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## Woman from Mali who underwent circumcision fights for asylum Associated Press

By STEPHEN MANNING, Associated Press Writer

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Alima Traore doesn't remember when part of her genitals was removed as a young child in her native Mali. But even at 29, she still lives with the consequences.

There's the pain, the fear of future medical problems, and a persistent feeling that she has been robbed of an important element of being a woman.

"It is like some part of you is taken away. I don't feel complete at all," she said of the practice, meant to suppress sexual desires and maintain the honor of young girls. "A woman is complete when you have all parts of your body."

Traore, whose student visa expired, now faces deportation and the unsavory prospect of submitting to an arranged marriage with her first cousin if she returns home to Mali in West Africa.

She claims the procedure she underwent, often referred to as female genital mutilation or female circumcision, is proof that she will suffer in Mali. She says the common practice is an example of a society where men dominate women.

But her petitions for asylum have so far been rejected by immigration courts and the Justice Department, which on April 14 denied her request for reconsideration. Traore has also filed an appeal with the federal Fourth Circuit of Appeals, a case that remains open.

An immigration appeals court wrote in November that while female genital mutilation was "reprehensible," Traore had not proven the act was evidence that she would suffer further harm in Mali. The court concluded that like the loss of a limb, it was a one-time act that could not be repeated, and did not constitute a threat of continued harm.

Female genital mutilation involves the removal of a girl's clitoris or other genital parts, usually shortly after birth or at a young age. Critics say it can lead to pain during sex and complications in childbirth and eliminates any pleasure for women during sex.

According to a February statement from 10 United Nations agencies, between 100 million to 140 million women and girls have had the procedure done, most in African countries.

A State Department report released in 2007 estimates that 95 percent of adult women in Mali, a nation of roughly 12 million people, have undergone female genital mutilation. However, rates have declined under recent government efforts to eliminate the practice.

Asylum petitions are based in part on whether an applicant will face continued and similar harm if they are sent home. That has led to mixed opinions in U.S. courts.

In 2005, a federal appeals court in California compared female genital mutilation to forced sterilization, saying it had effects lasting far beyond the act itself. But the Board of Immigration Appeals, a Justice Department unit, said in its decision for Traore that the California court was wrong to conclude it amounted to continued persecution.

Traore lived in Bamako, the capital of Mali, the only girl in a family led by a stern father. At some point, she doesn't know when, she was circumcised. A doctor who examined her confirmed it in a filing with her case, according to her lawyer, Ronald Richey.

All of her friends were circumcised, and it was considered shameful for girls not to have had the procedure, she said. Her mother didn't approve of it, but the family never spoke of what happened, Traore said.

"They do it in my country to have control of women, control over your sexual activity," she said. "I was circumcised without my consent."

Traore came to the United States in 2000 on a tourist visa but was later granted a student visa to attend college. But in August 2003, she learned her visa had expired because she had not filled out the proper paperwork when she changed schools.

She called her father in Mali and told him she would return home to apply for another student visa. The father saw the development as "a sign from God" and said he planned to arrange a marriage with her cousin. When she objected, her father said the decision was "irrevocable," and that a dowry had already been paid, according to court filings.

Traore sought to remain in the United States while she applied for a new student visa, but her request was denied and she was ordered to leave the country.

Ernestine Fobbs, a spokeswoman for Immigration and Customs Enforcement, would not comment on the case since it is a pending legal matter.

In recent months, several members of Congress have sent letters to Attorney General Michael Mukasey, asking him to intervene. Traore's federal appeal lists a long roster of supporters, including doctors and women's rights groups.

Meanwhile, Traore is in limbo while her case continues. She had planned to become a nurse, but she can't go to school without a student visa.

If she has to return to Mali, she will, but she doesn't want to be forced into marriage, especially with a close relative. If she had a daughter, Traore said, the child would likely be circumcised as well.

Going home would mean losing the freedom to choose for herself, she said.

"I am going to be a slave again," she said.

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