



Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting: A Fact Sheet

"I was genitally mutilated at the age of ten. When the operation began, I put up a big fight. The pain was terrible and unbearable... I was badly cut and lost blood... I was genitally mutilated with a blunt penknife. After the operation, no one was allowed to aid me to walk... Sometimes I had to force myself not to urinate for fear of the terrible pain. I was not given any anesthetic in the operation to reduce my pain, nor any antibiotics to fight against infection. Afterwards, I hemorrhaged and became anemic. This was attributed to witchcraft. I suffered for a long time from acute vaginal infections." –Hannah Koroma, Sierra Leone

Background

- Female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) is the removal of part, or all, of the female genitalia. FGM/C may refer to clitoridectomy (removal of the clitoris), excision (removal of the labia minora), or infibulation (removal of the clitoris, labia minora and majora, and stitching together).
- FGM/C is a dangerous procedure that often results in dire physical, sexual, and mental consequences. The procedure is usually performed in unsanitary conditions, using objects like broken glass, tin can lids, blunt knives, scissors, or razors. Victims are not given anesthesia or antibiotics and rarely have access to medical treatment. Infibulated women have their entire external genitalia cut, scraped, or burned out. The subsequent raw wound is stitched together with cat or lamb intestines or thorns, leaving a small opening for the passage of menstrual flow. The girl's legs are bound together for up to two months, immobilizing her while the wound heals over.
- Conducting such a major procedure in poor hygienic conditions often results in infection, shock, hemorrhaging, abscesses, benign nerve tumors, cysts, excess scar tissue, progressively enlarging scars, and sterility. Because FGM/C is practiced as a group rite on many girls at once using the same cutting implement, it can easily cause the spread of HIV and other communicable diseases. Infibulation often causes a woman to retain urine and menstrual blood, leading to chronic urinary tract and pelvic infections that may cause sterility. Women must be continually cut open for childbirth and resealed afterward, a process which results in a mass of thick scar tissue. This makes childbirth not only excruciatingly painful, but also extremely dangerous as it prolongs labor, obstructs the birth canal, and often causes perianal tears in the mother. Such ill effects of FGM/C are rarely blamed on the practitioner, but are instead blamed on witchcraft or the inadequate performance of rituals associated with the procedure.
- More than 130 million girls have been subjected to female genital mutilation/cutting. The practice, most prevalent in Africa and some countries in the Middle East, is also prevalent among immigrant communities in Europe, North America and Australia.¹

Why FGM/C is practiced

- FGM/C is traditionally practiced as a ritual signifying the acceptance of a woman into society and establishes her eligibility for marriage. It is believed to inspire submissiveness in young women. Reasons given for FGM/C range from beliefs that touching the clitoris will kill a baby during childbirth, to hygienic reasons, to enhancing fertility and ensuring chastity.
- In many societies, an important reason given for FGM/C is the belief that it reduces a woman's desire for sex, therefore reducing the chance of sex outside marriage. In FGM/C-practicing societies it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, for a woman to marry if she has not undergone mutilation. Marriage is often the only role available for women in FGM/C-practicing societies because they receive little education and are discouraged from pursuing a profession. In the case of infibulation, a woman is "sewn up" and "opened" only for her husband. Family honor is seen as dependent on a woman's sexuality. Therefore, restricting women's sexuality is believed to be vital.

How FGM/C reinforces gender stratification

- FGM/C is rooted in a culture of discrimination against women. It is a human rights abuse that functions as an instrument for socializing girls into prescribed gender roles within the family and community. It is therefore intimately linked to the unequal position of women in the political, social, and economic structures of societies where it is practiced.
- Alternatively, women who do not undergo FGM/C in societies where it is the norm are often ostracized by their communities and are considered ineligible for marriage. In countries where females are not adequately educated and are unlikely to find employment, unmarried women are often forced to rely upon relatives and the community and are denied the means to support themselves. Because marriage is seen as the only significant and acceptable role for women in FGM/C-practicing societies—and only women who are mutilated are eligible to marry—FGM/C reasserts women's relegation to the domestic sphere, conferring upon women an inferior status and reducing them to mere child-bearers and objects of the male sexual fulfillment.

¹ UNIFEM Facts & Figures on Harmful Traditional Practices. 2007. (UNIFEM drew this figure from pg. 39 of the following report: General Assembly. In-Depth Study on All Forms of Violence against Women: Report of the Secretary-General, 2006. A/61/122/Add.1. July 6, 2006.)

FGM/C as a human rights violation

- Every day, thousands of girls are targeted for mutilation. FGM/C involves the deliberate infliction of severe pain and suffering and its effects can be life threatening. FGM/C is often perpetrated on girls from birth to adolescence and is a grave violation of Children's Human Rights. Most survivors must face physical and mental scars for the rest of their lives. Violence against women and girls in the home or in the community is regarded as a "private" issue; the fact that perpetrators are private actors rather than state officials has often precluded FGM/C from being seen as a human rights concern.
- FGM/C is a manifestation of gender-based human rights violations that exist in all cultures that aim to control women's sexuality and autonomy. Though striking because of its severity and scale, FGM/C cannot be viewed in isolation. Recognizing that FGM/C is one of many forms of social injustice that women suffer worldwide is key to creating societies in which women are valued as full and equal participants.
- A human rights perspective sets FGM/C in the context of women's social and economic powerlessness. Recognizing that civil, political, social, economic, and cultural rights are indivisible and interdependent is a crucial starting point for addressing the range of factors that perpetuate FGM/C. A human rights framework affirms that the rights of women to physical and mental integrity, to freedom from discrimination and to the highest standard of health are universal. Violations of these rights can never be justified.

FGM/C and International Law

- *General Recommendation No.19 of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)* asserts, "gender-based violence... is... violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or affects women disproportionately..." States are obligated under international law to prevent, investigate, and punish violence against women. Out of the twenty-eight African countries that practice FGM/C, twenty-six have ratified *CEDAW*.
- *The UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women* recognizes that violence against women not only deprives them of their civil and political rights, but also their social and economic rights, saying that, "the underlying structural consequences of these forms of gender-based violence help to maintain women in their subordinate roles, contribute to their low level of participation and to their lower level of education, skills, and work opportunities." The Declaration provides that states should not invoke any custom, tradition, or religious consideration to avoid their obligation to eliminate violence against women, and that they must exhibit due diligence in investigating and imposing penalties for violence, and establishing effective protective measures.

The work of NGO's to combat FGM/C

- Local NGO's recognize that in order for legislation to be effective, it must be accompanied by a broad and inclusive strategy for community-based education and awareness raising. In addition to creating, upholding, and enforcing anti-FGM/C legislation, states have the obligation to target the underlying beliefs and inequality that perpetuate the practice and reinforce gender-based discrimination. NGO's therefore augment state's legislation by working to eradicate FGM/C by providing education, medical treatment, and advocacy to women in FGM/C-practicing communities.
- Some local organizations have designed alternative rite-of-passage rituals similar to the traditional FGM/C ceremonies that replace genital mutilation with gift giving and celebration. Key to an effective approach is the exercise of cultural sensitivity when dealing with a custom that has been prevalent for many years and is thought of as normal and necessary by cultures that practice FGM/C.
- Effective action requires an understanding of the complexity of perceptions and beliefs surrounding FGM/C. The cultural significance of FGM/C cannot be ignored. Eradicating the practice needs to be understood as a question not of eliminating rites of passage, but of redefining or replacing those rites in a way that promotes positive traditional values while removing the danger of physical and psychological harm.
- FGM/C is a practice that compounds unspeakable violence against women and young girls with discrimination, repression, and inequality. As the issue becomes more visible in the public sphere, states that allow FGM/C to be perpetuated face increasing criticism and scrutiny by the international community. It must be made clear that no form of violence against women can be justified by any cultural claim.

"It is unacceptable that the international community remains passive in the name of a distorted vision of multiculturalism. Human behavior and cultural values, however senseless or destructive they may appear from the personal and cultural standpoints of others, have meaning and fulfill a function for those who practice them. However, culture is not static but is in constant flux, adapting and reforming. People will change their behavior when they understand the hazards and indignity of harmful practices and when they realize that it is possible to give up harmful practices without giving up meaningful aspects of their culture." –Joint statement by the World Health Organization, UN Children's Fund, and UN Population Fund

For more information on FGM/C and other women's human rights issues, visit <http://www.amnestyusa.org/women> or contact us at AIUSA, 5 Penn Plaza-16th floor, New York, NY 10001 or at (212) 807-8400.