



IS FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION A MATTER OF RELIGION?

- FGM comprises all procedures that involve partial or total removal of the external female genitalia, or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons (WHO). The practice concerns more than 200 million girls and women in the world, and may result in severe health problems, both short and long-term, serious psychological damage, as well as troubles in the girl's or the woman's sexual life.
- FGM is practiced in various regions of the world: Africa (e.g Egypt, Mali, Guinea) but also Asia (e.g. Indonesia, Malaysia), Middle East (e.g. Iraq, Iran), South America (Colombia, Peru), Europe ... It has been observed in several societies, whether religious or not.
- Nevertheless, it is important to question the link between religion and FGM. Undeniably, if several reasons may be cited by FGM-practising communities to **justify** the practice such as the respect of the tradition, the control of women's sexuality, marriageability ... **religion is often one of the first elements evoked.**
 - > In Mali, 64% of women believe FGM to be a religious requirement, just as 57% of women in Mauritania or 49% of women in Egypt for example (1).
 - > Beyond these individual justifications, religious authorities themselves may present FGM as a religious requirement, as seen in Malaysia or Indonesia (2).

But is this link between FGM and religion legitimate? Why is FGM still practiced in the name of religions which do not require it? How can we deconstruct such ideas in our work in favour of abandonment of the practice?



I. FGM IS NOT A « MUSLIM PRACTICE »

FGM is sometimes, wrongfully, seen as a “Muslim practice”, including by the general public in non-practicing or practicing communities. However, **although FGM are performed by some Muslim communities, the practice is also common in Christian and animist communities.**

- > In Eritrea for example, 98% of Muslim women have undergone FGM, but so have 88% of Catholic women and 84% of women belonging to other religious communities.
Likewise, in Mali 89% of Muslim women, 84% of Christian and 86% of animist women have undergone the practice. (1)
- > In Niger, Tanzania and Nigeria, FGM is more prevalent in Christian communities than in any other religious group : In Niger over 50 % of girls and women having undergone the practice are Christian while the Muslims represent only a few percent. (1)

II. FGM IS NOT REQUIRED BY THE FOUNDING DOCTRINES OF THE THREE GREAT MONOTHEIST RELIGIONS

While FGM is practiced by some Christian (e.g. Gambia, Burkina Faso, Sierra Leone, Erithrea), and Muslim communities (e.g Indonesia, Djibouti, Guinea, Mali, Egypt), and historically by a Jewish community in Ethiopia (Falashas), the practice is **not imposed by any monotheist religious script, or any other religion.**



- *Christian* : FGM is not mentioned in the Bible, or recommended in the texts. Female genital mutilations are in fundamental contradiction with the Christian principle of body sanctity and the respect due to the human body. (3)

- *Jewish* : FGM is neither mentioned in the Torah nor in any sources constituting the Jewish law. It falls within the act of body mutilation, a strongly forbidden and rejected practice according to Jewish precepts. (3)

- *Muslim* : Islam appears to be the religion that is the most commonly associated with FGM, as it is frequently used and understood as a justification of the practice. It has been observed that the respect of the Islamic law could even be the first motive of FGM-practising communities ...
However :
 - > **FGM cannot be defined as an « Islamic act »** in regard of the four main sources funding the Islamic obligations (4) :
 - **Quran** -> FGM is not in any way present in the text as such.
 - **Sunna** -> the Hadiths that may have been used to justify FGM have been denounced and recognized as inauthentic (4). Moreover, there is no proofs that the daughters of the Prophet or the ones of his companions were cut, while it appears that the Prophet would never order a practice that he did not apply himself.
 - **Ijma'a** -> there is no consensus between Muslim scholars or between the four great schools of thoughts on the thematic of FGM. Thus, the practice cannot be performed in the name of a global scholar consensus around the question.
 - **Qiyas** -> although some people argue that FGM is the female equivalent of male circumcision and that the same rules could be applied to it in terms of Islamic jurisprudence, in the name of the Qiyas principle, many others point out that FGM is not similar to male circumcision and therefore cannot be subject to the same religious injunctions and affirmations.



> Not only is FGM not required by Islam, but it is in fact **in contradiction** with the commandments recognized as such by the sources of Islamic law : do no harm, do not change Allah's creation, do not punish an innocent (FGM anticipate a girl's « fault » - sexual intercourse before or out of marriage - and thus punish a girl who has not yet done anything) ... They are also **in opposition with the human rights recognized by Islam**: the right to life, the right to physical integrity, the right to sexual pleasure for women wishing marriage (4)

FGM is not requested by any of the three monotheist religions. They have in fact been **observed before the emergence of these three religions** and are similarly **practiced by animist communities**.

III. NEVERTHELESS, FGM CAN BE PERCEIVED AS A RELIGIOUS PRACTICE BY THE COMMUNITIES WHO PRACTICE IT

Studies show that many individuals who practice FGM perceive it as a religious obligation. Thus, even if the practice is not religious in terms of formal obligation in the texts, it is still perceived as a religious practice by concerned groups. **While FGM is not religious in theory it can be lived as such in practice.** FGM is religious for individuals who practice it.. How can this be explained?

- FGM is frequently (and wrongly) associated with **sexual purity** of women: control of their sexual desire, virginity before marriage and fidelity within marriage ... Since purity is highly valued in religious texts and ideologies, FGM can be perceived as a way to comply to religious requirements of morality and chastity. (4)



- Similarly, marriage is an important aspect of monotheist religions' doctrines. Because FGM is associated with the idea of **marriageability** for women, it may also appear as a way to observe the path outlined by the religious norms.
- Regarding the association made between FGM and Islam more specifically, it has been noted (4) that the use of Islamic terms such as « sunnah » to name the practice can reinforce the misconception of FGM as a requirement of Islam. Moreover, the word « khitaan » ("circumcision" in Arab) is understood by some as describing both male circumcision and female genital mutilation, while others use it only when referring to male circumcision. Finally, FGM is also wrongly associated with the idea of « cleanliness », a necessary state to perform tohara (ablution ritual before the prayer) (4).

According to Abdelwahab Bouhdiba, if female genital mutilation can be lived as a religious practice, it is most importantly because the practice contributes to the **creation of a Muslim collective identity**, more than individual. In other words, the practice is a sign of belonging to the community and helps reinforce the cohesion of the society. The **collective meaning** of FGM thus **prevails on the sacred aspect** of the practice, only secondary here. (6)

In Guinea for example, **64%** of women believe that the first interest of practicing FGM is **social acceptability**, while only **32%** first evoke the respect of a religious obligation (1).

*« Excision (...) is more a practice of Muslims than a practice of Islam. »
Abdelwahab Bouhdiba (6)*



IV. HOW CAN WE USE RELIGION AS A STRATEGY TO TACKLE FGM ?

It appears fundamental to **deconstruct religious beliefs** as they remain one of the main reasons why communities continue to perform female genital mutilation (7).

In order to achieve this, **eminent religious figures taking a stand against FGM** seem to be an essential step towards the deconstruction of the links wrongly established between FGM and religious obligation, such as the Muslim scholars of the university Al-Azhar in Egypt, the great Mufti of Egypt Ali Gomar, the ayatollah Fadlallah, the general secretary of the International Federation of Islamic Scholars Muammed Salim A-Awwa etc ...

However, many **obstacles** stand in the way of such public positions (7, 8) :

- The **lack of knowledge** and doubts on the religious character or not of the practice
- **Social pressure** and fear of losing one's social status within the community
- **Limited awareness** of consequences of FGM
- Underestimations of the severity of the practice by leaders in some communities
- The status of religious figures advocating in favour of the continuation of FGM

Therefore, how can we improve the inclusion of religious leaders in programs aiming toward the end of FGM ?



What about you... ?

Is religion used as a justification to perform FGM in your country?

What are the official positions of religious leaders regarding FGM?

What role are religious figures playing in your country?

Which prominent religious leaders take a stand against FGM?

How can we better integrate them in the fight against the practice?



A FEW RESSOURCES ...

1) Female Genital Mutilation / Cutting : a statistical overview and exploration of the dynamics of change. UNICEF, 2013.

Access here :

https://www.unicef.org/cbsc/files/UNICEF_FGM_report_July_2013_Hi_res.pdf
(13/11/2018)

2) Women's Rights & Religion. A report on women's rights and Christianity, Islam and Judaism. Human Rights Without Frontiers, June 2018.

3) El-Damanhoury I. « The Jewish and Christian view on female genital mutilation », African Journal of Urology 19 (3) : 127-129, September 2013.

Access here :

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/259143889_The_Jewish_and_Christian_view_on_female_genital_mutilation (13/11/2018)

4) Lethome Asmani I, Sheikh Abdi M. Delinking Female Genital Mutilation / Cutting from Islam. Population Council, FRONTIERS Program, 2008.

Access here : <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Delinking%20FGM%20from%20Islam%20final%20report.pdf> (13/11/2018)

5) Hayford S, Trinitapoli J. « Religious differences in Female Genital Cutting : A Case Study from Burkina Faso », J Sci study Relig. 50 (2) 252-271, 2011.

Access here : <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4064295/>. (13/11/2018)

6) Bouhdiba A. La sexualité en Islam. Editions Presses Universitaires de France. 1975.

7) Mahmoodi O. « Survey on religious views on FGM », August 2016.

Access here :

https://www.28toomany.org/static/media/uploads/Continent%20Research%20and%20Resources/Middle%20East/16_08-survey-mullahs.docx.pdf. (13/11/2018)



**BUILDING
BRIDGES**
TO END FGM

- 8) Sheikh Abdi M. A Religious Oriented Approach to Addressing FGM/C among the Somali Community of Wajir, Kenya. Population Council, FRONTIERS Program, 2007.
Access here : <http://www.wajir.org/rapporten/Maryam%20Sheikh%20-%20Rapport%20over%20relatie%20Koran%20en%20FGM.pdf> (13/11/2018)
- 9) « Religion or Culture ? », Stop FGM Middle East, 2005.
Access here : <http://www.stopfgmmideast.org/background/islam-or-culture/> (13/11/2018)
- 10) « Fatwas against FGM », Stop FGM Middle East.
Access here : <https://stopfgmmiddleeast.wordpress.com/fatwas-against-fgm/> (13/11/2018)
- 11) Sami A. Aldeeb Abu-Sahlieh, Circoncision masculine et féminine : débat religieux, médical, social et juridique. Centre de droit arabe et musulman. 2012.
- 12) Sami A. Aldeeb Abu-Sahlieh, "To Mutilate in the Name of Jehovah or Allah: Legitimization of Male and Female Circumcision" in Medicine and Law, Vol. 13, Number 7-8: 575-622, July 1994. Access here : <http://www.cirp.org/library/cultural/aldeeb1/#Chapter3> (13/11/2018)
- 13) Cohen, Shaye J. D. Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised? Gender and Covenant in Judaism, Oakland: University of California Press, (p. 59), 2005.
- 14) Serour, G. et Abd El-Hameed Ragab, A.R. "Excision (MGF) : Entre utilisation incorrecte de la science et compréhension erronée de la doctrine, Résumé exécutif, 2013. Access here : <https://goo.gl/nh4ejF> (15/11/2018)

IF YOU HAVE ARTICLES AND PUBLICATIONS TO RECOMMEND ON THE ISSUE OF RELIGION AND FGM, DO NOT HESITATE TO SHARE THEM WITHIN THE COP!

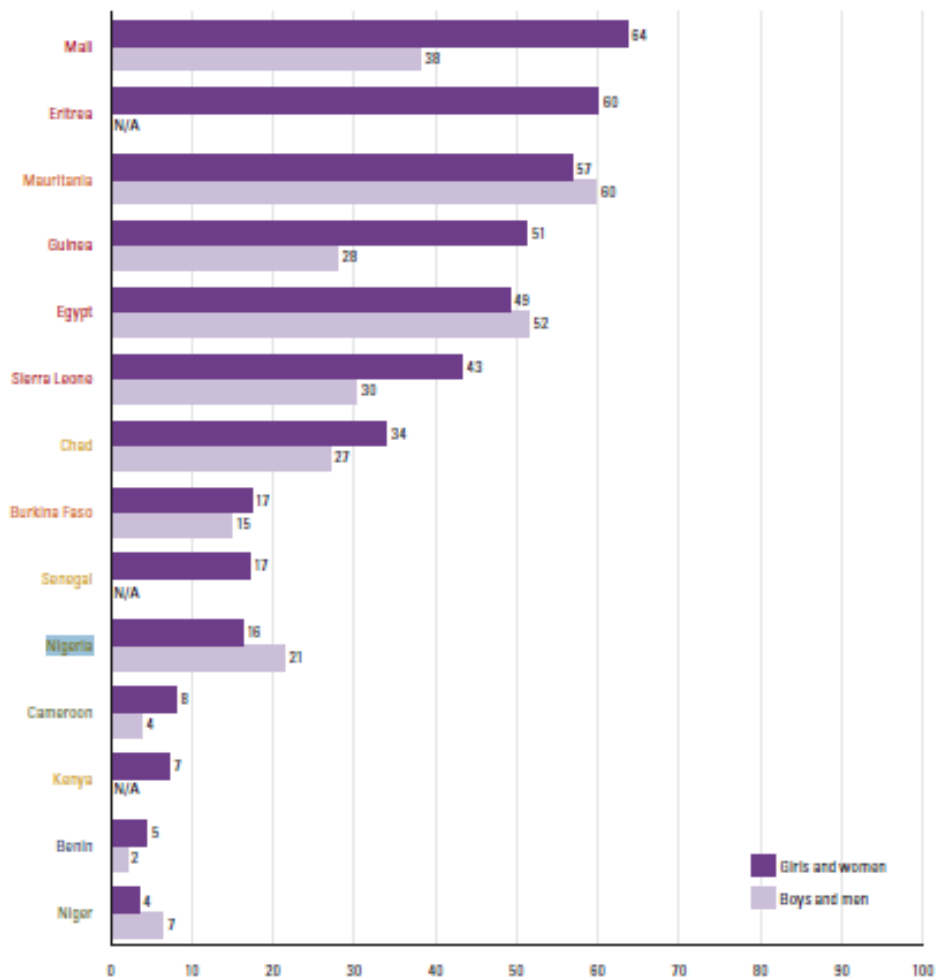
ANNEXES

Useful tables from the UNICEF Statistical Overview, 2013 (1)

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Figure 6.12 In 4 out of 14 countries, more than 50 per cent of girls and women regard FGM/C as a religious requirement

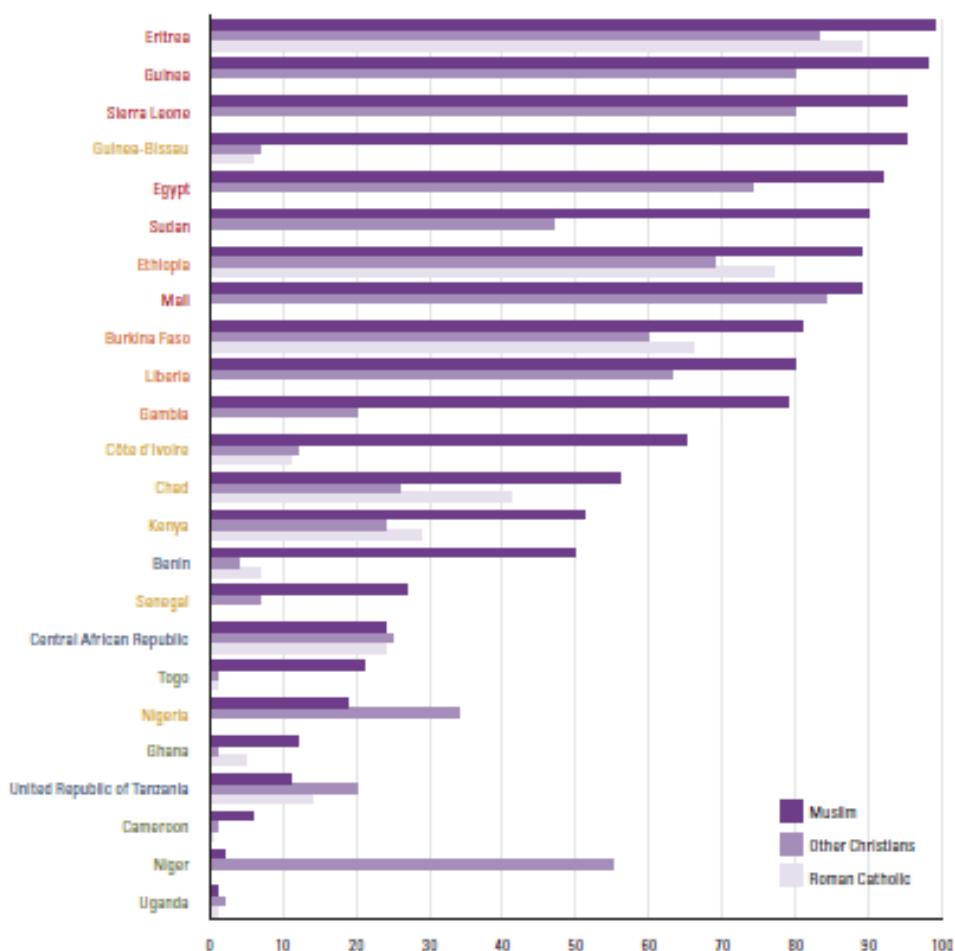
Percentage of girls and women aged 15 to 49 years and boys and men aged 15 to 49 (or 50, see note) years who have heard of FGM/C, by their opinion on whether the practice is required by religion



Notes: N/A = not available. Data for Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Egypt, Nigeria and Sierra Leone refer to boys and men aged 15 to 49. Data for all other countries refer to boys and men aged 15 to 50. Country names are coloured according to prevalence level groupings, as explained in Box 4.4 on page 21.
Sources: DHS and MICS, 2000-2011.

Figure 6.13 While the majority of cut girls and women are Muslim, other religious groups also practise FGM/C

Percentage of girls and women aged 15 to 49 years who have undergone FGM/C, by religion



Notes: For several surveys, the data were re-analysed to disaggregate prevalence data by these main religious groups. FGM/C prevalence data broken down by other religions, such as "Traditional" or "African", are not presented here because they are only reported in a small number of countries. In Ethiopia, the category for "Other Christians" includes "Orthodox", which represents the majority of the population (49 per cent of surveyed women and men). FGM/C prevalence among Orthodox girls and women alone is 68 per cent. Data for Sierra Leone are from the 2008 DHS and data for the United Republic of Tanzania are from the 2004-2005 DHS, since more recent data on religion were unavailable. Data for Sudan are from the 1993-1998 DHS, since more recent data on religion are unavailable. Country names are coloured according to prevalence level groupings, as explained in Box 4.4 on page 77. Sources: DHS and MICS, 1989-2011.

What are the prevailing attitudes towards FGM/C? 73

Statistical table page 175

Country	FGM/C prevalence among girls and women, by selected background characteristics (%)												Reference year	Data source	
	Education				Ethnicity		Religion								
	No education	Primary completed	Secondary or higher	Koranic/non-standard	Ethnic group with the highest prevalence	Ethnic group with the lowest prevalence	Muslim	Roman Catholic	Other Christians	Animist	Traditional religion	Other religion			No religion
Benin	18	4	2	–	74	0.2	50	7	4	–	7	2	23	2006	DHS
Burkina Faso	80	70	56	–	87	22	81	66	60	–	76	–	62	2010	DHS/MICS
Cameroon	5	1	0.4	–	13	0	6	0.3	1	0	–	1	0.3	2004	DHS
Central African Republic	30	25	12	–	53	3	24	24	25	–	–	21	23	2010	MICS
Chad	47	42	31	–	92	1	56	41	26	7	–	59	11	2010	MICS
Côte d'Ivoire	52	21	15	–	(77)	4	65	11	12	45	–	10	30	2006	MICS
Djibouti	94	96	91	93	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	2006	MICS
Egypt	97	89	87	–	–	–	92	–	74	–	–	–	–	2008	DHS
Eritrea	93	86	82	–	100	(79)	99	89	83	–	(100)	*	–	2002	DHS
Ethiopia	77	71	64	–	(100)	(0)	89	77	69	–	49	74	–	2005	DHS
Gambia	78	77	74	–	98	12	79	–	20	–	–	–	*	2010	MICS
Ghana	13	2	1	–	30	0	12	5	1	–	10	(1)	4	2011	MICS
Guinea	97	92	90	–	99	68	98	–	80	88	–	–	75	2005	DHS
Guinea-Bissau	65	39	28	–	–	–	95	6	7	5	–	7	8	2010	MICS/RHS
Iraq	16	7	6	2	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	2011	MICS
Kenya	38	26	19	–	98	0.1	51	29	24	–	–	–	38	2008-2009	DHS
Liberia	84	60	41	–	–	–	80	–	63	–	95	–	88	2007	DHS
Mali	89	88	88	–	98	13	89	–	84	86	–	*	88	2010	MICS
Mauritania	82	71	51	77	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	2011	MICS
Niger	2	2	1	–	66	0.2	2	–	55	*	–	*	20	2006	DHS/MICS
Nigeria	15	35	32	–	–	–	19	–	34	–	–	29	24	2011	MICS
Senegal	28	24	20	–	82	1	27	–	7	20	–	*	*	2010-2011	DHS/MICS
Sierra Leone	95	86	74	–	92	34	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	2010	MICS
Somalia	98	97	96	99	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	2006	MICS
Sudan	84	91	92	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	2010	SHHS
Togo	8	3	1	–	28	0.1	21	1	1	2	–	0	1	2010	MICS
Uganda	2	1	2	–	3	0	1	1	2	–	–	0.1	–	2011	DHS
United Republic of Tanzania	20	16	3	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	2010	DHS
Yemen	22	26	29	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	1997	DHS