

Female Circumcision: Culture or Torture?

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The operation lasts just fifteen minutes. A little girl is entirely nude, her legs spread wide apart while she is held down by several women. A traditional practitioner offers a short prayer, takes a sharp razor, and excises the clitoris. She cuts from top to bottom. Then, to ensure adhesion, the practitioner uses four acacia thorns which pierce one side and pass through the other. These are held in place by a thread or horse-hair. The girl is defenseless; her unbearable pain is expressed in howls (1).

This is the ancient practice of female circumcision — or perhaps mutilation is a better word. As a woman, I feel that this practice is abhorrent. Furthermore, it is "...medically unnecessary, painful and extremely dangerous, a deliberate disfigurement and disablement affecting millions of women, carried out solely in the name of tradition, without ideological, practical or religious sanction" (2). Recent World Health Organization statistics show that more than 80 million women have undergone this form of genital mutilation in about 40 different countries (3). In Egypt, where about 80 percent of rural women are circumcised, 365 girls are operated upon daily (4).

Evidence from the remains of female mummies dating from 2000, B.C. indicate that female genital mutilation originated in ancient Egypt (5). Types of circumcisions include *sunna* (excision/clitorodectomy) and Pharaonic infibulation. Although *sunna* is considered to be the mildest form, the physical injury inflicted in each case is extreme. If complications develop, a girl is likely to die from tetanus infection resulting from the use of unsterilized and dangerous equipment such as blades, iron knives and glass shards (6). Even if she lives, she might suffer from hemorrhaging, painful urination and difficult menstruation. Even worse, when delivering a child, scar tissue blocking the birth canal can result in fetal and maternal death (7). Not only is anesthesia unheard of, but the wound is often cleansed with kerosene or engine oil! (8). The psychological and physical trauma of female circumcision generates feelings of betrayal and resentment towards adults, who trick and coerce young girls into having this operation against their will.

A recent report affirmed that this barbaric practice has been on the rise, despite vigorous campaigns by international and local health organizations (9). What are the reasons for its persistence? Proponents give justifications on the grounds of tradition, enhancement of fertility, religion, prevention of promiscuity and cultural relativism.

Tradition refers to ancestral practices that symbolize the shared heritage of an ethnic group (10). Advocates of female circumcision insist on its continuation for the reason that it is handed down by their forebears; but the real reason is that it is the only means for females to achieve a recognizable status and role in society and hence be accepted and integrated into their community. This tradition gives a girl an ultimatum rather than a choice: either jeopardize your health or be deprived of esteemed social acceptance (11). I believe that this is wrong because the promotion of social and political cohesion should not be dependent on the suffering and death of individual human beings (12).

Despite convincing medical evidence, traditional practitioners — who perform 90 percent of all circumcisions — continue to believe that this sexual surgery is a prerequisite for fertility and safe delivery (13). Some communities, like the Isoko and the Urhobo of the Delta state, even conduct circumcision when a woman is seven months pregnant (14). How can an ethnic group ensure cultural continuity when this practice endangers the very fertility of women, the life-givers of any society?

Justifications for circumcision based upon religion are misused and rest upon frail doctrinal grounds. Although both Islam and Christianity uphold virtues such as modesty and virginity, neither religion requires female circumcision (15). Furthermore, Christian and Muslim proponents cannot cite textual references in either the Bible or the Qur'an to justify this alleged religious requirement. Also, not all Muslim countries practice circumcision — not even Saudi Arabia, the cradle of Islam (16). Ultimately, the argument misuses religion as an instrument of fear and exploitation.

Another reason advanced for the practice of circumcision is the male desire to prevent female promiscuity. Quite simply, sexual control and subjugation of women through circumcision suggests that men do not exercise responsibility and control over their *own* sexual behavior. Circumcision is thus enforced to control the sexual impulses of women in a way that suits the needs of men (17). Otherwise, why does custom not advocate castration to ensure male fidelity?

The theory of cultural relativism claims that human rights violations in one culture may be viewed as morally right in a different cultural context (18). It is understandable that any abolition of local traditions based on external norms is likely to be rejected, but in the case of female genital mutilation, I have reservations about using the argument of cultural relativism. For example, Article 17 of the African Charter affirms that

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"every individual may freely take part in the cultural life of his community. The promotion and protection of morals and traditional values recognized by the community shall be the duty of the State" (19). It would be highly ironic to argue that such a document would endorse female circumcision when it involves torture and mutilation to half the population it claims to protect! Obviously, only "positive" and life-enhancing African values should be preserved. Another example which is at odds with cultural relativism is the French trial of an African immigrant accused of sanctioning the genital mutilation of her daughter (20). The prosecutor, Miss Weil-Curiel, argued that "not only is circumcision a form of butchery to control women," it also violates a French law against harming children. Miss Weil-Curiel won the case.

In essence, one cannot propound "culture" and "ethnicity" to defend female circumcision because, according to the *Harvard Law Review*, "...even cultural values and practices are as legitimately subject to criticism from a human rights perspective as any structural aspect of a society" (21). It is logical to associate culture with tradition and history, but one must recognize that culture is an amalgam of the traditional and the contemporary; it is dynamic and not static (21). Therefore, it is pertinent to re-examine practices passed down in the light of contemporary values in order to determine whether these practices deserve to be perpetuated. A practice such as female genital mutilation does not deserve legitimacy because, as an age-old custom, it has outlasted any factual or historical usefulness or validity it may have once possessed. It is a practice devoid of benefit to society as a whole. Nor is it of benefit to the individual, to whom it offers only agony, injury and fear.

Last, but not least, one must keep in mind the all-important point that "within a dynamic notion of culture, a woman's health and reproductive freedom are essential to cultural survival and continuity" (23).

Editor's Note: According to a recent issue of *The Women's Watch*, a publication of the International Women's Rights Action Watch, the Government of Egypt has recently retracted its ban on female genital mutilation. Due to pressures from certain sectors of the religious establishment, the Egyptian Health Minister, Ali Abdel Fatah, issued a decree that medicalizes the practice of female circumcision and designates particular hospitals as appropriate centers for the performance of the operation for a fee. According to spokesmen at the Health Ministry, the new medicalization policy is an attempt to halt the "butchery that damages the health and lives of more than half of all young girls." However, many observers noted that the Ministry's decision came in spite of a recent *fatwah* issued by the Grand Mufti of Egypt (which was supported by many other respected religious leaders) stating that there is nothing in the Qur'an to support the continued

practice of female circumcision, and that the opinion of the medical establishment should prevail in making decisions on this issue. According to the New Woman Research Center in Egypt, "the decision to codify and medicalize circumcision, rather than criminalizing it, has nothing to do with religion or morality, but is rather a decision to codify the control of women, and to codify violence against them, in addition to codifying their inferior status in society" (*The Women's Watch*, Volume 9, No. 5, June 1995. Page 6).

Footnotes

- (1) Darkenoo, Efna and Scilla Elworth (1992). "Female Genital Mutilation: Proposals for Change," *Minority Rights Group International*.
- (2) *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- (3) Heise, Lori (1989). "The Global War Against Women," *The Washington Post*, April 9.
- (4) *Al-Kifaa al-Arabi*, p. 27.
- (5) Assaad, Marie (1979). *Female Circumcisions in Egypt: Current Research and Social Implications*. American University of Cairo.
- (6) *Harvard Law Review*, "What has Culture Got to do with It?" Excising the Harmful Tradition of Female Circumcision." Vol. 106, No. 8, p. 1947.
- (7) *Ibid.*, p. 1944.
- (8) Heise, p. B4.
- (9) Ezzat, Dina (1994). "A Savage Surgery." *The Middle East*, January, pp. 35-37.
- (10) *Harvard Law Review*, p. 1950.
- (11) *Ibid.*, p. 1950.
- (12) *Ibid.*
- (13) *Ibid.*
- (14) *Ibid.*, p. 1951.
- (15) *Ibid.*
- (16) Ezzat, p. 36.
- (17) Darkenoo, p. 13.
- (18) *Harvard Law Review*, p. 1953.
- (19) *Ibid.*, p. 1955.
- (20) Simons, Marlise (1983) "African Mutilation Ritual Collides with French Law," *International Herald Tribune*, November 25th.
- (21) *Harvard Law Review*, p. 1959.
- (22) *Ibid.*, p. 1959.
- (23) *Ibid.*, p. 1960.