

EGYPTIAN GOVERNMENT RESCINDS MEDICALIZATION OF FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION

Following the international outcry which erupted over the issue of female genital mutilation (FGM) in Egypt during the 1994 UN International Conference on Population and Development, the Egyptian Minister of Health publicly stated that the practice of FGM would henceforth be banned, and all those practicing it would be subject to legal prosecution and punishment. But only one month later, the same Minister issued a new directive which medicalized FGM. This sudden change of policy stemmed from pressures from more conservative sectors of society, even though there is no mandate or rationale to be found in the Qur'an or the Hadith supporting FGM. Mainstream Egyptian religious leaders did not join the call for re-instating FGM in a medical setting. In fact, the Grand Mufti of Egypt, Sheikh Muhammad Al-Tantawi, issued a fatwa declaring that the Qur'an and the Hadith do not contain any teachings concerning FGM.

On 17 October, 1995, the Egyptian Ministry of Health rescinded the directive which medicalized FGM. The latest directive instructs hospitals and doctors not to perform FGM, stressing that the role of medical personnel will be limited to providing counseling and guidance to limit practice. This directive brings the Egyptian Government into line with the policies of the World Health Organization, which has expressed its unequivocal opposition to the medicalization of FGM in any setting.

GENDER INEQUALITIES REVEALED BY FIRST LEBANESE CENSUS SURVEY SINCE 1932

A partial census survey of Lebanon, undertaken by the Lebanese Ministries of Social Affairs and Health in cooperation with the United Nations Development Program, has provided the most accurate demographic profile of Lebanon in more than 60 years. According to the census data, Lebanon's inhabitants number just over 3,111,800 (not counting the 300,000 Palestinian refugees in Lebanon). Of these, 64 percent are between the ages of 15 and 64. Nearly 30 percent of the Lebanese population are children under the age of 15. Although the census does not reveal a great difference in the numbers of boys and girls enrolled in schools (and, in fact, girls outnumber boys in school enrollment between the ages of 10 and 19), there is nonetheless a higher rate of illiteracy among females than among males. Lebanon's overall illiteracy rate is 13.6 percent. Just over 9 percent of all men are illiterate, while 17.8 percent of all women are unable to read and write. The census data indicate that most illiterate women are over the age of 40. Concerning women's role in the Lebanese work-force, the census indicates that women are most active as workers between the ages of 20 and 40. Women between the ages of 25 and 29 constitute nearly one-third of Lebanon's work-force. One of the most surprising facts revealed by the census survey is that nearly 15 percent of Lebanese households are headed by single mothers, usually widowed. A final report will be issued in December 1996.

IRAQI NATION AS TORTURE VICTIM

According to a recent UNICEF report on the humanitarian crisis in Iraq, up to 40,000 children may be dying every month as a result of malnutrition, lack of potable drinking water, and inadequate medical services. Although the report's accuracy was immediately called into question by the United States, few informed people can deny that the suffering of Iraqi men, women and children has reached horrifying proportions.

The punishment of the Iraqi population by the world community, who, through the United Nations support the punishing sanctions placed upon the country, constitutes blatant, large-scale torture of a civilian population. The long-term effects of this mistreatment will exact more suffering and sacrifices from the weakest members of Iraqi society: women and their dependent children.