

Private Members' Business

continue to listen on the subject. That is obviously witnessed by the fact that he is present for the debate today.

In 1991 by a unique set of circumstances I made the acquaintance of a young professional couple who was fleeing an extremely oppressive situation in a north African country. I will talk a bit about them and about my indirect personal experience with this terrible subject matter.

These people were secular Muslims. They were persecuted by a fundamentalist regime for expressing their more moderate views and for associating with persons who shared those moderate views. I am straining here not to invade their privacy and I am of necessity therefore being vague about details of their professions, nationalities and other identifying features.

In any event, I am happy to say the Canadian immigration system worked. It delivered for this couple. They became refugees and then immigrants. Now they are citizens living and working in the freedom of our great country. They became friends of our family and particular friends of my daughter who is the same age as the young woman.

Shortly after achieving refugee status they came to see me. The woman needed to consult a doctor because she wanted to have children and she needed advice. She had been the victim at the age of 12 of female genital mutilation. Her clitoris had been crudely removed, her labia minora excised and her labia majora incised to create raw surfaces so they could be stitched together forming a cover of skin and scar over the vagina. There is in this type of mutilation a small opening left to allow for urination, for menstruation and for the pleasure of the man who would ultimately become her husband.

Like most Canadians I had never been confronted with it before although I knew about it. We were able to find a surgeon who was of assistance and who performed a procedure that gave some relief and ultimately allowed my friend to more comfortably perform bodily functions and happily to bear two gorgeous children who are Canadian citizens. One of them was a Canadian before her parents were.

I was struck then and I remain struck now by the image of this beautiful young woman, the same age as my daughter, intelligent, alive, youthful and because of our system politically free.

Even with what we have done for her we can never put things back the way they should be. She can never, ever enjoy sexual relations with her husband. She bears scars and will suffer physical side effects for the rest of her life. She will have pain both physical and spiritual that we can only imagine. She will bear this pain stoically, with dignity, and thankfully with the support of her husband. She bears the terrible memory of the mutilation act, of the midwife with a razor, of no anesthesia, of her mother and others holding her down, of the blood, the pain,

the fear, the convalescence, and to what end? The end to be served was that of her own oppression.

They mutilate women, damage them. In this rite women are treated like chattel, like livestock. They exist to be used for labour, to bear sons and for sexual gratification that they cannot share. They mutilate them so they will be faithful, so they will not enjoy sex, so they will not run away, so someone else will not take them. It is done in the name of manhood, in the name of God or religion, in the name of the preservation of a way of life and in the name of a culture; but nothing comparable is done in these cultures to men.

• (1825)

I believe passionately in the diversity of this country; in the right of Canadians and of people who come here to display their religions, their cultures and their ethnic origins; in the equality of the sexes; and in respect for religious and cultural practices of others.

I believe religious headgear like the keppah, the turban and the Muslim veil should be accepted by Canadians in our everyday life. I believe we should be colour blind in our policies. I believe in employment equity.

As much as I believe in all these things, I also believe that practices like female genital mutilation cannot and must not be tolerated in Canada. Throughout the world between 85 million and 115 million girls and women have suffered this tragedy. Its defenders say, quite incredibly to me, that it is a right of passage like ear piercing or the male right of circumcision. The mutilation of female genitalia cannot be compared to these other minor procedures. It has no purpose but to suppress.

I do not want to impose my views unilaterally on foreign lands or cultures, but I believe that we can and must come to grips with this practice within our own borders.

I know and I accept the assurances of legal experts that female genital mutilation is covered by the more general sections of the Criminal Code concerning assault. However, as a woman, as a mother, as a sister, as a daughter and as a citizen of the global village, I do not think that is good enough.

I urge the government and all members of the House to take the extra step to help to educate others, to help to educate across the world and to educate within our borders so that people understand that if they participate in the act of female genital mutilation we believe it is wrong. If it takes an amendment to the Criminal Code in the final analysis after we have studied it, after it has perhaps gone to committee and after we have looked at all factors, I will rise in the House and support it.

Mrs. Jan Brown (Calgary Southeast, Ref.): Madam Speaker, it is with respect that I rise to speak to Bill C-277 presented by my colleague for Quebec.