

*Private Members' Business***PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS**

[Translation]

**CRIMINAL CODE**

**Mrs. Christiane Gagnon (Québec, BQ)** moved that Bill C-277, an act to amend the Criminal Code (genital mutilation of female persons), be read the second time and referred to a committee.

She said: Mr. Speaker, my heart is filled with emotion as I open debate today on Bill C-277, an act to amend the Criminal Code (genital mutilation of female persons). It is filled with emotion because this bill deals with a cruel practice to which millions of women are subjected in the name of a so-called cultural value.

What I am trying to do today is help prevent mutilation of female genitals at least in Canada and Quebec. My heart is also filled with emotion because I realize that I am speaking for a great many women who will never get to speak publicly. I am referring to the victims of this practice.

Finally, I will be delivering my speech with great respect, respect for immigrant women, foreign cultures and ethnic communities. This respect should underlie every word spoken on the subject of traditions, for traditions are part of every human being's make-up and respect for human beings is what my bill is all about.

The purpose of this bill is twofold: to deter and protect; to protect innocent victims, and deter any would-be offender. That is why the bill has two parts: criminalization of the act per se, and punishment for anyone involved.

Moving to the heart of the matter, allow me to set the problem in context by briefly recapitulating the facts and figures regarding genital mutilation of female persons, then summarizing arguments in favour of such practice and, finally, setting this practice in the Canadian sociopolitical context.

First, the facts. To give a better idea of what genital mutilation means, let me describe briefly the three different operations currently performed. The first one is circumcision, or sunna, in which the tip of the clitoris is removed. The second is called extended circumcision, and involves the complete excision of the clitoris or partial excision of the labia minora and labia majora and the stitching of the genitals except for a small meatus. As for infibulation, it is similar to extended circumcision, with the added feature of suturing with a product supposed to fasten the wound.

Depending on the country, the act is performed by a barber, a midwife, an elder, or a health professional. It is estimated that there are currently between 80 and 120 million excised women and young girls, mainly in Africa, the Middle East and Asia.

In October 1994, *La Presse* reported that 6,000 girls between the ages of 7 and 22 are excised everyday. Six thousand per day, Madam Speaker. This is a situation of concern to me and I hope that it will be of concern to other members as well. On May 22, the international press reported the case of a ten-year old Egyptian girl who died after being excised; her 12-year old sister was admitted to hospital in serious condition.

Having heard the technical description of the operation, we can easily imagine the serious effects it must have on the women on whom it is performed. Here are a few among those on record: haemorrhaging, infections, obstetrical complications, cysto-vaginal or rectovaginal fistula, cysts, violent pain, impaired sexual response, psychological disorders, and death.

• (1805)

In addition to this long list of possible consequences, there is another specific problem affecting excised women who immigrate to Canada. When these women realize that they are "different", they may experience problems in their social and love lives. For example, during a medical consultation with female practitioners who were not aware of that practice, a social worker helping immigrants told of many mutilated fiancées or wives who were abandoned by their partners after these men had sexual relations with women who had not been excised. Imagine the double trauma experienced by these women who are mutilated and then abandoned, which is of course contrary to the expectations generated by their traditional family environment.

Because this operation is still common in many regions of the world, there are many explanations justifying it. Some are more esoteric than others, but all are objectively wrong. I will mention a few of the more surprising ones, without commenting.

Childbirth is easier for the excised woman. Female genital organs produce smelly and unsanitary secretions. Male circumcision is done for aesthetic reasons; consequently, women should undergo a similar type of operation. The clitoris could kill a first child, especially if the child's head touches it during delivery. Women whose clitoris is intact become nymphomaniacs. The clitoris generates too much excitement for the man. Virginity is preserved. Fertility increases, since female genital secretions kill sperm.

Those are the arguments most often used to justify these types of genital mutilation. I want to point out that, contrary to popular belief, no religion prescribes genital mutilation of female persons.

Although genital mutilation may seem a problem occurring far away from us, according to some witnesses, it happens here, in Canada and in Quebec. Since our society is open to immigrants, this tradition that goes against our values has unfortunately been imported along with other values more similar to ours.