

Religion and FGM

Female genital mutilation (FGM) (sometimes called female genital mutilation/cutting, or 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 believe it is a religious requirement.

Within Demographic and Health Surveys and similar reports, a key indicator often given in relation to FGM 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 and 72% believe it is a religious requirement.¹

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

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

FGM and Islam

Islamic law (*Sharia*) is derived from the Holy Quran, the Sunna (*traditions*), Qiyas (*analogical arguments*) and Ijma (*juridical consensus*).² **There is no reference to FGM in the Holy Quran, the Qiyas or any Ijma consensus.**

There are five **Hadiths** (*stories*), which are categorised under Islamic law as Sunna (*traditions*), 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 honorable 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 Ghushl (*ablution*) is necessary.'

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

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 (i.e. female circumcision), but that the term for circumcision used here is specific to a man.

Statements on FGM 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 female circumcision 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. The new book was titled *Female Circumcision: Between the Incorrect Use of Science and the Misunderstood Doctrine*.⁴ The book considers that previous declarations by Muslim jurists that FGM is *makramah* (a 'virtuous deed') were based on the knowledge and understanding available to them at that time, which has since been proven incorrect and should therefore be discounted; regardless, the use of 'makramah' means that FGM was never declared a religious duty (*wajib*) or a Prophet-recommended practice (*Sunna*). The authors conclude that, even if FGM 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 cannot be considered a beautification process, since humans were created 'in the best stature' as they are,⁶ and that 'Islam forbids inflicting harm upon health'; therefore, FGM 'must be prevented on the grounds of its harm.'⁷

Finally, the book calls for partnership among 'many influencing groups' to end FGM, for religious scholars to educate themselves about FGM before giving their opinion, for physicians to talk about the risks to anybody who asks them to perform FGM, 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

In 2016, **three landmark publications** were released as part of a collaboration between the International Islamic Centre for Population Studies and Research (IICPSR), the Bishporic 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.⁹

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. All three publications were intended for use by imams, pastors, religious scholars, parents and other caregivers.

The joint report states:

the Quran is empty of any text that mentions FGM/C, even remotely. Calling it 'Sunnah circumcision' is merely a deception to give it a degree of holiness and deceive people that the practice comes from Islam. . . . Also, there is not one authentic proof in a hadith from which could be derived a Sharia ruling in a matter as dangerous to human life as this one.

The report also notes that there is no medical justification for FGM and that abandonment of the practice is not sinful.

Fatwas Against FGM

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. **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.'¹⁰

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.¹¹

The most authoritative fatwa against FGM was issued in Egypt in 2007 by the **Al-Azhar Supreme Council of Islamic Research**, which stated not only that FGM has no basis in Sharia, but also that it is a sinful action and should be avoided.¹²

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 and posing consequences for those who practise it. Girls who have undergone FGM of the most severe form are eligible for compensation under this fatwa.¹³

Christianity and FGM

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 the Biblical texts.

The joint report 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.¹⁴

Christian contributors to the report emphasised that FGM 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 this superiority of men should not be encouraged or supported.¹⁵

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.'¹⁶

Within Christian contexts, the challenge is not as much that FGM has been promoted as a religious requirement, but rather that Christian leaders have not spoken out against it. Those who practise FGM 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, 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 is a religious requirement. In order to shift these deeply-held beliefs, local faith leaders must speak out against the practice on the basis of the religious statements that exist. It is essential that local faith leaders are trained on FGM and what each religion actually says about it, so they can speak out with confidence and credibility.

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.**¹⁷

- 1 Directorate of National Statistics, Federal Government of Somalia (2020) *The Somali Health and Demographic Survey 2020*. Available at https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Som%20Gvt%20UNFPA%20Press%20Release_SHDS%20Rpt%20Launch_29-04-20_Final.pdf.
- 2 Selim Al-Awa, Mohammed (2019) *FGM in the Context of Islam*. The National Council for Childhood and Motherhood. Available at <http://www.nccm-egypt.org/e9/e1869/e2357/e2358/infoboxContent2359/FGMintheContextofIslam.pdf>.
- 3 Al-Sabbagh, Muhammed Lufti (1996) *Islamic Ruling on Female Circumcision*. World Health Organization. Available at <https://applications.emro.who.int/dsaf/dsa54.pdf>.
- 4 International Islamic Center for Population Studies and Research, Al Azhar University, and UNICEF (2013) *Ending FGM/C: Accelerating [sic] Social Change in Partnership with Religious Leaders*. Available at <http://alazhar-iicpsr.org/data/uploads/books/Bioethics%20Books/EN/Ending%20FGM.pdf>.
- 5 Gamal Serour and Ahmed Ragaa Abd El-Hameed Ragab (2013) *Female Circumcisions (FGMK/C): Between The Incorrect Use of Science And The Misunderstood Doctrine*. International Islamic Center for Population Studies and Research, Al-Azhar University and UNICEF. Available at <https://www.unicef.org/egypt/reports/female-circumcision>.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p.6.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p.7.
- 8 *Ibid.*, pp.15–16.
- 9 *Ibid.* pp.18–19.
- 10 Stop FGM Middle East (undated) *Fatwas Against FGM*. Available at <http://www.stopfgmmideast.org/fatwas-against-fgm/>.
- 11 Dar al Ifta (2021) *The Islamic View of Female Circumcision*. Available at: <https://www.dar-alifta.org/Foreign/ViewArticle.aspx?ID=125&text=circumcision>.
- 12 United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) (2013) *Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting: A statistical overview and exploration of the dynamics of change*. Available at https://data.unicef.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/FGMC_Lo_res_Final_26.pdf.
- 13 Sahra Abdi Ahmed, Sagal Mustafe Hassan, and Harun Maruf (2018) ‘Somaliland Fatwa Forbids FGM’, *VOA News, Africa*. Available at <https://www.voanews.com/africa/somaliland-fatwa-forbids-fgm>.
- 14 UNICEF (2016) *PEACE. LOVE. TOLERANCE: Key Messages From Islam & Christianity On Protecting Children From Violence And Harmful Practices*. International Islamic Centre for Population Studies and Research at Al-Azhar University, Coptic Orthodox Church, Egypt, Bishopric of Public, Ecumenical and Social Services (BLESS), and UNICEF. Available at <https://www.unicef.org/mena/media/2291/file/EGY-PeaceLoveToleranceReport-September2016.pdf.pdf>.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 I. El-Damanhoury (2013) ‘The Jewish and Christian view on female genital mutilation’, *African Journal of Urology*, 19(3). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.afju.2013.01.004>.
- 17 UNICEF (2016), *op. cit.*, pp.18–19.