

Female Circumcision in Islam

(part 1 of 2): The History of Female Genital Cutting (FGC) and its Types



A common phenomenon which has been regrettably associated almost exclusively with Islam is the various forms of female genital cutting, or FGC[1]. Although many of those who are involved in this act attribute to the religion of Islam, the majority of the forms of FGC present in the world today which are acts truly abominable, acts of which the religion of Islam is innocent. In no way does Islam condone these actions, and they should be looked at something purely culture and not Islamic. Amnesty International asserts, “FGC [female genital cutting] predates Islam and is not practiced by the majority of Muslims, but has acquired a religious dimension.”[2] The Female Genital Cutting Education and Networking Project states, “...it is not an Islamic practice. FGC is a cross-cultural and cross-religious ritual. In Africa and the Middle East, it is performed by Muslims, Coptic Christians, members of various indigenous groups, Protestants, and Catholics, to name a few.”[3] One sect of Jews, the Falashas, also circumcise both sexes.[4] We will first look into the various types of FGC, and then examine why various cultures implemented these techniques upon their female constituencies.

Types of Female Genital Cutting

Female genital cutting is “term used to refer to any practice which includes the removal or the alteration of the female genitalia.”[5] There are three basic types of FGC[6]:

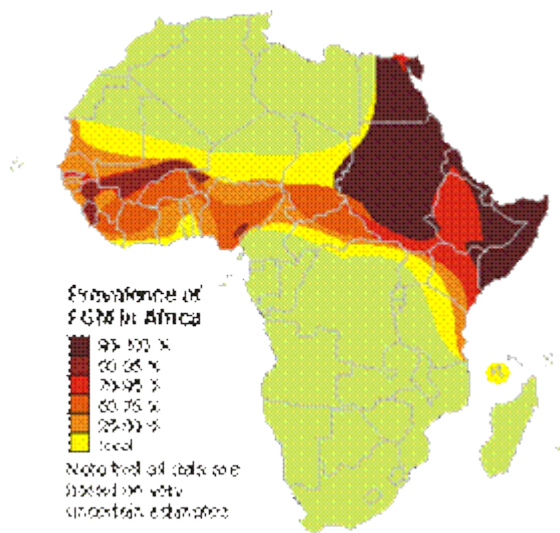
Type I: This is the mildest form of FGC, which includes removing or splitting the prepuce (foreskin or ‘hood’) which covers the clitoris of females, thus exposing the glans. This may be couple with partial or total excision of the clitoris. This is known as clitoridotomy (*slang*: hoodectomy). According to the United Nations Population Fund, this form is comparable to male circumcision.[7] This is sometimes also called “sunna circumcision” due to the fact that it is this type which is

performed commonly by those Muslims who believe it to be legislated in Islam.

Type II: In this type, known as clitoridectomy, the clitoris and labia minora is partially or totally removed.

Type III: This is one of the most extreme forms of FGC, involving the total excision of the clitoris, both the labia minora and majora, and the joining of the two sides of the vulva across the vagina, sewn with thread or secured with other items, until it heals joining together. Only a small, pencil-size hole is left to allow passage of menstrual blood and urine. This is known as infibulation or *Pharaonic Circumcision*, in reference to its origins.

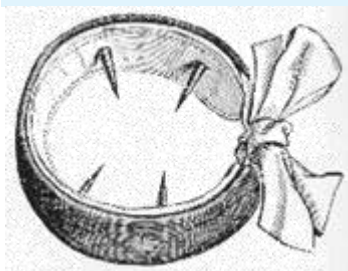
Type IV: This type is inclusive of all other forms of genital cutting, such as: pricking, piercing or incision of the clitoris and/or labia; stretching of the clitoris and/or labia; cauterization by burning of the clitoris and surrounding tissue; introcision, scraping (angurya cuts) or cutting (gishri cuts) of the vagina or surrounding tissue; and introduction of corrosive substances or herbs into the vagina.



Geography

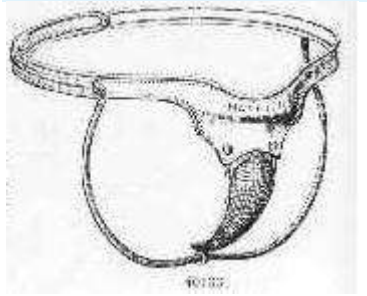
Various forms of FGC is practiced throughout the world, but it is most common in sub-Saharan Africa, in a band stretching East from Senegal to Somalia, as shown on the map. It also exists in the Middle East, North and South America, Indonesia and Malaysia. Type III is almost exclusive to Somalia, Sudan and southern Egypt, along with some areas in Mali and Nigeria.

We find that in some societies, such as Somalia, Eritrea, and Ethiopia, almost all women undergo type III of FGC. Reasons range from regarding the woman as unclean if the clitoris is not completely removed, to ensuring that women remain chaste until marriage. This practice is an age old custom in these societies, and members fear to leave it out of fear of chastisement. Women may not be able to get married, or even be accused of committing fornication. Families may also lose their honor if this tradition is not kept with.



FGC was also a common practice in North America, and specifically in the U.S., type I, II and III was common until the 1950's in order to control female sexuality. Clitoridectomy was performed for various reasons. One of the most common reasons was to reduce masturbation. In England, Isaac Baker

Brown published a book about his successes in treating female masturbation with clitoridectomy. He also claimed it to cure obscure nervous disorders such as hysteria and epilepsy.[8] Many more solutions were offered for masturbation, such as chastity belts, first used in medieval times to ensure that wives remain chaste while their husbands were away. In order to prevent masturbation in boys, spiked rings even more drastic measures were employed, such as cauterization and even castration.[9]



In one of the most classic of pediatric textbooks, *Diseases of Infancy and Childhood*, published 11 times from 1897 to 1940, the author L.E. Holt advocated cauterization of the clitoris as well as blistering the vulva as a preventive measure for masturbation. Masturbation was seen as the reason of many ills, such as neuroticism, disobedience, and disrespect of parents.[10]

In the U.S. an organization known as the Orificial Surgery Society was formed, publishing journals mentioning the various benefits of clitoridectomy, even for things as trivial as headaches.

There were also many hygienic benefits that were thought to be produced by clitoridotomy. C.F. McDonald states in a 1958 paper entitled *Circumcision of the Female*[11]: “If the male needs circumcision for cleanliness and hygiene, why not the female? I have operated on perhaps 40 patients who needed this attention.” The author states that it remedies “irritation, scratching, irritability, masturbation, frequency and urgency,” and [smegmaliths](#) causing “[dyspareunia](#) and [frigidity](#).”

Until recently the clitoris was seen as an unclean thing. Even Sigmund Freud, one of the founders of modern psychology, stated in one of his books *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*, the “elimination of clitoral sexuality is a necessary precondition for the development of femininity.”

Today in the west, many adults choose to undergo clitoridotomy, as some doctors[12] and others[13] advocate clitoridotomy, claiming that it increases sexual [pleasure](#). They state that over-sized clitoral hood may impede in the stimulation of the [clitoris](#). Some websites, such as [Circlist](#), [BMEzine](#), and [geocities](#), even have testimonials of people who underwent the process, as well as medical reports promoting the practice. They show that the majority of women reported increased sexual pleasure after the procedure (87.5% in Rathmann’s 1959 study[14] and 75% in Knowles’).

Footnotes:

[1] Some opponents of this practice use the term Female Genital Mutilation, or FGM, but the term FGC is being used more commonly these days in order to avoid stirring social sensitivities.

[2] *What is Female Genital Mutilation?* Amnesty International..(<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGACT770061997?open&of=ENG-370>)

[3] *Female Genital Cutting (FGC): An Introduction*, Marianne Sarkis. (<http://www.fgmnetwork.org/intro/fgmintro.html>).

[4] Andree, “Zur Volkskunde der Juden,” p. 84.

[5] *Female Genital Cutting (FGC): An Introduction*, by Marianne Sarkis (<http://www.fgmnetwork.org/intro/index.html>).

[6] *Female Genital Mutilation: Report of a WHO Technical Working Group, Geneva, 17-19 July 1995.* World Health Organization: Geneva. 1996.

[7] *Frequently Asked Questions on Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting* (<http://www.unfpa.org/gender/practices2.htm#4>).

[8] “The Ritual of Circumcision”, by Karen Ericksen Paige. *Human Nature*, pp 40-48, May 1978.

[9] *ibid.*

[10] *ibid.*

[11] McDonald, C.F., M.D (September, 1958). “Circumcision of the Female.

[12] Ezzell, Carol (October 31, 2000). “*Anatomy and Sexual Dysfunction*”.

[13] Clitoral Circumcision. Tantra * Kama Sutra * Tantric Sex & Tantric philosophy.

[14] Rathmann, W.G., M.D. (September, 1959). “*Female Circumcision: Indications and a New Technique.*”

(part 2 of 2): Circumcision amongst Muslims

A Difference of Opinion

Although circumcision of males is an act regarded as commendable in Islam, the scholars have differed in regards to females. Some scholars have regarded the act as commendable, while others regard it as merely permissible. Lately, some have even stated its impermissibility. All these opinions are based upon a number of Prophetic narrations (hadeeths) relating to this subject.

The scholars of Islam who state that circumcision is a commendable act mainly do so due to a hadeeth in which the Prophet, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, said:

“Circumcision is Sunnah for men and an honorable thing for women.”
(*Musnad Ahmad*)

From this narration, the scholars of Islam understand the encouragement of the Prophet to circumcise both men and women to be a commendable act in the religion, based about known principles of Islamic Jurisprudence.

Those who regard it as merely being something permissible base their opinion on an additional narration, known as the narration of Umm Atiyyah, in which the Prophet came to know of a circumcision being performed upon a female child. He related instruction to the woman performing it saying:

“Trim, but do not cut into it, for this is brighter for the face (of the girl) and more favorable with the husband.” (*Mu`jam al-Tabarâni al-Awsat*)

From this hadeeth, the scholars deduce the permissibility of the circumcision of females, as the Prophet did not clearly forbid it. They also deduce, however, the impermissibility of going to extremes in doing so, based upon his prohibition of “cutting into it”.

When one looks into the statements of the scholars of hadeeth, however, they will find that quite a number of the most prominent of them, such as Ibn Hajar, al-Bukhari, Abu Dawud, al-Bayhaqi, ibn-ul-Mundthir, ash-Shawkani, state that they are weak and cannot be relied upon. Ibn ul-Mundthir said:

“There is no report about circumcision that can be relied upon, and no chain of transmission that can be followed.”[1]

It is known amongst the scholars of Islam that if a hadeeth is found to be weak and unreliable, it is impermissible that it be used as evidence to establish a ruling in Islam, as all legal rulings in the religion must be verified with authentic, unambiguous proofs

“Sunnah” Circumcision

What one can see is that Type I FGC, sometimes called “Sunnah” circumcision, does have some basis in the religion of Islam, however weak this basis may be. It is key to note, however, that it is only this first type which some of the scholars regarded as permissible or commendable, which is the clipping of the prepuce until the glans becomes visible, or less. This procedure is harmless and has no detrimental effects upon women, and is similar to the circumcision of men, as mentioned previously. Rather, some have even argued that there are some benefits to this procedure, as mentioned earlier, such as increase of sexual pleasure, prevention of unpleasant odors which result from foul secretions beneath the prepuce, and reduction of the incidence of urinary tract infections and infections affecting the reproductive system.[2]

As for the other types of FGC, there is no basis for this practice in Islam, rather it is strictly prohibited, as in the hadeeth which implies its permissibility is a prohibition from going to extremes. Also, Islamic law protects women’s right to sexual enjoyment, demonstrated by the fact that a woman has the right to divorce on the grounds that her husband does not provide sexual satisfaction. As for those Muslims in certain parts of the world which do practice this form of female genital mutilation, as they grow in their understanding of Islam, they will start to put aside these abominable actions. A clear example of this is that

that one of the various groups in Kenya who do not practice FGM are the Muslims, although it is a country whose people are known to practice it,.

We must emphasize, however, that the correct stance is that there is no reliable text which directly encourages any form of circumcision, and thus the matter is left to other general texts which prohibit infliction of harm and those which encourage all things healthy and beneficial. One fundamental of Islamic jurisprudence is that what is not specifically prohibited is allowed, but still subject to other indirect texts. This makes for a great deal of tolerance in religion, but also allows it to cope with new issues brought by time. If it is found that circumcision is medically beneficial to females or to society, then it would be at the most something encouraged by Islam, as all things beneficial to life are regarded as commendable in religion. But if it is found, on the other hand, that circumcision is harmful, then it would definitely be regarded as something forbidden in Islam, as Dr. Abd al-Rahmân b. Hasan al-Nafisah, editor of the *Contemporary Jurisprudence Research Journal* based in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia stated in his article entitled *Female Circumcision & Islam*: “In Islamic Law, preservation of the person – the life and bodily soundness of the person – is a legal necessity. Anything that compromises this legal necessity by bringing harm to the person is unlawful.”^[3]

Footnotes:

[1] *Talkhees al-Habeer*. Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani. Hadeeth #2140.

[2] *Female Circumcision: A Medical Perspective*, Sitt al-Banaat Khaalid. 2003.

[3] (http://islamtoday.com/showme2.cfm?cat_id=2&sub_cat_id=822).