



Emilia's story

From "The Story of My Body," an event co-sponsored by *Glamour* magazine and the International Women's Health Coalition (IWHC)

March 8, 2007

"Every woman's education ends in the kitchen, Emilia." That's what everyone told me. In Calabar, Nigeria, a young girl is supposed to be seen and not heard. She watches her brothers go to school every day while she learns to do what her mother does: caring for the family, cooking, farming, giving birth to as many children as the husband wants—whether or not he can feed them. And then before that young girl gets married, she undergoes female genital mutilation; then she is given to a man to be his well-trained wife. Her bride-price is used to send her brothers to school.

As a child, I had so little information about my body. Most young girls only know about their hands, their legs, their mouths, the parts that society considers decent. And the parts that are indecent? We are forbidden to call our reproductive organs by their real names. It is taboo. And menstruation? Parents refuse to discuss it. Some girls, when they get their period for the first time, are accused of having sex...because of the blood.

I first found out about Mbobi, our word for female circumcision, when I was 10 years old. Many girls I knew were enthusiastic about it; it's a coming of age, but when my mother told me what would happen I was scared. My mother and almost all mothers believe that the clitoris gives a girl a high libido. And a girl with a libido will be a promiscuous girl. They also think it will grow very long if it is not cut off, and that it makes a woman ugly. An uncircumcised girl will be laughed at, her mother thinks, and no man will consider her worthy to be his wife.

For three years I worried. I knew that when I was 13 and a half, the circumcisor would come to our house. My mother and my aunties would gather round and hold my legs and arms, and the circumcisor would sit on me so I couldn't move. If I screamed I would be told to be quiet, as a girl that screams is weak and will not be able to go through labor and child delivery.

Then, afterward, I would be sent to "the Fattening Room" to eat and rest and get better. It can take weeks for the wounds to heal. So in the meantime the girl eats. And eats. She is expected to get very fat. If she gains a lot of weight it shows that her father spent a lot of money on her during her confinement.

It was normal, I knew, but I still wondered: Was *this* what made a girl into a woman? Into a healthy, intelligent human being?

One afternoon, a friend told me that there was an organization training young girls, called the Girl's Power Initiative, and I decided to check it out. It was the right information at the right time and I will be forever grateful. At GPI, I was surprised to learn that female circumcision was actually harmful to girls. The cuts can get infected. Later, the scars can get infected—evidence, men think, that a woman has cheated. I began to understand that

Mbobi was a violation, one that I would not let myself be subjected to. I learned that I had rights as a girl child.

And so I refused. My mother and friends thought I had lost my mind. They pressured me with words: “You are the first daughter,” they pleaded. “You will be an outcast!” Perhaps our family would be outcasts. Boys would feel threatened by me. At some point, I grew tired of fighting them, but I stood my ground. I refused. I remembered the lessons I had learned. And I taught them to my sister. She decided to refuse Mbobi too. I am so proud of protecting her.

Right now I am a graduate of Computer Science at the University of Calabar. My male friends from school have accepted me; they know that I am intelligent, and whenever issues about women come up they say, “please ask Emilia”...or, “Emilia we are tired of your emancipation talk.” One day, I hope to have a life-long partner, a man who will believe in me as a human being, a man who will not be scared away when I say, “I am a feminist.” That man will be lucky to be with me, because I am exceptional.

IWHC has supported GPI since its creation in 1994.