

# Delinking Female Genital Mutilation/ Cutting from Islam



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# **De-linking Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting from Islam**

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements .....	ii
Background .....	1
Why FGM/C is linked with Islam.....	2
Religious terms used to refer to the practice .....	2
The word khitaan.....	3
Interpretation of texts.....	3
Belief that FGM/C guarantees chastity .....	4
Marriageability.....	4
Belief that FGM/C ensures ritual cleanliness (tohara).....	4
Islam and FGM/C.....	5
When an act is considered to be Islamic.....	5
Islamic teachings that counter FGM/C .....	17
FGM/C contravenes the objectives of <i>Shariah</i> .....	17
Allah (SWT) condemns those who change His creation.....	18
Causing harm is unlawful .....	18
Islam condemns harmful cultural practices.....	19
Women have a right to a healthy body and enjoyment of matrimonial sexual relations.....	20
Infibulation interferes with ritual cleanliness (tohara).....	23
FGM/C violates girls' and women's human rights.....	23
Efforts must be made to correct ills in the community .....	24
The origins of FGM/C is not Islamic .....	26
Conclusions .....	27
Glossary of concepts/terms.....	28

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It is our sincere hope that this booklet will make a significant contribution in clarifying the correct Islamic stand towards Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting, also known as FGM/C, and will benefit its readers in making informed decisions to abandon the practice.

## BACKGROUND

Female genital mutilation or cutting (FGM/C), also known as FGM/C, is practiced in at least 28 countries of sub-Saharan Africa, a few countries in the Middle East and Asia, and among immigrant populations from these countries in Europe, North America, and Australia. Worldwide, an estimated 100 to 140 million girls and women have undergone the practice, and at least three million girls are at risk of being subjected to the practice each year.

FGM/C comprises all procedures involving partial or total removal of the female external genitalia, or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons<sup>1</sup>. The World Health Organization (WHO) recognises four types of FGM/C, the most severe of which is type III (infibulation<sup>2</sup>), sometimes known as Pharaonic circumcision<sup>3</sup>; approximately 15 percent of all forms of female genital cutting are of this type.<sup>4</sup>

The Somali ethnic community, in Kenya as well in Somalia, Djibouti, and Ethiopia, has practiced female genital cutting for centuries and the practice appears to have remained largely unchanged. The 2003 Kenya Demographic and Health Survey (KDHS)<sup>5</sup> found a prevalence of 96.8 percent among Somali respondents and 98.9 percent for the North Eastern Province where the majority of Somalis live. The community practices primarily type III or infibulations.

The Population Council's FRONTIERS in Reproductive Health Program, with support from USAID/Kenya, carried out two studies to better understand the practice of FGM/C among the Somalis in North Eastern Province so as to inform the design and implementation of interventions to encourage its abandonment<sup>6</sup>. The first diagnostic study was carried out in Mandera and Wajir districts and in Nairobi's Eastleigh area in 2004. The second, a baseline study, was conducted in November 2005 in six locations in the Central Division of Wajir District. Both studies collected data through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with community and religious leaders as well as with recently married and unmarried men and women. The first study also included interviews with health care providers and antenatal clients who had been cut, and undertook an assessment of clinics' readiness to offer safe motherhood services.

These studies confirmed that FGM/C is a deeply rooted and widely supported practice that is sustained through many cultural justifications that reinforce its continuation. The three main reasons cited were that FGM/C is a Somali tradition, that it is an Islamic requirement, and that it enforces the cultural value of sexual purity in females by controlling female

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<sup>1</sup> WHO. 2008. *Eliminating Female Genital Mutilation: An Interagency Statement* WHO: Geneva

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> The term is used to describe this form of genital cutting because it is thought to have been introduced by the Pharaohs of Egypt.

<sup>4</sup> Yoder PS and Khan S. 2007. *Numbers of Women Circumcised in Africa: The Production of a Total*. Calverton, Macro International Inc.

<sup>5</sup> Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) [Kenya], Ministry of Health (MOH) [Kenya], and ORC Macro. 2004. *Kenya Demographic and Health Survey 2003*. Calverton, Maryland: CBS, MOH, and ORC Macro.

<sup>6</sup> Jaldesa GW, Askew I, Njue C, Wanjiru M. 2004. *Female genital cutting among the Somali of Kenya and management of its complications*, Population Council: Nairobi, Kenya and FGM Baseline Study, Wajir District, 2005.

sexual desires, thereby ensuring virginity before marriage and fidelity throughout a woman's life. The studies showed that there is a fear of women "running wild" and becoming promiscuous if they are not circumcised and infibulated. FGM/C is erroneously seen as a way of complying with the Islamic requirement of chastity and morality, and is also believed to enhance women's ritual cleanliness to enable them to pray.

The perceived Islamic requirement is a major justification for FGM/C in practicing Muslim communities such as the Somali. It is necessary therefore to ascertain the correct position of Islam as regards the practice and to communicate this to religious leaders from the Islamic communities practicing FGM/C. This booklet is a humble effort to clarify the truth about Islam and the practice of FGM/C by critically examining the evidence cited by supporters of the practice, especially those who describe it as an Islamic practice.

## WHY FGM/C IS LINKED WITH ISLAM

Various reasons are given for the practice of FGM/C in different communities. However, in predominantly Muslim communities, the practice has been linked with Islam and the belief that every Muslim woman must be subjected to it is very strong. For example, the Somali community in Wajir said:

*"One who is not circumcised is not a Muslim, and even her parents are seen as not being in the religion, that is how we see as Somalis", (Married men, Wagberi<sup>7</sup>).*

The following are reasons why the practice has been linked with Islam.

### Religious terms used to refer to the practice

The use of some religious terms to refer to the practice has given it an Islamic identity and strengthened the belief that Islam requires FGM/C. An example is the use of the word *Sunnah* which is an Islamic religious term (see box below for definitions of this term). This belief is strongly held by the Somali community who said:

*"It is part of the religion of which firooni (infibulation) is not a must, but Sunnah is a must" (Married men<sup>8</sup>)*

*"Islam says just cut a bit, which is Sunnah..." (Married men, Wagberi<sup>9</sup>).*

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<sup>7</sup> FRONTIERS 2005 "FGM/C Baseline Study in Wajir District"

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

Other Islamic terms such as *mandoob*, *mubaah* and *mashru'u* are also used to refer to the practice. *Mandoob* means permissible but doing the act is better than not doing it. *Mubaah* refers to any permitted act in Islam but it has no virtue or sin for commission or omission respectively. *Mashru'u*, derived from *Shariah*<sup>10</sup>, is used to depict that the practice has an Islamic legal basis.

FGM/C has also been referred to as *tohara* (ritual cleanliness) in Arabic and Swahili<sup>11</sup> and as *dhahara* in Somali. The Somali community also uses terms like *xalaalin* (making lawful) and *Islaamin* (Islamizing) to emphasize its Islamic status. Arabic speakers refer to circumcised women as *mutoharat* (cleansed or purified) and to uncircumcised women as *ghulfa'a* (unclean or impure<sup>12</sup>).

### Definition of Sunnah

1. Literally, in Arabic, a 'path or a way'
2. In the Islamic religious context: 'way of life or tradition of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH<sup>1</sup>) i.e. what he said, what he did and what he approved that Muslims are recommended to practice'.
3. In *fiqhi* i.e. Islamic jurisprudence: 'an optional act which is recommended and when done a person is rewarded, if not done the person has not sinned'.

In the context of FGM/C, *sunnah* means following the way of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Proponents of the practice believe that FGM/C was one of his traditions. They also believe that the practice is optional and observing it confers virtue.

There is another meaning that has been given to the word which emanates from usage among many Muslim communities i.e. something small. For example it is common for somebody inviting another to share in a drink or food to tell that person "take *sunnah*" meaning "take something small". In the context of FGM/C, supporters hold the view that it involves cutting something small from the female genitalia hence *sunnah*. When asked what Islam says about the practice, respondents in Wajir said:

"...It says do *sunnah*, just bleeding no flesh should be cut or just cut a bit" (Married women, Jogbaru).

### The word *khitaan*

Proponents of FGM/C have translated the Arabic word *khitaan*, which appears in several religious texts, to refer to both male circumcision and FGM/C. In reality, however, the word only describes male circumcision; FGM/C is actually called *khifaadh*. However, whenever *khitaan* appears in a religious text it is used by the proponents to justify an Islamic basis for FGM/C.

### Interpretation of texts

Proponents of FGM/C have misinterpreted certain verses of the Quran to give the practice an Islamic basis. For example, "...and we revealed to you (Oh Muhammad) to follow the *milat* (religion) of Ibrahim" (Quran: 16:123). This verse orders Prophet Muhammad (PBUH<sup>13</sup>)--and hence all Muslims—to follow the way of life of Prophet Ibrahim (AS<sup>14</sup>). The belief is that because Prophet Ibrahim (AS) was circumcised at the age of 80, it is incumbent upon all Muslims to be circumcised. This verse will be objectively analyzed under the section on Islam and FGM/C to ascertain whether it can be used to justify FGM/C.

<sup>10</sup> Islamic legal system

<sup>11</sup> Now the term 'kukeketa' is used in Swahili to depict the mutilation the practice causes.

<sup>12</sup> Sheikh Ali Hashim as-Siraj, (2002) "Female Genital Mutilation is Female Infanticide" (translation), pg 31

<sup>13</sup> Peace be upon him.

<sup>14</sup> *Alleihi Salaam* (Peace be with him): see glossary of terms.

Proponents also base their arguments on some *ahadith*<sup>15</sup> in which they allege that Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) instructed both male and female Muslims to be circumcised. These *ahadith* will also be analyzed in the section on Islam and FGM/C to establish their authenticity and relevance as a basis for FGM/C.

### Belief that FGM/C guarantees chastity

Chastity is a very important attribute in Islam and Muslims are required to be chaste and morally upright. Proponents of FGM/C believe that women have a burning desire, *ghilma*, and if their genitalia are not cut they will be sexually uncontrollable. It is also believed that the clitoris and labia minora will grow long and make the women sexually overactive. Partial or total removal of these organs is therefore recommended to ensure that women remain chaste throughout their lives. Many Muslims believe that this recommendation conforms to Islamic teachings on chastity.

A traditional practitioner argued that an uncircumcised girl or woman “*will start chasing men because of her uncontrollable sexual urge, excessive sexual desire, she will be very vulnerable, she has no security and [will] subsequently [be] disgraced. Circumcised girls will not go for another man...*” (FGD Traditional circumciser, 2004<sup>16</sup>).

### Marriageability

Marriage is a recommended act in Islam and regarded as an important *sunnah* of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) who said, “*Marriage is my sunnah and whoever shuns this sunnah of mine is not among my people*”<sup>17</sup>. FGM/C is closely linked with a girl’s or woman’s marriageability because circumcised girls are believed to be chaste, their sexual desires controlled, and their virginity ensured, hence making them suitable for marriage. In the Somali community, there is a belief that infibulation (type III) ensures virginity and so a non-infibulated woman or girl is not considered a virgin. The infibulation is seen as both a preserver of virginity and a sign of virginity. There is the fear that an uncut, non-infibulated girl will not be attractive as a marriage partner.

*“If the girl is not circumcised, however beautiful she is, she is not wanted by men. He wants or prefers the stitched one, who [he] will be happily busy with through the night. But he will not be happy with the open one. I will do whatever will make them like my daughter; I will stitch her up tight”* (Elderly men FGD<sup>18</sup>)

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