

# Recognising women

Two award-winning African journalists

share their struggles to make an impact

“People think of the traditions as themselves,” said Leah Muuya of MYWO in “Secret and Sacred,” a MYWO-produced video, distributed by PATH, which explores the personal dangers and harmful social consequences of FGM. The video explains that female circumcision has traditionally signaled a young woman’s readiness for the responsibilities of adulthood.

In response, *Circumcision through Words* brings the young candidates together for a week of seclusion during which they learn traditional teachings about their coming roles as women, parents and adults in the community, as well as more modern messages about personal health, reproductive issues, hygiene, communications skills, self-esteem and peer pressure. The week ends with a community celebration of song, dancing, and feasting which affirms the girls and their new place in the community.

The original proponents of the new rite have since incorporated and are seeking support from international donors in order to continue and expand their efforts. Funding has come from several international donors including the Ford Foundation, the Moriah Fund, Population Action International (PAI)/Wallace Global Fund, Public Welfare Foundation and Save the Children – Canada.

MYWO and PATH have also developed public awareness campaigns that spread information on the harmful effects of female genital mutilation. According to Dr. Asha Mohamud, a PATH Senior Program Officer focusing on FGM, the two organisations agree that information, education and public discussion are more effective tools against FGM than direct, prohibitive action.

That became clear when Kenyan President Daniel arap Moi declared his intent to abolish the practice. “It led to a terrific backlash,” she said, including circumcisions in the middle of the night and a rush to circumcise girls at a younger-than-usual age in an effort to beat the ban.

Accompanying this Kenyan initiative is an international effort to increase global pressure on the issue. In April 1997 the World Health Organisation, UNICEF and the U.N. Population Fund announced a joint plan to significantly curb female genital mutilation over the next decade and completely eliminate the practice within three generations. Many governments have outlawed the practice in their own territories.

Efforts like *Circumcision through Words* offer a promising approach to resolving this controversial issue, at least within practicing communities, said Dr. Mohamud, since there are many people who would like to end the practice yet are not able to face the social ostracism that would entail. Yet, despite the continuing successes of *Circumcision through Words*, proponents of traditional circumcision are still numerous in many areas. As many have pointed out, ‘culture’ doesn’t change overnight.

## Managing Emotional Distance



After South African journalist **Charlene Smith** was raped she used her writing to become an outspoken activist on violence against women. In September she received the South African Award for Courageous Journalism from the Ruth First Memorial Trust. Here she reflects on this combination of journalism and activism:

I loathe the ‘me’ school of journalism. But perhaps once in our lives, something will have a profound impact on us, and we may believe that we can help generate positive change. Then, I believe, we have a responsibility to share, in as constructive a manner as possible, our experience with society.

I had a powerful sense on the night of the rape that I had to turn a bad incident into something good. My primary skill is as a writer. The initial article [in the *Mail and Guardian*], and those that have followed, have changed rape counselling techniques from San Diego to Namibia, Singapore to Uganda. It has seen the first research into the relationship between rape, HIV and anti-retrovirals. The articles have influenced steps with regard to rape legislation in this country and in Namibia, as well as the rewriting of rape protocols, police training, insurance policies, life skills training in schools and so on.

The first time I covered conflict was in 1976 – I was 17 and *The Star*’s first woman crime reporter. It taught me that nothing is more important than the story, the story comes first and when that is done I can deal with my emotions. We have a duty, particularly when confronted with horror, to record in as straightforward a manner as possible what happened – horror needs no embellishment – so that those who suffered or died, did not do so in vain. Our duty is to tell the world, so that it, hopefully, acts against barbarity.

I find it traumatic and emotionally draining to write about rape. Should I be writing about rape? Shouldn’t journalists keep an emotional distance? In reporting apartheid many of us did not lose emotional distance, we managed it. This was a crime against humanity so acute that we could not fail to be moved by it. We had to see for ourselves. The truth is rarely self-evident.

## Breaking through in male-dominated Africa

Being a young, female journalist in Africa is no easy feat. Pamela Mulumby, this year’s 24-year-old winner of the prestigious African Journalist of the Year award, can definitely attest to that. She has been sidelined, had her credibility questioned and even been accused of sleeping her way to the top at her newspaper, Kenya’s *East African Standard*.

Mulumby knocked 14 other contestants from across the continent out of the running. She was awarded the prize for a series of articles published about the plight of slum and squatter dwellers in Nairobi and nearby villages. The win catapulted her to instant stardom but she still faces much criticism in the wake of her success.

“Some men thought I was climbing the ladder too fast and felt their positions were threatened,” Mulumby says, alluding to the male-dominated journalism world in Kenya. Other men questioned her credibility and insisted a woman could not win such an award unless she was sleeping with one of the officials, she says.

Women also voiced their disapproval. “They thought I was too positive about life and wouldn’t fit in my shoes.”

She accuses female journalists of being as corrupt as their male counterparts. “When journalists are corrupt,” Mulumby says,

Journalists who are young and female in Africa – like much of the world – have much to contend with in advancing their careers. Rhodes University journalism student **Trusha Reddy** interviews African Journalist of the Year award-winner **Pamela Mulumby**...



“they will not sweep corruption under the carpet, but they will deny the people of the country the services of a free press.”

Tribal politics also played a role in her treatment at the paper. Her first encounter with tribal prejudice was from a female editor who did not assign her any stories for two months because she was from a different tribe. “I was left with little option but to be creative and nosy,” Mulumby says. “I had to smell news and gate-crash whether there was already a reporter there or not.”

Eventually her stories were published, but she was relegated to the traditional female beat, fashion. “Men do not trust women with covering certain issues,” Mulumby says. “They cover politics while women cover light stuff like fashion and beauty contests.”

Aside from pushing for gender equality, Mulumby names the challenges facing African journalists as embracing new technologies; engaging in further training; resisting government manipulation; and developing a voluntary ethics code.

Mulumby’s message to women is simple: “Women are their own enemies. We must be ready to fight. We still have hope.”