5 Female Circumcision: Religious Obligation or Cultural Deviation?

Throughout history female sexuality has provoked controversy and led to its being repressed in a variety of ways in all parts of the world. For example, the widows of deceased Pharaohs were buried alive to make sure that they would not be able to have relations with another man.1 Also, it has been stated that in ancient Rome, female slaves had rings put through their labia majora to discourage them from getting pregnant. In twelfth-century Europe, chastity belts were widely used. Only one century ago, clitoridectomy was performed as a surgical remedy against masturbation in both Europe and the United States. Currently, cruel and inhumane genital surgery continues to take place in different parts of the world, a practice commonly known as female genital mutilation (FGM).2

Female genital mutilation is an age-old practice performed on the grounds of inherited convention rather than for health reasons. The operation is mostly done by a traditional circumciser, known as daya,3 without anaesthetics, although recently it has been performed by some trained doctors and midwives. The practice involves cutting off parts of the whole organ of the female external genitalia.4 The nature and scope of mutilation differ from one country to another. In certain countries the mutilation reaches its most extreme when the two sides of the wound are stitched together, leaving only a very small opening for menstrual blood. This form of mutilation is called infibulation and it is the most severe type of circumcision. It is estimated that over 80 million women and young girls have undergone genital mutilation world-wide and that some 5,000 girls each day are vulnerable to having genital mutilation carried out.5

The medical consequences of this practice are horrific. They range from chronic infections (as a result of the nature of, and procedures used in, the operation) to problems with childbirth, intercourse and menstruation. It is stated by the World Health Organisation (WHO) that female genital mutilation increases greatly the chance of the mother’s death in childbirth and the risk of a child being born dead. Also, some girls who have undergone such an operation have lost their lives because of severe haemorrhaging resulting from shock due to excessive loss of blood.6
In recent years, female genital mutilation has received considerable public-
ity, especially in the West. Voices throughout the world have opposed it and
started to call for urgent action to eradicate it: the American columnist
A.M. Rosenthal branded it as ‘the most widespread existing violation of
human rights in the world’ and suggested the halting of grants and loans to
governments which allow it. In April 1994 the International Monetary Fund
(IMF) made combatting female genital mutilation a condition for its loan to
Burkina Faso. Due to the consistent efforts of the American novelist, Alice
Walker, many sanctuaries for mutilated women are now available in a
number of countries. President Clinton agreed in April 1994 to put the ques-
tion of female genital mutilation on the agenda of American foreign policy.

Human rights groups are working hard to have female genital mutilation
labelled as torture: ‘Harm that is done to women is seen as a personal, private
or cultural matter. Genital mutilation has not been seen as a type of harm’,
says Nancy Kelly, directing attorney of the women’s refugee project; and
Forward (Foundation for Women’s Health Research and Development) has
described it as ‘a violation of the fundamental human rights of the girl child’
and ‘another form of abuse under the guise of custom and tradition’.

It has been said that FGM is rooted in religious and cultural traditions
which makes it impossible to dislodge. So, does religion, or more
specifically, Islam, advocate female genital mutilation? Does Islam –
which condemned the Arab practice of female infanticide and elevated
women spiritually and mentally and gave them the right to sexual pleasure
– contradict itself and perpetuate this form of female subjugation? When I
asked an Egyptian doctor, ‘Why have you approved of female genital
mutilation?’ he answered that it was a religious obligation based on one of
the sayings of the Prophet. When I demanded more elaboration, he, not
surprisingly, failed to produce any tangible evidence.

So, is female genital mutilation really an Islamic practice advocated by
the Quran and the tradition? Or is it merely one of the old-fashioned
customs which has infiltrated Islamic tradition and then later been
assumed to be the expression of an Islamic principle? Before answering
these questions, we need to look at the origin of the practice, its medical
consequences, the reasons for it and its future prospects.

**DEFINITION OF THE TERM**

Female genital mutilation is a term used to describe a variety of genital
operations performed on female children, young girls, and women. The
operations are performed in the name of traditional beliefs and customs.