

Religion and FGM/C

Female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) is a traditional practice rooted in cultural beliefs and heritage. However, it has been attributed to various religions, and, as a result, some people who practise FGM/C believe it to be required by their religions.

Within Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) and similar reports, a key indicator often given in relation to FGM/C is whether or not people believe it to be a religious requirement. The rates vary from one context to another, but one example is Somalia and Somaliland, where 99.2% of women aged 15–49 have undergone FGM/C and 72% believe it to be a religious requirement.¹

However, FGM/C is not required by any of the major religious texts, and many faith leaders have spoken out against it. A shift in the belief that FGM/C is required by the major Abrahamic religions is essential to reducing and eventually eliminating FGM/C.

FGM/C is often practised in Muslim and Christian contexts. This brief explores the perspectives on FGM/C of scholars of these two religions.

Islam and FGM/C

Islamic law (*Sharia*) is derived from the Holy Quran, the *sunna* ('traditions'), *qiyas* ('analogical arguments') and *ijmā* ('juridical consensus').² **There is no reference to FGM/C in the Holy Quran, the *qiyas* or any *ijma*.**

There are five *hadiths* ('stories') (which are categorised under Islamic law as *sunna*) that reference cutting for women. In them, the Prophet Mohammed is purported to have said the following:

1. “Do not cut severely as that is better for a woman and more desirable for a husband.”
2. “Female circumcision is an act of Sunna for men and an honourable act for women.”
3. ‘Reported on the authority of Abdullah Ibn Amr, the Prophet ordered the women of Al Ansar (the Prophet’s supporters in Al Medina) to be circumcised.’

These three hadiths have been discredited by Islamic scholars based on the lack of credibility of their narrators.

4. “Should the two circumcised organs meet, then *ghusl* [‘ablution’] is necessary.”

This hadith has been authenticated by Islamic scholars, but it has been argued that this does not condone nor mandate FGM/C.

5. “Acts of natural disposition are five: circumcision, removal of the pubic hair, shaving of the moustache, cutting of the fingernails, and plucking of the armpit hair.”

Islamic scholars have argued that this does not refer to FGM/C (i.e. ‘female circumcision’), but that the term for ‘circumcision’ used here is specific to men.

Statements by Islamic Scholars

A meeting of scholars was convened at the University of Cairo in 1998. Subsequent publications emerged, such as the *Islamic Ruling on Male and Female Circumcision* by Islamic scholar Muhammad Lufti Al-Sabbagh.³ In that paper, the inauthenticity of the hadiths that reference FGM/C is the reason Lufti Al-Sabbagh concludes it cannot be a requirement of Islam.

In 2013 the International Islamic Center for Population Studies and Research at Al-Azhar University and UNICEF worked together to expand and republish a 2005 booklet on FGM/C. The new book was titled *Female Circumcision: Between the Incorrect Use of Science and the Misunderstood Doctrine*.⁴ The book considers previous declarations by Muslim jurists that FGM/C is *makramah* (a 'virtuous deed') to be based on the knowledge and understanding available at that time, which has since been proven incorrect and should therefore be discounted; regardless, the use of *makramah* means that FGM/C was never declared a religious duty (*wajib*) or a Prophet-recommended practice (*sunna*). The authors conclude that, even if FGM/C were considered a virtuous deed and not an obligatory practice of Islam,

Sharia recognises the principle that whenever a particular practice is proven by careful examination and research to be damaging to health or to have a negative influence on morals, it must be prevented on the grounds of its harm.⁵

The book also notes that FGM/C cannot be considered a beautification process, since humans were created 'in the best stature' as they are⁶ and 'Islam forbids inflicting harm upon health'; therefore, FGM/C 'must be prevented on the grounds of its harm.'⁷

Finally, the book calls for partnership among 'many influencing groups' to end FGM/C, for religious scholars to educate themselves about FGM/C before giving their opinions, for physicians to talk about the risks to anybody who asks them to perform FGM/C, for teaching on reproductive health to be introduced in schools, for the media to 'shed light on the true and negative facts about FGM/C, through citing opinions of Muslim and non-Muslim scholars', and for parents to 'perform their duties properly' towards their children.⁸

Christianity and FGM/C

Within Christianity, principles and practices are based primarily on the New Testament of the Bible. Reference is made to the Old Testament to provide context and richer understanding. Church denominations develop their own doctrinal statements based on their interpretations of certain Biblical texts.

A joint report by the International Islamic Centre for Population Studies and Research (IICPSR), the Bishopric of Public, Ecumenical and Social Services (BLESS) for the Coptic Orthodox Church and UNICEF, entitled *Peace. Love. Tolerance. Key Messages from Islam and Christianity on protecting children from violence and harmful practices*, states:

This harmful practice has absolutely no basis in Christianity and there is not a single verse in the Old and New Testaments of the Holy Bible that refers to FGM/C.⁹

Christian contributors to the report emphasised that FGM/C is a source of discrimination and violence against women and girls and that it reinforces male superiority. The report concludes that men and women are equal in the eyes of God, and any view of the superiority of men should not be encouraged or supported.¹⁰

In 2006, Christian scholars gathered at the **East Africa Program**. The attending Christian (Coptic) leaders emphasised that 'Christian doctrine is clear on the sanctity of the human body.'¹¹

Within Christian contexts, the challenge is not that FGM/C has been promoted as a religious requirement, but that Christian leaders have not spoken out against it. Those who practise FGM/C do so based on cultural or traditional heritage and see no conflict between the practice and their Christian faith.

The Way Forward

Both Christian and Islamic scholars have explicitly taken a stand against FGM/C, producing clear statements that it is not a religious requirement and is in opposition to the core principles of each faith.

However, at the community level, many people still believe that FGM/C is a religious requirement. In order to shift these deeply-held beliefs, local faith leaders must speak out against the practice on the grounds of the religious statements discussed above. It is essential that local faith leaders be trained in relation to FGM/C and what each religion's doctrine actually says about it, so they can speak out with confidence and credibility.

In 2016, **three landmark publications** were released as part of a collaboration between the International Islamic Centre for Population Studies and Research (*IICPSR*), the Bishopric of Public, Ecumenical and Social Services (*BLESS*) for the Coptic Orthodox Church and UNICEF:

- *The Islamic perspective on protecting children from violence and harmful practices*, prepared by the IICPSR;
- *The Christian perspective on protecting children from violence and harmful practices*, prepared by BLESS; and
- *Peace. Love. Tolerance. Key Messages from Islam and Christianity on protecting children from violence and harmful practices*, a joint document.¹²

The joint publication, *Peace. Love. Tolerance. Key Messages from Islam and Christianity on protecting children from violence and harmful practices*, was the first time that Islamic and Christian scholars came together to speak out in opposition to violence against children. Eleven different forms of violence were named in the publication, including FGM/C. All three publications were intended for use by imams, pastors, religious scholars, parents and other caregivers.

Peace. Love. Tolerance. Key Messages from Islam and Christianity on protecting children from violence and harmful practices concludes:

Both Christianity and Islam honour women and girls. Both religions agree that God has created humans in the best form and the sanctity of the human body must always be protected from harm. On these grounds, there is religious consensus that FGM/C is a detrimental social and cultural practice, which has no relation or justification in religion, either Christianity or Islam. **Hence, abandoning this harmful practice is a religious and moral duty.**¹³

In Practice: Religion-Orientated Approaches

A religion-orientated approach is one that demonstrates the ways in which FGM/C is incompatible with the religion of a community, thereby leading to changes of attitudes and behaviours. Religion-orientated approaches have been used primarily in Muslim and Christian communities, but are applicable wherever FGM/C is prevalent and religious leaders hold significant influence. There are a few strategies utilised within religion-orientated approaches, which include the following.

Mobilising High-Level Religious Scholars

The idea behind this strategy is to influence those who lead congregations and those who are followers of a particular religion to abandon the practice in response to statements made against it. Examples include those mentioned above and those produced at other gatherings of religious leaders and academic scholars. *Such statements are particularly helpful in clarifying that FGM/C is not a requirement of any major organised religion.*

Fatwas Against FGM/C

A *fatwa* is a religious ruling that Muslims try to follow. These are most often issued by a mufti who works for the Dar al Ifta ('House of Rulings').

In November 2006, the **Dar al Ifta** convened a meeting of Islamic scholars in Egypt, at the Islamic Al-Azhar University, to discuss FGM/C. **Professor Ali Goma, the Grand Mufti of Egypt,** stated,

The female genital circumcision practiced today harms women psychologically and physically. Therefore, the practice must be stopped in support of one of the highest values of Islam, namely to do no harm to another – in accordance with the commandment of the Prophet Mohammed, 'Accept no harm and do no harm to another.'¹⁴

According to the Dar al Ifta,

The findings of the conference represented a call to the peoples of the Muslim world – in Egypt and beyond – to hold fast to their Islamic identity by ending this deplorable custom in their communities. Injuring oneself or another in any form is expressly and categorically forbidden.¹⁵

The most authoritative fatwa against FGM/C was issued in Egypt in 2007 by the **Al-Azhar Supreme Council of Islamic Research**, which stated not only that FGM/C has no basis in Sharia, but also that it is a sinful action and should be avoided.¹⁶

A number of regional and national fatwas followed, based on this one. In February 2018, a fatwa was issued by **The Ministry of Religious Affairs in Somaliland** forbidding FGM/C and posing consequences for those who practise it. Girls who have undergone FGM/C of the most severe form are eligible for compensation under this fatwa.¹⁷

High-Level Church Statements

The **Orthodox Church** produced a statement on 13 October 2011, in which it stated that ‘the prevention of FGM requires the strong involvement of the church leaders and men, and collaboration of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church with other partners.’¹⁸

The **UNFPA-UNICEF Joint Programme on the Elimination of Female Genital Mutilation** has made it a priority to engage and sensitise faith leaders through its programming. As a result, in 2019 religious leaders from 3,843 communities made public statements that FGCM/C is not a religious requirement.¹⁹

Equipping Leaders to Speak Out

In a baseline study conducted by Mpanzi, a Kenyan non-profit dedicated to eradicating violence against women and girls, and Tearfund, a Christian non-governmental organisation (NGO), it was found that ‘[o]f those interviewed, 89% of respondents said religious practices such as prayer, thanksgiving and worship continued to be a central part of FGM/C activities. Spiritual and religious leaders offered blessings to the initiates when requested by family or community members. However, FGM/C was never discussed or debated.’¹⁸

Equipping faith leaders to speak out against FGM/C looks different in different contexts. **Tearfund** is an international NGO that partners with churches. In Tanzania, it worked with local pastors to share health information on the consequences of FGM/C and to publicly state their opposition to the practice. In some cases, this resulted in parents choosing not to have their girls cut. In other instances, pastors faced backlash from communities and even, in some cases, threats.¹⁹ **Population Council/Frontiers**, an international NGO, implemented a response to FGM/C in Wajir district, Kenya. It worked with small groups of Islamic scholars to debate FGM/C from a religious perspective and to develop a plan for engaging communities in which it is believed that FGM/C is a requirement of Islam.²⁰ The discussions engaged a traditional cutter, women who had experienced FGM/C and scholars to form a position in opposition to the practice.

In a report entitled ‘**No More “Harmful Traditional Practices”: Working Effectively with Faith Leaders**’, researchers Dr Elisabet Le Roux and Dr Brenda Bartelink state, ‘Case study findings suggest that religion is used in various ways to justify cultural beliefs and practices. While faith leaders may be aware that their particular faith does not condone or demand a certain [harmful traditional practice], they remain silent because of the power relations in which cultural expectations are embedded.’²¹

Dr Le Roux and Dr Bartelink recommend the following when working with faith leaders:²²

1. **Share basic health information with faith leaders** to provide insight into the health consequences of FGM/C, and combine this with theological engagement to enable faith leaders to address FGM/C in a sensitive and contextually relevant way.
2. **Engage with faith leaders from an understanding of the contextual variations** each leader finds themselves in. Support them to reflect theologically, but also to consider the cultural and societal expectations in the context where they live.
3. **Engage the full hierarchy of faith leadership**, from the local to the national level, to encourage buy-in and support for speaking out.

Creating Safe Spaces for Congregants to Debate

When working with small groups, it can be helpful to divide into groups of men, women and youth. It is essential to create safe spaces where people feel free to share their views with others in an atmosphere that is free from judgement and in which power dynamics are considered.

The goal of safe spaces is to generate critical dialogue around FGM/C and for theological reflection and debate, with the influence and support of faith leaders.

Various resources have been developed to support the creation of safe spaces for dialogue on FGM/C:

- Tearfund (a faith-based NGO) has implemented the **Transforming Masculinities** approach on FGM/C to engage Christian faith leaders (primarily local pastors) and faith communities to generate dialogue on FGM/C. The Transforming Masculinities Community Dialogues manual on FGM/C is available at <https://learn.tearfund.org/en/resources/tools-and-guides/transforming-masculinities>.
- In Senegal, Tostan (an international NGO) works to equip Muslim faith leaders (primarily local imams) to respond to FGM/C. Tostan uses an open-ended and participatory approach called the **Community Empowerment Program**, which provides a structure for reflection on community priorities and abandonment of harmful practices such as FGM/C. Imams reported leaving the training with a feeling of commitment and determination to respond to harmful practices and violence in their communities.²³ The Community Empowerment Program can be found at <https://tostan.org/programs/community-empowerment-program/>.

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- 7 *Ibid.*, p.7.
- 8 *Ibid.*, pp.15–16.
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