Activists Fear Rise of FGM Cases in Burkina Faso

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BERE, BURKINA FASO—

Burkina Faso has made tremendous strides against female genital mutilation in the past 25 years, with international aid agencies saying the practice has declined there as much as 30 to 40 percent. But some fear recent political instability may reverse the trend.

Enforcement efforts have remained robust in much of the country despite a year of political upheaval following the popular overthrow of President Blaise Compaore.

But enforcement levels can vary from region to region, as was highlighted by a trial this month in Zoundweogo province of southern Burkina Faso.

The trial of Bande Kadi was the first prosecution for female genital mutilation in Zoundweogo in a year, though prosecutions have continued in the rest of the country.

Three hundred people squeezed into the temporary court in Bere village to follow the proceedings. Hundreds more gathered under the shea trees outside, listening in via loudspeaker.

Sentencing Kadi to a year in jail for mutilating eight girls, aged eight to 17, judge Albert Kaobre had this message for the community: The law does not tolerate female genital mutilation, he said, and warned against the practice continuing.

FGM has been illegal in Burkina Faso since 1996, with offenders receiving a maximum sentence of three years.

**Life-long trauma**

Victims say the procedure traumatizes them for life.

“I was seven,” a woman recalled, asking not to be named. She said two women grabbed her, forced her legs apart and cut her, with no anesthetic.

She suffered a form of FGM where her genitalia were scarred and sewn almost completely closed. Giving birth to her son caused serious complications more than a decade later.  
  
Now a successful businesswoman, she is considering reconstructive surgery, though such a procedure is expensive and only recently became available in Burkina Faso.

According to the U.N. Children's Fund, there were 19 FGM cases prosecuted in the first half of 2015 alone, up from 11 in all of 2014.  The current incidence among girls under the age of 15 is now believed to be as low as 3 percent, according to the National Committee for the Fight Against the Practice of Excision.

But a legal expert with the committee, Viviane Taro, says there are worries about a resurgence of the practice in the chaos that has followed the overthrow of President Compaore last year.

She said officials suspect that because the regime is gone, some people believe the law against FGM is obsolete.

Evidence of any upsurge remains anecdotal for now, but authorities say they are on alert.