



Pan African Urological Surgeons' Association

African Journal of Urology

www.ees.elsevier.com/afju
www.sciencedirect.com



Editorial

The Jewish and Christian view on female genital mutilation

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Received 22 December 2012; received in revised form 7 January 2013; accepted 7 January 2013

KEYWORDS

Female genital mutilation;
Jewish;
Christian;
View

Abstract

Female genital mutilation (FGM) is a practice involving the removal of all or parts of the female external genitalia. It has been documented in 28 African countries and in some countries in Asia and the Middle East, but due to increasing immigration from these countries to the western world, FGM has become a worldwide human rights and health issue. Contrary to the belief that it is a practice carried out by Muslims only, it is also practiced by Christians and a minority group of Ethiopian Jews. However, FGM is neither mentioned in the Torah, nor in the Gospels, and – like in Islam – bodily mutilation is condemned by both religions. In fact, FGM is a mix of mainly cultural and social factors which may put tremendous pressure on the members of the society in question.

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According to the World Health Organization (WHO), female genital mutilation (FGM), also referred to as “female circumcision” or “female cutting”, “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” [1]. The WHO estimates that about 140 million girls and women worldwide are living

with the consequences of FGM and that every year in Africa alone, about 3 million girls are at risk for genital mutilation [1]. FGM has been documented in 28 African countries and in some countries in Asia and the Middle East [2]. However, it has also become a human rights and health issue in western countries where the practice is continued by immigrants from countries where FGM is commonly performed [3]. For instance, the German organization “Terre des Femmes” estimates that about 30.000 girls and women living in Germany have undergone or are at risk of being subjected to FGM [4].

Given the fact that some Sunni Muslims legitimate FGM by quoting a controversial *hadith* (a saying attributed to the Prophet Mohammed) in which the Prophet allegedly did not object to FGM provided cutting was not too severe [5,6] and that the least invasive type of FGM (partial or total removal of the clitoris and/or the prepuce) is also called “Sunna Circumcision” [7], FGM is widely considered to be associated with Islam. However, during a conference

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Peer review under responsibility of Pan African Urological Surgeons' Association.



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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.afju.2013.01.004>

held in Cairo/Egypt in 2006, Muslim scholars from various nations declared FGM to be un-Islamic [8,9] and, in fact, the traditional cultural practice of FGM predates both Islam and Christianity. Herodotus wrote about FGM being practiced in Egypt as early as 500 BC [3], while the Greek geographer Strabo who visited Egypt in about 25 BC reported that one of the Egyptian customs was “to circumcise the males and excise the females” [10]. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, FGM is actually practiced by Muslim, Christian and Jewish groups. There are countries, such as Nigeria, Tanzania and Niger, where the prevalence of FGM is even greater among Christian groups [11]. In Egypt, FGM is also practiced on Coptic girls [12], while in Ethiopia, the Beta Israel or Falashas, a Jewish minority, subject their girls to genital mutilation [5].

In this context, it will be interesting to have a look at the attitude of Christianity and Judaism toward FGM.

Jewish view on FGM

While, according to the Hebrew bible, circumcision is required for all male Jewish children in observance of God’s commandment to Abraham (Genesis 12-17), female circumcision was never allowed in Judaism, according to the Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion [13]. Buff, in his letter to the editor, states that “any form of female circumcision would be considered bodily mutilation and forbidden under Jewish law” [14]. Yet, a Jewish minority group living in Ethiopia, the so-called Falashas or Beta Israel, practice ritual female genital surgery [15]. Buff believes that “as a persecuted and isolated Jewish enclave for thousands of years, the Falashas did not have access to either definitive Jewish texts or informed rabbinical sources” [14]. In fact, the Falashas practice an archaic form of Judaism, strictly adhering to the Pentateuch, the five books of Moses. They do not speak or read Hebrew. Their bible is written in Ge’ez, which is the clerical language of the Ethiopian and Eritrean orthodox church, and they do not know the other important religious scriptures of Judaism, the Talmud and the Mishnah [16,17]. The Falashas consider themselves descendants of the tribe of “Dan”, one of the 10 “lost tribes of Israel”, and were acknowledged as such, and therefore as being officially Jewish, by the Israeli government in 1975 [17]. This entitled them to the right of settling in Israel. While until 1984 only few of them immigrated to Israel, the majority of Ethiopian Jews were taken to Israel in the course of two air bridge operations, one between November 1984 and January 1985, rescuing about 8200 Ethiopian Jews who had fled to Sudan from a famine in Ethiopia, and the second one in May 1991, rescuing 14,087 Ethiopian Jews from political constraints in the Ethiopian capital of Addis Abeba. After their immigration to Israel, the Ethiopian Jews were converted to orthodox rabbinic Judaism. Nowadays, only a minority is still living in Ethiopia [17].

In a study conducted by Grisaru et al. on 113 Ethiopian Jewish immigrant women in Israel, the authors found a variety of lesions in one third of the women, with 27% showing partial or total clitoridectomy. Although not all the women interviewed had undergone FGM, all of them stated that FGM was normative among Jews in Ethiopia, but they did not consider it related to religion. The reasons for FGM varied according to the province the women originated from, ranging from the intention to create adhesions that prevent premarital intercourse to esthetic reasons. The authors also found that the customs of FGM is readily given up by Ethiopian Jews right after their

immigration to Israel, as “they see themselves a part of a Jewish society without FGM” [15].

Christian view on FGM

Literature dealing with the Christian view on FGM is very scarce, however, Christian authorities unanimously agree that FGM has no foundation in the religious texts of Christianity [18–22]. During the 2006 conference of The East Africa Program, the attending Christian (Coptic) leaders emphasized that “Christian doctrine is clear on the sanctity of the human body” [22]. Yet, as has already been mentioned before, FGM is practiced among Christian groups, e.g. in Egypt, Nigeria, Tanzania and Kenya. Although FGM is not prescribed by religious law, many of those practicing it may consider it a religious obligation, as female sexual purity plays an important role, not only in Christianity, but in all monotheistic religions.

As described above, FGM cannot be justified by any of the three monotheistic religions. The reasons for FGM are various and are clearly a mixture of cultural, social and religious factors [1]. In societies, where FGM is practiced, the social pressure on the families is very high and the necessity to conform to what is considered right may be reason enough to continue the practice. But whatever reason there may be, the fact is that FGM represents a violation of human rights which has to be fought until it has been totally eliminated.

Conflict of interest

The author has no conflict of interest.

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