

# The International Day of Zero Tolerance To FGM

Sydney 04/02/06

Female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C), or female genital cutting, refers to a number of practices which involve cutting away part or all of a girl's external genitalia. Mutilated/cut infants, girls and women face irreversible lifelong health risks, among other consequences.

Estimates of the total number of women living today who have been subjected to FGM/C in Africa range between 100 and 130 million. Given current birth rates this means that some 2 million girls are at risk of some form of female genital mutilation every year. Most of the girls and women who have undergone FGM/C live in 28 African countries, although some live in Asia.

They are also increasingly found in Europe, Australia, Canada and the USA, primarily among immigrants from Africa and south western Asia.

FGM is practiced for a number of reasons including:

**Sexual:** to control or reduce female sexuality.

**Sociological:** for example, as an initiation for girls into womanhood, social integration and the maintenance of social cohesion.

**Hygiene** :where it is believed that the female genitalia are dirty and unsightly.

**Health:** in the belief that it enhances fertility and child survival.

**Religious reasons:** in the mistaken belief that FGM/C is a religious requirement.

FGM/C is mainly performed on children and adolescents between four and 14 years of age. In some countries, however, up to half of FGM/C is performed on infants under one year old, including 44 per cent in Eritrea and 29 per cent in Mali.

Practitioners of FGM/C are generally traditional birth attendants or trained midwives. FGM/C is a highly-valued service with high financial rewards, and a practitioner's status in the community and income can be directly linked with performance of the operation.

FGM/C is a fundamental violation of the rights of girls. It is discriminatory and violates the rights to equal opportunities, health, and freedom from violence, injury, abuse, torture and cruel or inhuman and degrading treatment, protection from harmful traditional practices, and to make decisions concerning reproduction. These rights are protected in international law.

Every year several million women approach childbirth knowing that the risk will be greater because some or all of their genitalia has been cut away by the traditional practice of female genital mutilation (FGM).

Approximately 2 million girls are mutilated every year. Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, Somalia, and the Sudan account for 75% of all cases.

Apart from the immediate fear and pain, the consequences can include prolonged bleeding, infection, infertility, and death. For those who suffer infibulation – the severest form of FGM in which all external sexual organs are cut away – the trauma of recutting is repeated with each new birth to allow passage of the baby. Both moderate and severe forms increase the risks of childbirth.

Mutilation is not required by any religion. It is a tradition designed to preserve virginity, ensure marriageability, and contain sexuality.

Mutilated genitalia reduce or eliminate a woman's pleasure during the act.

Nawal El-Saadawi, a victim of infibulation and a strong leader of the women movement in the Middle East, where made her an enemy of the authority, stated:

*"The importance given to virginity and an intact hymen in these societies is the reason why female circumcision still remains a very widespread practice despite a growing tendency, especially in urban Egypt, to do away with it as something outdated and harmful. Behind circumcision lies the belief that, by removing parts of girls' external genitals organs, sexual desire is minimized. Female circumcision is meant to preserve the chastity of young girls by reducing their desire for sexual intercourse"*

The United Nations has supported the right of member states to grant refugee status to women who fear being mutilated if they are returned to their country of origin. Canada has granted such status to women in this situation. A judge of a Canadian Federal Court declared it a *"cruel and barbaric practice."*

In 1994 CNN broadcast footage of the circumcision of a 10 year old Egyptian girl by an unskilled practitioner. This program drew international attention to the operation. A 500 million dollar lawsuit was brought against CNN for allegedly damaging Egypt's reputation; it was rejected by the courts.

In 1980, UNICEF announced that its anti-FGM program is *"based on the belief that the best way to handle the problem is to trigger awareness through education of the public, members of the medical profession and practitioners of traditional health care with the help of local collectives and their leaders."*

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is ambiguous about FGM. On one hand, Article 24, paragraph 3 states: *"States Parties shall take all effective and appropriate measures with a view to abolishing traditional practices prejudicial to the health of children."* But Article 29 paragraph 1.c calls for: *"The development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own."*

Statistics on FGM in Egypt are shocking according to experts. The last Egyptian demographic health survey conducted in 2003, found that of married women aged between 15 and 49, some 97 percent had undergone FGM.

It is most common in rural areas of Upper Egypt but is present in urban areas as well.

A myth had live for years among women in the Middle East that, if a girl is not cut, she will not develop the full-breasted, feminine shape that Egyptian society prefers. "She will always be a thin and hungry girl,"

In November 24/05, three months ago, UNICEF released a study on FGM in Egypt, Cairo, where it underscored new data and new solutions

The key findings were:

- Available data show that the current frequency of FGM around the world is roughly the same as it was nearly a decade ago.
- Female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) affects far more women than previously thought. An estimated three million girls and women are cut each year on the African continent (Sub-Saharan Africa, Egypt and Sudan).
- FGM/C is becoming a global problem. Not only is FGM/C practiced among communities in Africa and the Middle East, but with increased population movements and migration, FGM/C is also an issue in immigrant communities throughout the world.
- Real social change is a lengthy and complex process. Still, there is every reason to be optimistic that with global support, FGM/C can be ended within a single generation.
- Never before has the global community had such a refined understanding of why FGM/C persists. Factors perpetuating the practice include woman's status, marriageability, chastity, health, beauty and family honour.
- A number of promising initiatives are supporting communities to abandon FGM/C in Africa and the Middle East. The most successful, guide communities to define the problems and solutions themselves.

FGM/C occurs in many countries around the world such as Senegal, Mali, Yemen and Oman. Among the countries where the practice is most prevalent is Guinea - FGM/C has been inflicted on 99% of women there. There are also reports from Europe, North America and Australia, indicating that the practice takes place among immigrant communities.

Community awareness campaigns seek to reach key figures across society in the fight against FGM/C: village chiefs, media, traditional and religious leaders, young people, teachers, nurses, midwives and female excisers. In 2003, the government of Niger passed a law calling for fines or jail sentences for those conducting FGM/C.

UNICEF is working closely with its partners around the world in the campaign for the abandonment of FGM/C everywhere within a generation.

Cairo 29 June 2005 - children's voices are being heard loud and clear at the Un sponsored conference on violence against children 27 children spoke in front of delegates to proclaim that any form of violence used against children must end now , no matter where it occurs and how it happen.

Please allow me to end my points presented with a question had been asked at that conference by a Yemeni girl , she said' why is it that there are many conferences like this one and yet there are so few concrete results' , there were no answer given to her...  
Dr Eman Sharobeem