

It's time to speak out against a cruel practice against young women in many Third World countries.

Breaking the silence

CYNTHIA DICKSTEIN

Women learn about silence when they are young. I did.

Because I was the orchestra concertmistress in junior high, every school day I had rehearsals or a lesson in a private practice room with the music director.

This man regularly put his arms around me to show the proper position to hold the violin or the proper bowing technique, but he always did it in such a way that he was perfectly positioned to rub up against my breasts and breathe down my neck. He never overtly pushed himself on me, but he never really stopped trying until I decided to stop playing the violin in high school.

What is most interesting as I look back at his behavior was not only his perseverance but my response. I ignored it. I didn't feel ashamed because I knew it was he who was wrong, but I never said a word about it. I recognized that he was the authority figure, the one who would be believed. So I chose to be silent.

Generations of young girls, like me, learned early where the power lay and were taught that it was not in their best interests to challenge that authority. And many of these young women became wives and mothers who chose to be silent.

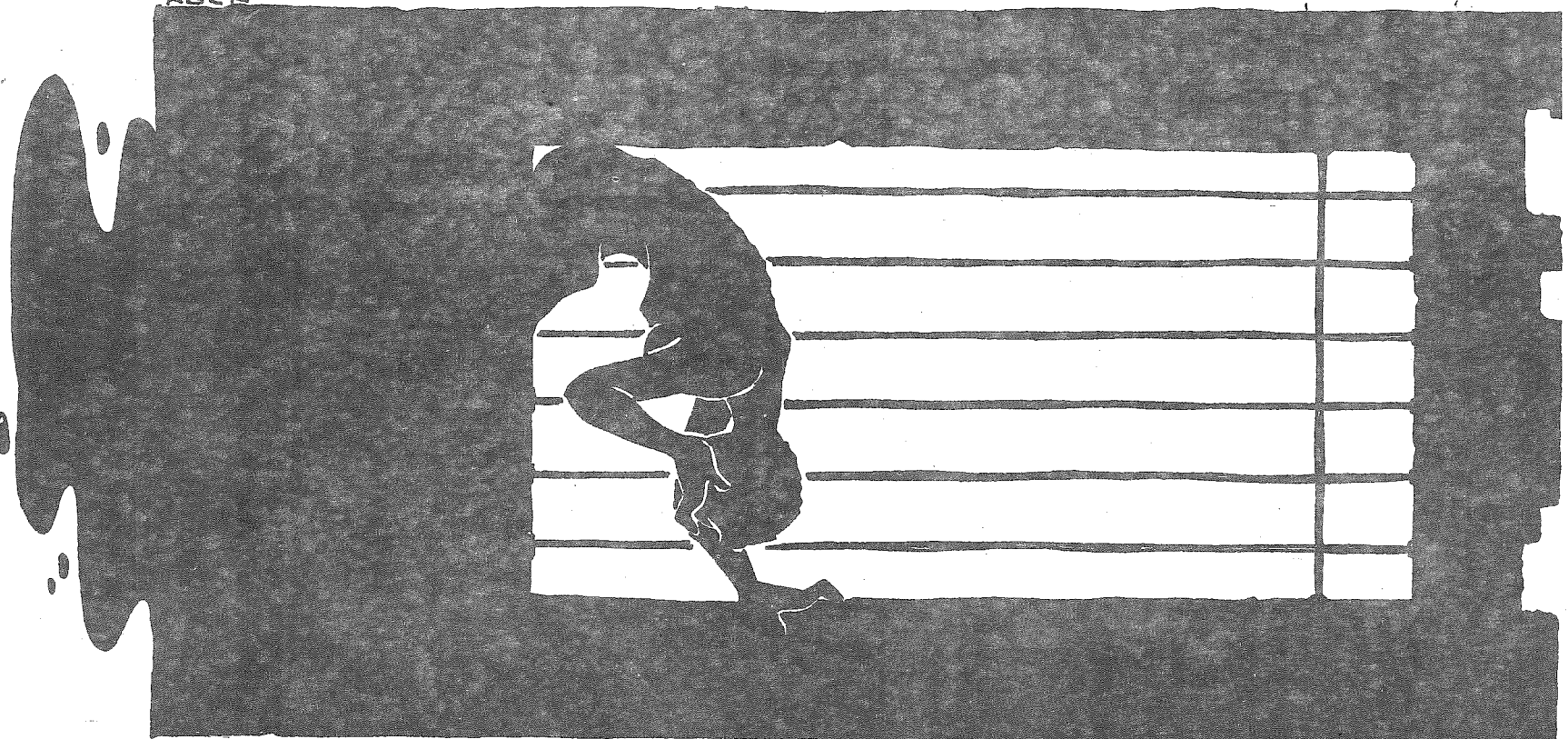
Silent when their men beat and raped them, silent when their husbands physically and sexually abused their children. So these children not only had to deal with the fear of their fathers but had to come to terms with the even more confusing and maybe equally damaging issue of why their mothers betrayed a trust, didn't protect them, didn't speak out.

Too young to understand their mothers' fears, these children could only feel that their mothers were ashamed of them, could only conclude that what was happening was somehow their fault. Afraid and humiliated, they kept silent, too.

Today, thanks to brave denunciations by those who did step forward, society has acknowledged that certain behaviors are not only unlawful but are no longer even secretly acceptable. At a younger age than my '60s generation did, American women are finding their voices. They are speaking up and speaking out.

Lydia Oluoro is speaking out to protect her daughters. Lydia has been in this country illegally since 1987, but her daughters, ages 6 and 4, are US citizens. Fighting deportation, Lydia contends that if she must return to her native Nigeria, her daughters will face genital mutilation.

Misleadingly labeled female circumcision, this is a practice that few



ELIZABETH ROCK ILLUSTRATION

usually by inserting a sliver of wood, so the urine and later the menstrual blood can be passed.

A recent issue of US News and World Report stated that the purpose of this genital mutilation is to diminish sexual appetite in order to maintain a girl's virginity and thus her marriageability; the result is lost sexual sensation, infections, persistent pain, painful intercourse, infertility and dangerous childbirth.

The article went on to report that Amnesty International has no policy concerning the genital mutilation of girls and women and that the State Department monitors the practice but does not tie foreign aid to efforts to eradicate it. And then, in an attempt to present a balanced report, it states that there are those who feel that Westerners should stay out

raged over the genital mutilation of some 100 million women?

■ Why does Congress approve foreign aid to countries that allow this practice, and would such aid be approved if it were 100 million men undergoing genital mutilation?

So the women of these cultures are receiving few messages from the world that this practice is wrong. They think they have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo, that it is best for their children.

Many economically dependent American women, who were abused and silent for so long, also thought they were doing what was best for their children by maintaining the status quo. There is a comparable complexity of the powerless, regardless of cultural differences.

We women in America are forth-