



## FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION AND ISLAM

### Introduction

It is estimated that some 140 million women, girls and babies throughout the world have been genitally mutilated. Another three million girls are at risk of such mutilation each year. Female genital mutilation (FGM) is primarily practised in 28 African countries, to a lesser extent in certain countries in Asia and the Middle East and also, as a result of migration, in western host countries.

Although the elimination of FGM was originally regarded as a mere question of health education and information, today FGM is recognised as a socio-cultural problem that is deeply rooted within the societies in which it is practised. Thus social change is indispensable if the practice is to be ended permanently. Commitment to ending FGM is symbolic of the effort to strengthen the position of women and women's rights generally, because FGM is a serious violation of human rights, and its elimination would serve to advance virtually every one of the UN Millennium Development Goals.

### Female genital mutilation and Islam

FGM is not mentioned at all in the Qur'an, the holy scripture of Islam. The roots of the practice go back to pre-Islamic and pre-Christian times. In countries in which Islam is prevalent and FGM is practised, religious authorities have produced various legal interpretations of the Qur'an on the subject, so that there is often no consistent position to go by. Indeed, in these countries, it is often erroneously argued that the Qur'an prescribes the practice of female genital mutilation.

### Basic foundations of Islam

In Islamic societies, the Qur'an is the foundation of Muslim belief and life. The second basic source is the Sunna – the 'trodden path' or 'way' of the Prophet Mohammed, which has come down to believers in the form of hadith (personal sayings and actions of the Prophet that are recommended for

### WHO classification:

*Type I: Partial or total removal of the clitoris and/or the prepuce (clitoridectomy).*

*Type II: Partial or total removal of the clitoris and the labia minora, with or without excision of the labia majora (excision).*

*Type III: Narrowing of the vaginal orifice with creation of a covering seal by cutting and appositioning the labia minora and/or the labia majora, with or without excision of the clitoris (infibulation).*

*Type IV: All other harmful procedures to the female genitalia for non-medical purposes, for example: pricking, piercing, incising, scraping and cauterization.*

imitation). All Islamic believers recognise these two sources as binding.

In Islamic societies, the Shari'a, Islamic law, functions parallel to secular law and often plays a role in family law and the regulation of civil status.

Life in the community of believers (Umma) is based on compassion, charity and reciprocity, which are of central importance in the Qur'an, with the well-being of the family at the core. According to the interpretation of conservative legal scholars, the man assumes responsibility for maintaining his family in decent circumstances. The woman is destined for motherhood, obedience and the execution of domestic tasks.

Marriage is considered the form best suited for a bond between a man and a woman. It is to be based on mutual love and responsibility and to provide the framework for sexual fulfilment. Good health is viewed as a gift of Allah. This principle is supported by rules and regulations for its preservation and maintenance. Respect for the integrity of the male and female body created by Allah, and the inviolability of body and soul, are important elements of this principle.

## Interpretations regarding FGM

Some Muslim legal scholars are of the opinion that FGM is certainly recommended, if not obligatory. They refer to the hadith, in which the Prophet, during a discussion with a circumciser named Um Habibah (or Um 'Atiyyah), states: 'When you cut, do not cut too much. That way you allow the woman more pleasure, and it is more pleasant for the man.' From this statement they conclude that removal of the clitoris or the labia minora is prescribed.

Other Muslim legal scholars reject FGM, however, pointing out that there is no indication that the Prophet regarded it as a religious obligation. Consequently, they maintain, FGM is not an Islamic custom at all but rather a violation of women's physical integrity.

Furthermore, several legal scholars strongly doubt the authenticity of this hadith, since it is very vague, and since there is no exact description of how the act of cutting ought to be performed. Some conclude that FGM only found its way into Islam through a process of adaptation to certain cultures.

## Fatwas and declarations against FGM

In Egypt, six fatwas (religious legal rulings) have been pronounced on FGM since 1949. The first was against the cutting of women, the second and third were in favour of it. In 1996, Sheikh Mohamed Sayed Tantawi, Grand Imam of Al-Azhar University in Cairo, pronounced a ban on FGM.

The most recent conference of scholars took place in November 2006 at Al-Azhar University in Cairo. Initiated by TARGET, a German human rights organisation, and held under the auspices of the Grand Mufti of Egypt, Professor Ali Gom'a, Muslim scholars from all over the world came together to discuss the practice of FGM with scientists. They passed the resolution, with all the weight of a fatwa, that FGM was to be considered a punishable offence as an act of aggression and a crime against humanity.

In other parts of Africa, too, religious leaders have spoken out publicly against FGM and are continuing to do so. Since the 1990s there have been numerous conferences that have put the focus on the issue of female genital mutilation at the core of discussion, particularly with Islamic religious leaders.

*In 1998, the Inter-African Committee (IAC) organised an international conference for religious leaders and medical*

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*personnel in Gambia. The concluding document, the Banjul Declaration, condemns continuation of the practice and stresses that the roots of FGM lie in neither Islam nor Christianity.*

*In 2000, the GTZ sectoral and supranational project Ending Female Genital Mutilation supported a regional IAC symposium of religious and traditional leaders in Tanzania. The Arusha Declaration stresses that FGM is not a religious duty and that it violates the human rights of women and girls.*

*In 2005, at a regional conference, the Djibouti Declaration was adopted. It re-affirms the consensus that FGM is based neither on Islam nor on other religions and is to be rejected in all of its forms.*

*In March 2005, another regional conference took place in Sudan, at which religious scholars from East Africa and the Arab world discussed a plan of action to mobilise Islamic leaders to oppose FGM.*

*In October 2007, the IAC organised another conference of Islamic and Christian leaders, which, in the Declaration of Abidjan, called upon governments, international organisations and NGOs, among others, to make every possible effort to put an end to FGM.*

The results of the conferences may be considered ground-breaking: they form the basis for arguments against the continuation of FGM on religious grounds.

## Work with religious leaders

Africa's Muslim population is strongly swayed by the interpretations of the Qur'an and hadith by local Islamic leaders. The GTZ sectoral and supranational project Ending Female Genital Mutilation and its partners respond to this by using awareness and information campaigns to encourage religious authorities to use their role as opinion-shapers to influence the population.

In Mauritania in June 2007 the GTZ Good Governance Programme, together with the Islamic Forum and the Mauritanian Ministry of Women's Affairs, held a national colloquium entitled 'Harmful Practices for Women: the Role of Tradition and Islam', which significantly advanced public discussion of women's rights.

In Mali, too, support was given in November 2007 to a meeting of religious leaders and scholars. The heated debate and discussion focused on the question of the supposed legitimisation of FGM by Islam. Even though the majority of participants still failed to acknowledge the harmfulness of FGM from a medical standpoint, they nevertheless expressed their view that the practice of FGM was not obligatory in Islam.

IAC: Inter-African Committee on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children, [www.iac-ciaf.com](http://www.iac-ciaf.com).

