. Time like this, I will be doing my business and be with my husband and my children."

By Sande tradition young girls, sometimes infants, have their genitals mutilated during initiation ceremonies. **Children have generally no idea of what is about to happen to them and, as minors, they are not able to deny consent anyway.** Many girls struggle with severe lifelong injuries and difficulty in childbirth. But such is the power of Sande that few people have ever dared confront them on FGM.. Speaking of Sande ceremonies outside of the community is punishable by death and every Liberian knows someone who has angered Sande people and paid for it with his or her life. Liberian journalist Mae Azango was forced into hiding in March 2012 when she wrote a front-page story on the practice that drew threats against her and her 9-year-old daughter.

The Sande have great political clout. Key influencers from traditional society fill the ranks of government all the way up to the cabinet. Even the country's former President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Africa's first elected woman leader and Nobel Peace Prize winner for her advocacy in favour of women's rights, only applied a temporary ban on FGM her last day in office.

But Ruth Berry Peal was a rare, small voice that refused to be cowered.

"Ruth is very brave," says H. Dedeh Wilson, the lawyer who represented her. Wilson was initially reluctant to take on such a daunting case, but Ruth was determined. She denounced that hiding behind the cloak of supposed rich African 'traditions', In reality, FGM is a weapon to enforce direct control over female sexuality by damaging or eliminating the organ allowing female sexual pleasure.

"Ruth was at my door every day. She was humiliated. And she felt the perpetrators should not go free. So, she came to claim her rights. She wanted justice to be done," says Wilson.

Wilson's first challenge was finding a complaint to file against the perpetrators who are women. Though lawmakers have promised to pass a law specifically banning FGC, the practice is not yet illegal. But the women who cut Ruth were eventually found guilty of kidnapping, felonious restraint and theft of property and sentenced to three years in jail. After an appeal Liberia's Supreme Court upheld the ruling and ordered police to jail the women. Ruth and her supporters were jubilant. **But a victory in Liberia's broken legal system does not necessarily mean justice.**

Police in Ruth's village refused to carry out the court's orders. **After her lower court victory, it was Ruth not her tormentors who was thrown in jail, for daring to challenge local authorities. She spent 8 days there during which time she was beaten.** She was only released when local NGO Women's Secretariat of Liberia paid a \$US 500 fee. Three months since her Supreme Court win Ruth's attackers remain free.

There has been no more movement on a law banning FGC.

But the case is historic, activists say, a crucial first step. Ruth's win shows the judiciary is willing to punish the Sande when they violate Liberia's laws. It shows attackers they could face penalties. It shows victims they too could stand up against the Sande.

Ruth remains trapped in the capital, separated from her family and dependent on support from local women's groups. **Each time she has spoken to the media she has paid a price in beatings and more harassment. But Ruth keeps talking, hoping each time that maybe the police will be forced to carry out the court's ruling and jail her attackers.**

And maybe she and her family will finally get some semblance of their lives back..

