

## Female Genital Mutilation – Part of Religion or Tradition?

Written by Sheikh/Dr. Shaheed Satardien  
Monday, 01 November 2010 15:35

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Good Evening Ladies and Gentlemen.

I greet you all with the universal greeting of peace. Assalaamu 'alaykum.

I am indeed honoured to be afforded the opportunity to be part of this gathering and I thank Ifrah Ahmed, who happens to be one of the most admirable young feminists in Islaam, for inviting me. I know that it may come as a surprise to you to hear me talk about Islaam and feminism in the same sentence. That is because the prophet of Islaam not only abolished slavery, but he also outlawed the evils of a chauvinistic patriarchal society and mysoginy; and thus liberated women and restored their real legal status in society. He insisted that every individual does not only have responsibilities but also rights; and more importantly, the freedom of choice.

Therefore, the notion of a young girl having her genitals removed with a rusty blade is the plot of a grisly horror film to most Westerners, but sadly, such barbarism is a reality to many young women in Africa and the Middle East; not because of their religions, but because of their traditions that have been misappropriated into their religions. Whilst many Westerners embrace the notion of cultural relativism, not even the most ardent of apologists for African & Middle Eastern customs can support the deliberate maiming of innocent young women.

Yet, whilst most political activists can be relied upon - and lauded by me - to protest at the drop of a hat against the atrocities of Israel, the perpetual military conquests of the USA and the racist tendencies of the West in general, their relative lethargic inactivity in the face of mass DIY surgery performed on millions of, mainly, pubescent girls every year, is a stark contrast and is sadly lamented.

The question beckons: Does the tolerance of traditional customs justify the tolerance of lacerating female genitalia?

The relationship between custom and religion is well documented – many religions have significant rituals which when continually practiced become a custom even to non-believers. Belief and conviction are a driving force behind behaviour, and when there is a conviction that certain behaviour will favour those in power, it is hardly surprising that such behaviour is embraced and encouraged by the powerful. The physical removal of an alleged pleasurable

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sensation from women can only be described as grossly abusive, a controlling mechanism and a means to ensure that women cannot presume to be permitted the same physical benefits and sexual pleasures as men. This human tragedy not only has to be vehemently condemned, but also ruled as a major crime and stopped now because this is in my opinion is worse than raping the girl. Such control mechanisms in our patriarchal societies have long been used by those for whom religion is a convenient tool of social manipulation.

It has been falsely alleged that the prevalence of Female Genital Mutilation in Muslim countries indicates that Islaam supports and encourages such vile practices. Certainly there is no doubt that some extremist clerics such as Qaradhawi of the Muslim Brotherhood and other reactionary forces like Liam Egan and Ali Salim in their ignorance of Islaam not only saw it fit to promote and defend this abhorrent practice; but also condemn Ifrah and myself. I wish to remind them that the the Holy Qur-aan does not mention any inhuman practice such as FGM at all.

On the other hand, the Islamic oral tradition indicates that the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, allegedly did not condemn such a vile practice. He is alleged to have said: “Yes it is allowed.....if you cut do not overdo it.....” However it is very unclear as to what “cut” he was referring to; but there is little evidence that this saying has any authenticity attributed to it and in most Muslim scholarly circles is regarded as a blatant lie attributed to the prophet of peace and mercy.

Male circumcision however, is practised to some extent in almost every society, and Muslim men also undergo this ritual as a health more than a faith issue. Although very painful and certainly very risky when done by non-medical personnel, it has multiple reported health benefits. Scientific studies indicate that male circumcision reduces the risk of sexually transmitted disease (including HIV infection) and it has some hygiene benefits also. But male circumcision does not usually negatively affect the enjoyment of sexual behaviour and when properly carried out it rarely leads to any long-term adverse reactions.

The contrast between Male Circumcision and Female Genital Mutilation is significant. FGM usually has a very serious effect on the enjoyment of sexual behaviour. Some young girls bleed to death, many contract infections and most are traumatised by the procedure. Many such abused women suffer long term adverse effects during marriage and pregnancy. In rural areas the procedure is often carried out by unqualified midwives with unsterilized instruments, knives or even broken glass. Such trauma can only have deleterious effects on women in general and has to be proclaimed a crime. We praise and support the initiative of Senator Ivana Bacik and call on the Irish government to pass the bill which outlaws such practices.

The societal consequences of having 50% of the population being subjected to such torture during the hormonal turmoil of puberty have not been researched. It can hardly have anything but very negative consequences. FGM must, at least, have a dampening affect on the joys of

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life and could certainly act as a strait-jacket of pain, inhibiting a fuller engagement of women in public life. When one examines the countries where FGM is widespread like Africa and the Middle East, is it a co-incidence that these societies are largely dysfunctional and that the participation of women in public discourse is very limited?

Despite the lack of any support for FGM in the Holy Qur-aan, some Muslims continue to believe that it is a religious obligation to perpetuate such behaviour. The denial of such an obligation by scholars has not dented the conviction amongst some Muslims that a requirement exists to mutilate children in this way. The question arises as to whose interests are served by the continual practice of this barbarity?

Extremists of all types rely on heavy control mechanisms to achieve their aims of domination. The Taliban banned women from education, and banned them from public life. The Holy Inquisition burned people at the stake for believing a non-Catholic version of Christianity. The North Korean dictatorship operates total control over all aspects of its society to the extent that verbal criticism of its leadership is a criminal offence, whilst the former Communist States in Eastern Europe forced millions of people to spy on their neighbours. Indeed the former Polish Communist regime even forced Catholic priests to spy on their fellow clergymen.

So extremists of all stripes are intent on limiting activity, on constraining behaviour and restricting what is permissible – all with a view of modelling society in terms of their prejudices, to promote a paradigm of humanity where only certain people - the extremists and ignoramuses - know best what is good for us. It is in this context that Female Genital Mutilation is promoted.

Whilst this was a problem somewhere else it was easier to forget about it and pretend it was not happening. But human migration has brought FGM to Europe, and it is happening in Ireland, in the UK and on the Continent. The extent of FGM in the EU has not been adequately researched, but anecdotal evidence exists that it is happening.

Research carried out by an Austro-German NGO (WADI) in Kurdistan indicates that 60% of Kurdish women have undergone FGM, whilst the Demographic & Health Surveys Programme estimate that 130 million women in 28 African countries have undergone FGM. These figures were gathered in the face of hostility to research on the subject in many countries, and consequently the almost certain under-estimation of the figures.

FGM is carried out by Traditional Native Africans and Christians too; it is prevalent amongst the Coptic community in Egypt for example, but it is in predominantly Muslim communities that it is most pervasive. It is now time that religious leaders of all persuasions take a stand on this issue

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and utterly condemn it. Failure to do so will further give FGM tacit approval and the continual traumatising of children in the name of custom, tradition or religion.

I hereby call upon all of you to act now.

I thank you.

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The servant in need of the mercy of Allaah (God)

Sheikh (Prof/Dr) Shaheed Satardien