

Analysis on the Health and Socio-Cultural Effects of Female Genital Mutilation

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Mollie Todd

Department of Folk Studies & Anthropology

Western Kentucky University

According to the World Health Organization, over 125 million girls and women alive today have undergone the practice of female genital circumcision (FGC)¹. It has also been condemned by the United Nations General Assembly as “irreparable and irresponsible abuse²,” a sentiment echoed by many other human rights organizations like UNICEF and Equality Now. This practice has been referred to as female genital mutilation (FGM) or female genital cutting and is the act of removing various parts of the vagina for non-medical reasons. There are various methods of female genital cutting practiced around the world, mostly in Africa and the Middle East. FGM holds profound cultural meaning that varies by society and is founded in deep rooted traditions dating back to ancient times. This operation also causes several physical and psychological traumas to the women that have undergone the procedure. Whether considered to be an abomination or a vital part of tradition, the physical and mental properties of female genital circumcision create visible effects on the status of women in societies where it is performed.

Currently, there are multiple types of female genital circumcision being practiced. These methods include clitoridectomy, removal of the clitoral hood, removal of the inner labia, general pricking or scraping of the vaginal area, and the most severe form, pharaonic infibulation. This procedure includes the removal of a woman’s inner and outer labia and sewing the vulva shut, leaving an opening just large enough to let urine and menstrual blood pass through³. Usually the female genital circumcision is performed on young girls between the ages of infancy and fifteen as a rite of passage, a measure to ensure chastity or preserve virginity in some societies. This practice is most prevalent in Northeast Africa but has also been found in the Middle East and Western Africa. Of the Middle Eastern region, cases of female genital mutilation are more widespread in Iraqi Kurdistan, Yemen and Egypt. The most common form of FGM being performed there is the removal of the clitoral hood or the removal of the clitoris itself⁴. In Kurdistan, an estimated 40% of women and girls have undergone this

¹ "Female Genital Mutilation." World Health Organization. February 1, 2014. Accessed December 2, 2015. <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs241/en/>.

² Lorenzi, Rossella. "How Did Female Genital Mutilation Begin?" Discovery News. December 21, 2012. Accessed November 22, 2015. <http://news.discovery.com/human/female-genital-mutilation-begin-121210.htm>.

³ "Female Genital Mutilation."

⁴ Berivan Yasin, Namir Al-Tawil, Nazar Shabila, and Tariq Al-Hadithi. "Female Genital Mutilation among Iraqi Kurdish Women: A Cross-sectional Study from Erbil City." *BMC Public Health* 13, no. 809 (2013): 2. Accessed December 2, 2015. <http://www.biomedcentral.com/1471-2458/13/809>.

form of FGM⁵. In Africa, the most severe form of FGM, infibulation, is practiced most commonly in Sudan, Somalia, and Djibouti and an estimated 90% of women have undergone the procedure⁶. In the countries of Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Kenya, the clitoridectomy version of this practice is performed. The excision of the clitoris, labia minora, and sometimes the labia majora is prevalent in Sierra Leone, Gambia, Guinea, and Benin⁷. The rates of prevalence of female genital cutting vary between all these nations.

Historically, the origins of female genital circumcision are largely unknown. There are several cases recorded of women undergoing this procedure dating back to ancient times. According to the research of political theorist Gerry Mackie, "The early civilization of the Middle Nile (Nubia, Kush, Meroe)...thrived from the second millennium B.C. to the first millennium C.E. The Meroite civilization lay at the center of distribution of female genital cutting (in today's Sudan where the most intense FGC, infibulation, is practiced) engaged in...imperial female slavery."⁸ Mackie goes on to speculate that it is likely female genital cutting began in this time period as a way to control female sexuality and promote fidelity. Another source from the Greek geographer Strabo who was visiting Egypt around 25 B.C. recorded that "This is one of the customs most zealously pursued by them [the Egyptians] to raise every child that is born and to circumcise the males and excise the females."⁹ At this point in history Egyptian women were rumored to have excessively large clitorises due to the hot climate of the region. Multiple explorers to this region, like Strabo, recorded the prevalence of this practice but based on available evidence the validity of this argument cannot be supported. The Sudanese writer Ahmed Al-Safi also stated "Female circumcision with infibulation was practiced by ancient Arabs long before Islam to protect the shepherd girls against likely male attacks while they were out unescorted with their grazing sheep."¹⁰

Additionally, female genital circumcision is practiced in multiple societies around the world. The reasoning behind why this practice became rooted in cultural traditions varies in the context of each society. Some scholars speculate that female genital circumcision became more cemented in North African and Middle Eastern traditions with the advent of Islam. The evidence to support this claim is limited, but none the less remains a vital part of arguments surrounding this practice. While neither the condemning nor condoning of female genital circumcision is mentioned in the Qur'an, it is referenced to in the Hadith.¹¹ One famous hadith mentions, "A woman used to perform circumcision in Medina. The Prophet (peace be upon

⁵ Sarah Tung. "Report: Female Circumcision in Iraqi Kurdistan Still High." *New York Times*, June 30, 2010, World sec. Accessed December 2, 2015. <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1998966,00.html>.

⁶ "Female Genital Mutilation and Other Harmful Practices." World Health Organization. 2014. Accessed December 2, 2015. <http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/topics/fgm/prevalence/en/>.

⁷ Nawal Nour. "Female Genital Cutting: A Persisting Practice." *Reviews in Obstetrics and Gynecology* 1, no. 3, 135.

⁸ Gerry Mackie, *Female Genital Cutting: The Beginning of the End* (2000) 287.

⁹ Mary Knight. 2001. "Curing Cut or Ritual Mutilation?: Some Remarks on the Practice of Female and Male Circumcision in Graeco-roman Egypt". *Isis* 92 (2). [University of Chicago Press, History of Science Society]: 318. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3080631>.

¹⁰Ellen Greenbaum. *The Female Circumcision Controversy: An Anthropological Perspective* Anthropology / Gender Studies. Illustrated ed. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001. 43.

¹¹ Hadith are narrations originating from the words and deeds of the Islamic prophet Muhammad, considered supplemental material to the Qur'an.

him) said to her: Do not cut severely as that is better for a woman and more desirable for a husband.”¹² Here it can be discerned that female genital circumcision was likely already in existence before the advent of Islam, and while Muhammad did not ban the practice, he did not pardon it either. The scholars of Islam, Rizvi, Naqvi, Hussein, and Hasan argue that the practice of female genital circumcision is inherently un-Islamic, as it dates to the times of Egyptian pharaohs and is practiced in African countries where Islam is not the majority religion. Additionally, “Female circumcision has no place in Islam....this was further certified by Egyptian Supreme Court ruling in 1997...government ban on female genital circumcision...The court pronounced that circumcision of girls is not an individual right under *sharia*¹³ and there is nothing in the Qur’an that authorizes it.¹⁴” Despite discrepancies on the origins of female genital circumcision, there is undoubtedly enormous amounts of evidence to show that this practice has detrimental effects on women’s mental and physical health.

In addition to the host of physical injuries that result from female genital circumcision, there are also multiple mental illnesses, especially PTSD that many women develop after the procedure. In a study conducted by Dr. Alice Behrendt and Dr. Steffen Moritz, that assessed the psychological impacts of female genital mutilation on Senegalese women, it was found that, “circumcised women showed a significantly higher prevalence of PTSD (30.4%) and other psychiatric syndromes (47.9%) than the uncircumcised women. PTSD was accompanied by memory problems.¹⁵” Due to the extremely painful and violating nature of female genital mutilation, women can develop mental disturbances as a coping mechanism for dealing with this event. However, in countries like Sudan and Somalia where nearly 90% of women undergo female genital circumcision, the rates of mental disorders as a result of this procedure are much lower. Behrendt and Moritz hypothesize that because Senegal has a low prevalence of female genital circumcision practices (around 20%) that women who undergo this practice have increased anxiety that they are no longer accepted and absorb the negative perceptions of this practice in their society.¹⁶

Another study by Dr. Jan Kizilhan on the psychological trauma of Kurdish¹⁷ women who have undergone female genital circumcision suggests that “circumcised girls showed a significantly higher prevalence of PTSD (44.3%), depression disorder (33.6%), anxiety

¹² "Partial Translation of Sunan Abu-Dawud, Book 41:." Center for Muslim-Jewish Engagement A Partnership between the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Omar Ibn Al Khattab Foundation, & USC Center for Religion and Civic Culture. Accessed December 3, 2015. <http://www.usc.edu/org/cmje/religious-texts/hadith/abudawud/041-sat.php#041.5251>.

¹³ Literally, “street” law in Arabic. Legal system entailed in the Qur’an.

¹⁴ Rizvi, Naqvi, Hussain, and Hasan. (1999), Religious circumcision: a Muslim view. *BJU International*, 83: 14. doi: 10.1046/j.1464-410x.1999.0830s1013.x

¹⁵ Alice Behrendt and Steffen Moritz. "Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Memory Problems After Female Genital Mutilation." *American Journal of Psychiatry* 162, no. 5 (2005): 1001. Accessed December 2, 2015. <http://ajp.psychiatryonline.org/doi/full/10.1176/appi.ajp.162.5.1000>.

¹⁶ Behrendt and Moritz, “Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Memory Problems After Female Genital Mutilation.” 1002.

¹⁷ Ethnic minority mostly located in Northern Iraq

disorder (45.6%) and somatic disturbance (36.7%) than the uncircumcised girls.¹⁸ This study also indicates that female genital circumcision can cause emotional disturbances in young girls that can pose as triggers for other psychological disorders like PTSD and schizophrenia. As with the case of the Senegalese women, since the prevalence of female genital mutilation in this area is so low (5-10%) women may have increased anxieties because the status of being circumcised is not accepted in their society¹⁹. As a result of this and other studies, many human rights organizations have exposed the practices of female genital circumcision in Kurdistan and this has led to much lower prevalence of the practice in this region over time.

In addition to the psychological trauma, there is a vast array of physical conditions that occur in women who have been circumcised. The medical side effects vary depending on the type of circumcision that a woman has been subject to. Generally, immediate effects of female circumcision are chronic pain, frequent urinary tract infections, susceptibility to STI's, and infections²⁰. The most common long-term symptoms resulting from multiple forms of female genital circumcision are hemorrhage, infertility, difficulties giving birth, perineal hemorrhage, and perinatal death.²¹ Additionally, women may go into shock from the severe pain endured while undergoing the procedure. Throughout their lives, the victims of this procedure will also have decreased or non-existent sexual pleasure, in addition to chronic pain from the removal of the sexual organs. Female genital cutting often includes removal of the clitoris, which would take away sexual sensitivity. Most of these symptoms have occurred during the clitoridectomy and labia removal forms of FGM, but especially during infibulation. The length of the infibulation procedure is much longer and more invasive, therefore the pain intensity is greatly increased. An unintended consequence of the second type of female genital circumcision (labia removal) may result in labial adhesion and result in later infibulation²².

The immediate and long-term health effects of female genital cutting are most severe for those who have undergone pharaonic infibulation. There are increased issues during childbirth for women who have been infibulated. The infant may be impacted in the scar tissue in the woman's vaginal canal and there is increased risk for tearing and obstetric fistulas. The mother is also much more likely to have postnatal hemorrhage or give birth to a still born baby. Even more grim is the likelihood that infibulated women will be re-infibulated multiple times throughout life, after penetrative sex and childbirth²³. With each infibulation the likelihood of infections, development of psychological disorders, and death increase.

¹⁸ Jan Kizilhan. "Impact of Psychological Disorders after Female Genital Mutilation among Kurdish Girls in Northern Iraq." *The European Journal of Psychiatry* 25, no. 2 (2011): 1-3. Accessed November 30, 2015. http://scielo.isciii.es/scielo.php?pid=S0213-61632011000200004&script=sci_arttext.

¹⁹ Kizilhan, "Impact of Psychological Disorders after Female Genital Mutilation among Kurdish Girls in Northern Iraq." 2.

²⁰ J Thomas. 2010. "Female Genital Mutilation Complications Lead to Lost Lives and High Costs". *International Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health* 36 (3). Guttmacher Institute: 161-62. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20775357>.

²¹ Susan Bewley, Sarah Creighton, and Comfort Momoh. "Female Genital Mutilation: Pediatricians Should Resist its Medicalization," *British Medical Journal* 340 (2010): 1317. Accessed October 6, 2015.

²² "Health Complications of Female Genital Mutilation," World Health Organization, Accessed December 3, 2015, http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/topics/fgm/health_consequences_fgm/en/.

²³ Ibid.

In addition to the medical and psychological detriments of female genital cutting, recent research asserts that women who have been circumcised will suffer financially due to medical costs associated with the procedure. According to J. Thomas of the *International Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health* journal, in an analysis among women ages 15 to 45 from six African nations, “the estimated cost of treating obstetric complications associated with female genital mutilation was \$3.7 million.²⁴” Additional statistics from this analysis suggest that the average woman who undergoes the most severe form of female genital cutting will lose approximately one fourth of her life span. Any woman who undergoes other types of female genital circumcision will lose approximately 0.07 years of her life²⁵. From the information present on female genital cutting, it is evident that the practice has severe economic, physical, and mental detriments.

As a result of these negative aspects, some alternative practices have been created to decrease the number of women being circumcised. Recently some medical facilities have agreed to “nick,” rather than remove, parts of female genitalia as a cultural compromise. This procedure is still highly controversial, as woman’s rights organizations, the World Health Organization, and other entities have all expressed that even “nicking” the vagina as part of female genital cutting should be banned. The view of these organizations is that, “a nick is not indicated treatment or the proper business of pediatricians²⁶.” Also, “cultural rituals...are not within the scope of appropriate, expert pediatric practice²⁷.” The decision of whether to allow the symbolic nicking practice remains unresolved. With the host of issues resulting from female genital cutting, much of the world wonders why this practice is so highly regarded in some societies.

For millennia, the practice of female genital circumcision has been present in multiple societies around the world. The reason for why this procedure is valued varies by society. But in nearly every civilization a woman’s decision to undergo circumcision is praised and elevates her societal status, while those who refuse the procedure have been outcast as social pariahs. According to an ethnography by Janice Boddy, in Northern Sudan undergoing infibulation circumcision is a necessary part of becoming a woman and enables her to become fertile. There is also the widespread belief in this area that, “female circumcision of any kind...increases male enjoyment in intercourse.²⁸” Research cross-culturally also suggest that infibulation was introduced as a way to preserve a woman’s virginity, protect her from rape, and act as a form of birth control. Interestingly enough, Boddy found in her studies in northern Sudan that it was women, rather than men, that persisted in keeping this cultural practice alive. She found that women in this society generally believe, “a girl who has not been purified through circumcision may not marry...may not have children, and attain a position of respect.²⁹” It

²⁴ Thomas, “Female Genital Mutilation Complications Lead to Lost Lives and High Costs,” 162.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Bewley, Creighton, and Momoh, “Female Genital Mutilation: Pediatricians Should Resist its Medicalization,” 1318.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Janice Boddy. 1982. “Womb as Oasis: The Symbolic Context of Pharaonic Circumcision in Rural Northern Sudan”. *American Ethnologist* 9 (4). Wiley: 685. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/644690>.

²⁹ Boddy, “Womb as Oasis: The Symbolic Context of Pharaonic Circumcision in Rural Northern Sudan,” 687.

seems that in this region of Africa the practice of female genital circumcision has persisted as an act of preparing for womanhood; the vital rite of passage that leads to a respected life. It is apparent that the older women of the community insist on keeping this cultural practice, as it is what they endured and feel that younger generations must do also.

Moreover, female genital circumcision holds special cultural values for women in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. Some Kurdish people view FGM as Sunnah, “the Muslim customs and practices based on the deeds and words of the Prophet Muhammad.” While others of this region argue that it, “controls sexual appetite induced by the hot climate of Iraq... or that men prefer to marry circumcised girls because they are seen as pure and respectable.”³⁰ It seems that women who do not circumcise their daughters in this area may be ostracized for refusing the procedure. Despite assertions on the cultural values of FGM from more conservative community members, the rates of people practicing this in Kurdistan and Northern Iraq are on decline. The practice was officially banned in Kurdistan Iraq in 2011. In a survey conducted in 2014 by a coalition of UN agencies and the Kurdistan national government, it was found that, “68% of people, including religious leaders, said the practice should be eliminated, and almost the same number said it should be banned as a tradition.”³¹ These recent findings give new hope to those who wish to see the practice eliminated and to the girls that have refused to undergo the procedure.

Moreover, female genital mutilation³² persists in Egyptian societies despite global efforts to abolish the practice, as it holds significant meaning to more conservative groups within this country. As in the case of other Islamic countries where female genital cutting is practiced, some Egyptians insist that FGM is part of the Sunnah, actions required by the Prophet Muhammad. The traditional belief also continues that Egyptian women are naturally born with larger clitorises and therefore should be cut down to size.³³ In spite of traditional community members pushing to keep the practice alive, the rates of women being circumcised in Egypt are slowly declining. The proof this is shown in demographic updates being recorded over the past twenty years. In 1995, nearly 97 percent of women had been circumcised at some point in their lives³⁴. The UNICEF non-profit organization also recorded that 14,332 Egyptian women were circumcised in this year alone³⁵. When compared with recent updates of these statistics, there has been a slight decrease in the amount of procedures being done in Egypt. As of 2008, around 91 percent of Egyptian women have been circumcised, with approximately

³⁰ Sarah Tung, “Report: Female Circumcision in Iraqi Kurdistan Still High.”

³¹ Liz Ford. “Majority in Iraqi Kurdistan Oppose Female Genital Mutilation.” *The Guardian*. September 9, 2014. Accessed December 3, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2014/sep/08/iraqi-kurdistan-female-genital-mutilation-fgm>.

³² More specifically, the type of female genital cutting that involves removal of the clitoris or removal of the clitoral hood is practiced in this region.

³³ “Debates About FGM in Egypt: Before 2007,” Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance, Accessed December 3, 2015, http://www.religioustolerance.org/fem_cirm3.htm.

³⁴ Katherine Yount, “Like Mother, Like Daughter? Female Genital Cutting in Minia, Egypt,” *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*. 43 (3). American Sociological Association: 336. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3090208>.

³⁵ “Female Genital Cutting: The Interpretation of Recent DHS Data,” United States Agency of International Development, Accessed December 3, 2015, <http://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/CR33/CR33.pdf>.

5,044 girls circumcised in that year.³⁶ Researchers utilizing the modernization theory suggest that, “Female genital cutting is a product of patrilineal societies...increased urbanization, education, wage labor, communication and economic development...alter attitudes about women’s position.³⁷” It is the hope of anti-FGM activists in Egypt and around the world that increasing progressive views will lead to the eradication of this practice. As these more conservative societies change due to urbanization and outside perspectives, the modernization theory suggests that female genital mutilation will be slowly phased out.

In conclusion, female genital circumcision is a procedure performed on young women involving the removal of parts of the vagina, ranging from clitoridectomy to infibulation. The operation is carried out in many countries, spanning from the Middle East, Western and Northern Africa, and Southeast Asia. Even though female genital circumcision is an ancient practice dating back to Ancient Egyptian civilizations, it has more recently become a topic of great controversy and many human right organizations have sought to eradicate it. Based on evidence from medical and psychological research, female genital circumcision has been found in many cases to cause great mental trauma and physical harms, sometimes including death. Upon analysis of several ethnographies, female genital circumcision has also been found to be a mechanism invented to control women’s sexuality and chastity. In some societies, women who have refused the procedure have been ostracized and made ineligible for marriage. The combination of all these findings has led many government and activist groups to conclude that female genital circumcision should be eradicated. Millions of women have been permanently maimed and traumatized in an attempt to preserve this tradition. While the cultural values that FGM has held for many societies are to be respected, the weight of the lives damaged or lost by this procedure is too great.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Yount, “Like Mother, Like Daughter? Female Genital Cutting in Minia, Egypt,” 337.

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