

# Female Genital Mutilation and Female Circumcision

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## *Introduction*


Commonly found in under-developed and developing nations, female genital mutilation (FGM, also referred to as Female Genital Cutting FGC) is generally recognized as a violation of human rights. It reflects deep-rooted inequality between the sexes and constitutes an extreme form of discrimination against women. It is nearly always carried out on minors and is a direct violation of the rights of children. The practice also violates a person's right to health, security and physical integrity, the right to be free of degrading treatment, and the right to life when the procedure results in death.


## *Relevancy of this Discussion*

In recent times, the issue of female genital mutilation (FGM) in Islam arose once again due to recent charges against doctors in Michigan accused of FGM/FGC. They cited religious and cultural traditions for their actions. Naturally, the question arises whether these actions can be religiously sanctioned at all.


## *Islamic Relevancy*

Circumcision is widespread as a religious practice for Muslim males as well as males from other Abrahamic faiths. Islamic sacred texts also seem to include women; however, the practice is scarcely found.

*Narrated Abu Hurairah *:

*Allah's Messenger  said, "Five practices are characteristics of the Fitra: circumcision, shaving the pubic region, clipping the nails and cutting the moustaches short." (Sulayman, Hadith of Fitrah)*

In another narration, a woman was advised and instructed regarding her practice of circumcision:

*Narrated Umm Atiyyah al-Ansariyyah *:

*A woman used to perform circumcision in Medina. The Prophet ﷺ said to her: Do not cut severely as that is better for a woman and more desirable for a husband. (Sulayman, Regarding Circumcision)*

It is clear that female circumcision is found in the text, but is it equitable to the modern-day definition of FGM?

### *Definition of FGM*

WHO, the World Health Organization, gives four categorical definitions for FGM (UNICEF, 2016):

- Type 1: Often referred to as clitoridectomy, this is the partial or total removal of the clitoris (a small, sensitive and erectile part of the female genitals), and in very rare cases, only the prepuce (the fold of skin surrounding the clitoris).
- Type 2: Often referred to as excision, this is the partial or total removal of the clitoris and the labia minora (the inner folds of the vulva), with or without excision of the labia majora (the outer folds of skin of the vulva).
- Type 3: Often referred to as infibulation, this is the narrowing of the vaginal opening through the creation of a covering seal. The seal is formed by cutting and repositioning the labia minora, or labia majora, sometimes through stitching, with or without removal of the clitoris (clitoridectomy).
- Type 4: This includes all other harmful procedures to the female genitalia for non-medical purposes, e.g. pricking, piercing, incising, scraping and cauterizing the genital area.

The vagueness of the fourth category is noted and its broadness comes across as overly encompassing. In contrast, the Islamic definition for female circumcision is read from Ibn Ḥajr's *Fath ul-Bāri* found under hadith 5885:

*Māwardī said: It is to cut the skin which happens to be on the surface of the private part which is above the entry point for the male or female private parts, like a date palm seed or like the crown of the rooster. It is mandatory to remove that upper skin and not to uproot the entire genital.*

For the male, it is clear through understanding and practice, that circumcision is to remove the foreskin. As for the female, it is referring to removing excessive clitoral hood. By consensus of the panel, none of the definitions identified by WHO are applicable here. Rather, the removal of the clitoral hood is an increasingly common cosmetic/plastic surgery used to enhance the visual appearance and sexual experience for women (Michael, et al., 2010). Thus, it seems there is a wrongful conflation of the two terms FGM and female circumcision.

### *Can circumcision be considered mutilation?*

A point discussed was whether or not circumcision in itself could be considered mutilation categorically. If mutilation is to be understood as any deviation or change to the natural human body, then any circumcision would fall under it. However, the condition of malice and violence was brought up as well, so that consensual change should not be considered mutilation.

### *Ruling & Consent*

Both religiously and culturally, it is agreed that it is an obligation as well as an expectation that males are to be circumcised, while this obligation is not found for females. In fact, if females were circumcised in the same way as males are at birth, the issues of consent and human rights are often cited. There is clear disparity between the standards for both genders. However, it was mentioned that this disparity is increasingly being questioned in the west.

In interviews conducted by one of the panel members, two Somalian women were asked about their experiences with FGM. Both spoke about their experience and their cultural reality back in their home village. While it was understood that it had no religious basis, there was cultural pressure to undergo the procedure, refusing which would lead to communal ostracization. The procedure was performed to prevent women from pre-marital sex, consisting of removal of the clitoris and closing of the vaginal opening. Both women had to undergo procedures upon coming to Canada to reverse the effects, and in one of the cases, to mend the ability to have children.

### *Benefit*

Male circumcision does not appear to affect sexual function or satisfaction (although anecdotal evidence from people says otherwise) and has specific benefits: prevention of urinary tract infection, acquisition of HIV, transmission of some sexually transmitted infections and penile cancer (Male Circumcision, 2012). The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found circumcision as an important public health measure (Morris, Krieger, & Klausner, 2017). A point mentioned by the panel was that in the past, excess foreskin in non-circumcised males caused a buildup of bacteria which led to infections due to lack of water and cleaning amenities found in dryer lands such as deserts. In the case of women, both partners saw enhancement in their sexual lives. (Michael, et al., 2010)

### *Conclusion*

The panel agreed that female circumcision, as mentioned in Islamic texts was more along the lines of clitoral hood reduction and did not fall under the definition of FGM given by WHO, all of which would be rejected and considered harmful under religious guidelines. Furthermore, female circumcision may even prove beneficial to women. It is important to make the distinction between FGM and female circumcision through trained and qualified professionals.

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