



MANUAL FOR THE MANAGEMENT AND PREVENTION OF FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION/CUTTING FOR HEALTH PROFESSIONALS **THE GAMBIA**

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AND PREVENTION  
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**Coordinator:**

Adriana Kaplan Marcusán.

We acknowledge the contributions of:

Mam Mengeh, Kemo Fatty, Dodou Secka  
Nora Salas Seoane, Neus Aliaga Figueras.



Fajara F Section KSMD  
P.O. Box 339 Banjul  
The Gambia  
Tel: +220 773 75 83  
+220 773 6 334

<http://www.mgf.uab.es>  
[wassukafo@gmail.com](mailto:wassukafo@gmail.com)

Edificio Módulo A Parc de Recerca (MRA)  
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona  
Bellaterra, 08193  
(Barcelona)  
SPAIN

Tel. 0034 - 935868799  
<http://www.mgf.uab.es>  
[fundacion.wassu@uab.cat](mailto:fundacion.wassu@uab.cat)

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**Authors:**

Adriana Kaplan Marcusán  
Suiberto Hechavarría Toledo  
Noria Liset Puppo Avila

**Consultant:**

Sheik Omar Dibba

**In collaboration with the  
Cuban Medical Mission in The Gambia:**

Raúl Hernández Cañete,  
Elisabeth Navarro Martín,  
Juan Jorge Pérez Peña y  
Norberto Pérez Sánchez

# INDEX

Foreword .....	7
Presentation .....	11
<b>1. INTRODUCTION TO FGM/C .....</b>	<b>15</b>
Origin and definition .....	15
Prevalence of FGM/C .....	18
<b>2. TRADITION, RELIGION AND HUMAN RIGHTS.....</b>	<b>23</b>
Procedures, decision-making and age .....	23
Excisers and medicalisation of FGM/C .....	24
Customs and traditions underpinning FGM/C .....	26
Reasons for FGM/C existence and persistence .....	29
Religion and FGM/C .....	33
Ethics, legal implications and rights in FGM/C .....	34
Human Rights and FGM/C .....	36
The rights of the child .....	37
Violence against women .....	41
<b>3. FGM/C IN THE GAMBIA .....</b>	<b>45</b>
Country profile .....	45
FGM/C situation .....	47
<small>(Prevalence and type of FGM/C, Age at which FGM/C is performed, Decision-making, Procedures, The ritual and seclusion period, Cutting without ritual - an emerging phenomenon, Perceptions of the need for FGM/C, Scientific knowledge on FGM/C, Legislation, I International Forum on Harmful Traditional Practices: Exploring strategies and Good Practices: from local to global).</small>	
<b>4. COMPLICATIONS OF FGM/C .....</b>	<b>63</b>
Overview of the female genitalia .....	63
Immediate complications .....	65
Long-term complications .....	68
Psychosocial complications .....	71
Sexual complications .....	72
Dangers for childbirth .....	73
<b>5. MANAGEMENT OF GIRLS AND WOMEN WITH PHYSICAL COMPLICATIONS OF FGM/C .....</b>	<b>77</b>
Management of immediate physical complications .....	77
Management of long-term physical complications .....	80
<b>6. MANAGEMENT OF GIRLS AND WOMEN WITH PSYCHOSOCIAL &amp; SEXUAL COMPLICATIONS OF FGM/C .....</b>	<b>87</b>
Managing psychosocial complications .....	88
Managing sexual problems .....	88
Referral procedures .....	90
Opening up of type III .....	91
<b>7. MANAGEMENT OF WOMEN WITH FGM/C DURING PREGNANCY, LABOUR AND DELIVERY .....</b>	<b>97</b>
Management of women with FGM/C during pregnancy .....	98
Management of women with FGM/C during labour and delivery .....	98
<b>8. MANAGEMENT OF WOMEN WITH FGM/C DURING THE POSTPARTUM PERIOD AND CONDITION OF THE BABY .....</b>	<b>105</b>
Management of women with FGM/C following delivery .....	105
<b>9. COUNSELLING .....</b>	<b>109</b>
<b>10. COMMUNITY HEALTH EDUCATION AND ADVOCACY .....</b>	<b>115</b>
Community Health Education .....	115
Advocacy .....	121
<b>Appendix .....</b>	<b>127</b>

# F

## FOREWORD

The United Nations estimates that over 200 million women in the world have been subjected to Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C) and 3 million girls are at risk every year, in 30 African Countries, the Middle East and Asia.

In The Gambia, FGM/C overall prevalence is 76,3% in girls and women aged 15-49 years (UNICEF MICS, 2010) and it is practiced by most of the ethnic groups, nationwide. Although numerous players are involved in the effort to eliminate FGM/C, health professionals are yet to play a proactive role.

The physical, psychological and sexual complications of FGM/C require skilled management carried out by health care workers. In many societies where the practice is performed, it is not covered in the training curricula of medical, nursing, midwifery and other health sciences studies. It is important that these gaps in professional training and education are addressed adequately.

This Manual is the third edition of the *Manual on Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting for Health Professionals* (2010, 2014) , developed to facilitate understanding, care and prevention of FGM/C. The ten modules of the Manual have been piloted with the Community Based Medical Program (CBMP) and later integrated in the Academic Curriculum in all health studies in the country (Medicine, Nursing, Public Health and Midwifery), with the support of the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare (MoHSW) and the collaboration of the Cuban Medical Mission in The Gambia.

In the School of Medicine and Allied Health Sciences (SMAHS), FGM/C has been integrated into six subjects: anatomy, physiology, psychology, gynecology and obstetrics, pediatrics and community medicine.

In 2010, the MoHSW signed a MoU with UN agencies interested in launching the first National Training Program on FGM/C for Health Professionals in The Gambia, designed and implemented by Wassu Gambia Kafo, becoming the first country in Africa to have a scientific and health based approach to the issue. The training gives health workers the skills needed to identify the complications of FGM/C, to manage girls and women who suffer such complications and to advocate for its prevention. Advanced training prepares midwives and those involved in caring for women during pregnancy, labor, delivery and the postpartum period.

FGM/C is underpinned by deep-rooted cultural forces which need to be understood in their proper context by health personnel. Once health workers have gained sufficient insight into the clinical and socio-cultural dimensions of the practice, they will be able to relate the issues in a more sensitive manner. Their legitimated roles in the society or communities reinforce their capacity to enable changes towards FGM/C.

This training Manual will contribute significantly to attaining the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for The Gambia as FGM/C is highly linked to the reproductive health of women, a priority in the Government agenda.

This innovative, sustainable and successful methodology, based on the pioneer experience piloted in The Gambia by Wassu Gambia Kafo, research center of the Wassu UAB Foundation; is being replicated along with an Academic Curriculum for the Universities of Dodoma (UDOM), Muhimbili University of Health and Allied Sciences (MUHAS) and Kilimanjaro Christian Medical University College (KCMUCo) in Tanzania as well as Moi University in Kenya.

The clinical studies undertaken in The Gambia and the systematic, rigorous and constant work of applied research to knowledge transfer by WGK have brought scientific evidence to prove the nature of FGM/C as a harmful practice for women and girls' health.

The National Assembly, December 29<sup>th</sup> 2015 has approved by unanimity a law banning FGM/C in The Gambia.

As Ministry of Health and Social Welfare in The Gambia, I am proud to lead together this Program, contributing in this way to the South-South cooperation by empowering through information and health education.



**Mr Omar Sey**  
Hon. Minister of Health and Social Welfare  
The Gambia

# P

Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C) is an ancient practice that remains a deeply rooted tradition in 30 countries of Sub-Saharan Africa, part of the Middle East (Iraqi Kurdistan, Yemen) and Asia (Indonesia, Malaysia). Today, the local becomes global, and the practice is widespread within the African diaspora worldwide.

FGM/C is still driven by deep-seated traditional beliefs. Mothers and grandmothers insist on excising their daughters and grand-daughters to prepare them for eligibility of marriage, sometimes the only social security within the community. It is out of love and care for the future of their daughters that this practice is perpetuated. The socializing process which moulds the attitudes of girls and women prepares them to accept pain and suffering as an inevitable part of women's life, and as an obligation to be observed for acceptance by their respective societies, bringing ethnic and gender identity.

In The Gambia, the prevalence of FGM/C is estimated at 76.3% (UNICEF MICS, 2010), with 1.3 million women having undergone the practice (UNICEF, 2013). The prevalence varies widely between regions and ethnic groups. The regions with higher prevalence are Basse, Upper River Region (99%); Mansakonko, Lower River Region (90.6%); and Brikama in Western Region (84.5%). The higher prevalence of the practice is found amongst the Mandinkas, Sarahulehs, Jolas and Fulas. The percentages of having FGM/C practiced decline slightly for women with secondary education or above and the practice appears as more common in rural areas than in urban areas (UNICEF MICS, 2010).

The physical, psychological and sexual complications of FGM/C require skilled management carried out by health care workers. They need to be able to identify such complications and manage girls and women who suffer them. The knowledge of the consequences of FGM/C also enables them to inform and warn the families about the potential negative effects of the practice. If health professionals do not recognize FGM/C as a major public health issue, there is little hope of convincing communities to abandon the practice. Their legitimated roles in the territory reinforce the capacity to enable changes towards the issue.

This Manual is the third edition of the *Manual on Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting for Health Professionals* (2010, 2014) developed to facilitate understanding care and prevention of FGM/C. The ten modules of the Manual have already been integrated in the Academic Curriculum in all health studies in the country (Medicine, Nursing Public Health and Midwifery) with the support of the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare and the collaboration of the Cuban Medical Mission. In the School of Medicine and Allied Health Sciences (SMAHS), FGM/C was integrated into six subjects: anatomy, physiology, psychology, G&O, paediatrics and community medicine.

This project follows the scientific methodology of applied research to knowledge transfer in cascade developed and implemented by the Transnational Observatory of Applied Research to New Strategies for the Prevention of Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting under the Wassu-UAB Foundation, with two research centres: one in The Gambia, through the NGO Wassu Gambia Kafo, and one in Spain, through the Interdisciplinary Research Group for the Prevention and Study of Harmful Traditional Practices at the Department of Social Anthropology of the Autonomous University of Barcelona. The program aims to implement a comprehensive strategy for addressing FGM/C with a circular approach, including communities of origin and destination of the migrant groups involved and providing data on transcontinental social and cultural transformations.

Qualitative and clinical knowledge is generated through applied research and transferred in cascade to governmental and non-governmental institutions; health, social and educative services; health professionals and students; community and religious leaders, traditional birth attendants and circumcisers; women, men and young people. The outcome of this methodology is to empower key social actors to be the ones who transfer the knowledge to their communities, promoting preventive actions for the abandonment of the practice. This methodology is aligned with local policies and international strategic plans, contributing towards the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, by reducing child mortality, improving maternal health, empowering women and promoting gender equality.

The project starts in The Gambia in 1989 in its now historical contribution for the management and prevention of FGM/C. In 1999, Wassu Gambia Kafo (WGK) is established. In 2008, her Excellency the Vice President agrees on the importance of having scientific evidence of the impact of FGM/C, requesting to design and coordinate the first clinical study conducted in-country about the health consequences of the practice. In 2009, the results are presented at the I International Forum on Harmful Traditional Practices: Exploring Strategies and Good Practices, organized in collaboration with UN agencies (OMS, UNFPA and UNICEF). The Brufut Declaration expresses the commitment to join efforts towards FGM/C prevention, while highlights the need to conduct further research. In 2010-2011 a second clinical study is held. In 2011, the results of the clinical studies are shared with the Imams and Oulemas of West Africa in the Colloquium "Islam and FGM/C" in Nouakchott (Mauritania) with the final result of the promulgation of a Fatwa against FGM/C (see Appendix). Since then, the Women's Bureau organizes every year a meeting with the religious leaders to discuss the issue and bring scientific knowledge to the scholars.

In 2008-2009, WGK conducted a survey on Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices (KAP) among rural Gambian health professionals: 42.5% of the health professionals embraced the continuation of the practice, 42.7% intended to subject their own daughters to it, and 7.6% reported having already performed it during their medical practice. These results highlight the urgent need of training health care personnel on FGM/C management and prevention in order to walk towards the avoidance of the practice, while providing care of the consequences for girls and women who have already been subjected to it.

In 2010, WGK signs a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare and UN agencies (WHO, UNFPA and UNICEF) for the design and implementation of the first National Training Programme of Health Professionals on FGM/C. The Ministry of Health guarantees that coordinated efforts extend through the Gambian territory, ensuring consistency in actions and promoting synergies of the various entities at a regional level. Within the program, questionnaires of (KAP) are carried out amongst health professionals in order to generate updated knowledge on the situation of FGM/C in the country. A KAP questionnaire on the perceptions of men about the issue has also been conducted. These studies are developed with the collaboration of the students of the Community Based Medical Programs (CBMP), The Nursing and Midwifery Schools and The School of Medicine and Allied Health Sciences (SMAHS), contributing to the empowerment of the students' research skills.

In 2016, WGK explores the tendencies and measures the changes between 2012 and 2014 in KAP of the Gambian health care professionals. While the results strongly confirm the progress made with the training of professionals, they show that medicalization of the practice is becoming a new tendency in the country. Thus, there is an urgent need to support HCPs in the integration of FGM/C preventive interventions within the public health system, to address arguments favouring medicalization, and to use data to design appropriate strategies.

In this common endeavor for the abandonment of FGM/C, the role of health professionals is crucial as they earn respect and confidence from the population, becoming effective agents of change. This Manual wants to be a contribution to this attempt. It aims to add efforts to this strategy based on research, awareness, prevention and empowerment in order to be women and their communities the ones who take alternative proposals to avoid FGM/C. It seeks to safeguard the fundamental right of women to physical and mental integrity, reconciling this perspective with respect to tradition, the right to privacy and the free movement of persons.

**Prof. Adriana Kaplan Marcusán**

Chair of Knowledge Transfer

Director Wassu-UAB Foundation

Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB)



## Origin and definition

### The origins of FGM/C

It is not known when or where the tradition of Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C) originated. Some people believe the practice started in ancient Egypt while some believe it began during the slave trade when black slave women entered ancient Arab societies. Yet, others believe it started independently in Sub-Saharan Africa, prior to the arrival of Islam, notably among warrior tribes. Some believe the practice developed somehow among certain ethnic groups in Sub-Saharan Africa as part of puberty rites.

FGM/C is performed by followers of different religions, including Muslims, Christians and Animists, as well as by non-believers in the countries concerned.

Ancient history of the Dogon culture in Mali relates an incident of significance to the origin of FGM/C<sup>1</sup>. According to the myth, Amma, God of the Sky, was alone and wanted to have intercourse with the Earth, whose form was like that of the female body. The Earth's sexual organs were like ants' nest and her clitoris was raised like a termite mound. Amma drew close but the termite mound rose up, blocking penetration. It so happened that the Earth had the same sex as Amma, causing discord in the Universe. Amma, angry at being thwarted, cut down the termite mound and successfully coupled with the Earth. Amma consorted many times with his wife and harmony was restored to the universe once the termite mound had been removed. Nowadays, there are still cultures that believe that if the clitoris is not removed it will grow to the same size as the penis and, once erect, will prevent a man penetrating a woman's vagina.

The historian Carlos Castañeda<sup>1</sup> places the origin of FGM/C in the V century A.C. Probably it was a rite of passage performed by Egyptian, Phoenician, Hittites and Ethiopians. From Egypt, the practice may have travelled to Sudan and the Horn of Africa. The first references in papyrus are from the II century A.C., where they mention a girl in the age of undergoing an Egyptian circumcision. From here, researchers link the practice with African groups who had contact with Egyptians. It seems the girls' parents organized a feast in her honour, called *therapeuteria*. That was common in the Roman Era, proved by documents from Oxirrinco (III century A.C).

FGM/C is also linked to camito-semita groups and Afro-asiatic languages. The excision could initially have been practised by the Masaai in Kenya, from Cushitic groups coming from Ethiopia. The Kikuyu, influenced by Cushitic groups, could have adopted it as a result of having Bantu influence. The Harris Papyrus mentions that goddesses Anat and Astarté had to have their vulvas closed. Horus sealed them and Set opened them. Thus, goddesses could conceive but not give birth. The tradition may have come from Asia, as those goddesses are from there.

The Lidyas in Greece were the first women to develop this practice called *ευνυχιξίω*. It could be associated to a ritual for adolescents in the temples, performed within the menarche or before marriage. Perhaps, it arrived in this way to Egypt.

Castañeda considers that the Egyptian contact with inland Africa had a remarkable Nubia influence (matriarchal community with feminine leadership) and it came in the last dynasties (XXIV and XXV), with the Peje conquer.

It has also been written that the *leitmotif* to perform FGM/C is the belief that the *feminine soul* of men is located in the prepuce, while the masculine soul of women is located in the clitoris. With the excision, both become real men and women. This convention may have come from the androgyny of Egyptian gods, and it has last until nowadays as one of the reasons explaining the survival of this harmful traditional practice.

### Definition of FGM/C

Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C) is defined as "all procedures involving partial or total removal of the female external genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons"<sup>2</sup>. Prior to the adoption of "female genital mutilation", the practice was referred to as female

circumcision. This term is still used in societies where FGM/C is practiced. In those communities it is perceived as an equivalent of male circumcision. "Only this terminology [FGM/C] reflects the full seriousness and the extent of the damage caused by these practices and captures the element of violence and physical assault which mutilations entail"<sup>3</sup>. FGM/C is practiced for social and cultural reasons.

### Classification

Different types of FGM/C are known to be practiced today:

**Type I:** "Partial or total removal of the clitoris and/or the prepuce. In medical literature this form of FGM/C is also referred to as 'clitoridectomy'<sup>4</sup>. In Islamic culture, this type is known as "Sunna" ("tradition") and is compared to male circumcision.

**Type II:** "Partial or total removal of the clitoris and labia minora, with or without excision of the labia majora (excision)".

**Type III:** "Narrowing of the vaginal orifice by cutting and bringing together the labia minora and/or the labia majora to create a type of seal, with or without excision of the clitoris. In most instances, the cut edges of the labia are stitched together, which is referred to as 'infibulation'<sup>4</sup>. This type is sometimes referred to as 'Pharaonic', and its name comes from the Latin word "infibulare" ("fasten with a clasp").

**Type IV:** "All other harmful procedures to the female genitalia for non-medical purposes, for example: pricking, piercing, incising, scraping and cauterization"<sup>4</sup>. Detailed examples include:

- Pricking, piercing or incision of the clitoris and/or labia;
- Stretching of the clitoris and/or labia;
- Cauterisation (burning) of the clitoris and surrounding tissue;
- Scraping (angurya cuts) of the vaginal orifice or cutting (gishiri cuts) of the vagina;
- Introduction of corrosive substances into the vagina to cause bleeding, or of herbs into the vagina with the aim of tightening or narrowing it (dry sex);
- Any other procedures which fall under the definition of FGM/C given above.

Current estimates indicate that around 90% of FGM/C cases included types I or II and cases where girls' genitals were "nicked" but no flesh removed (type IV), and about 10% are type III<sup>5</sup>. FGM/C is mostly

performed on girls between the ages of 0 to 15 years, prior to the onset of menstruation. However, adult and married women are also occasionally subjected to the procedure<sup>4</sup>.

## Prevalence of FGM/C

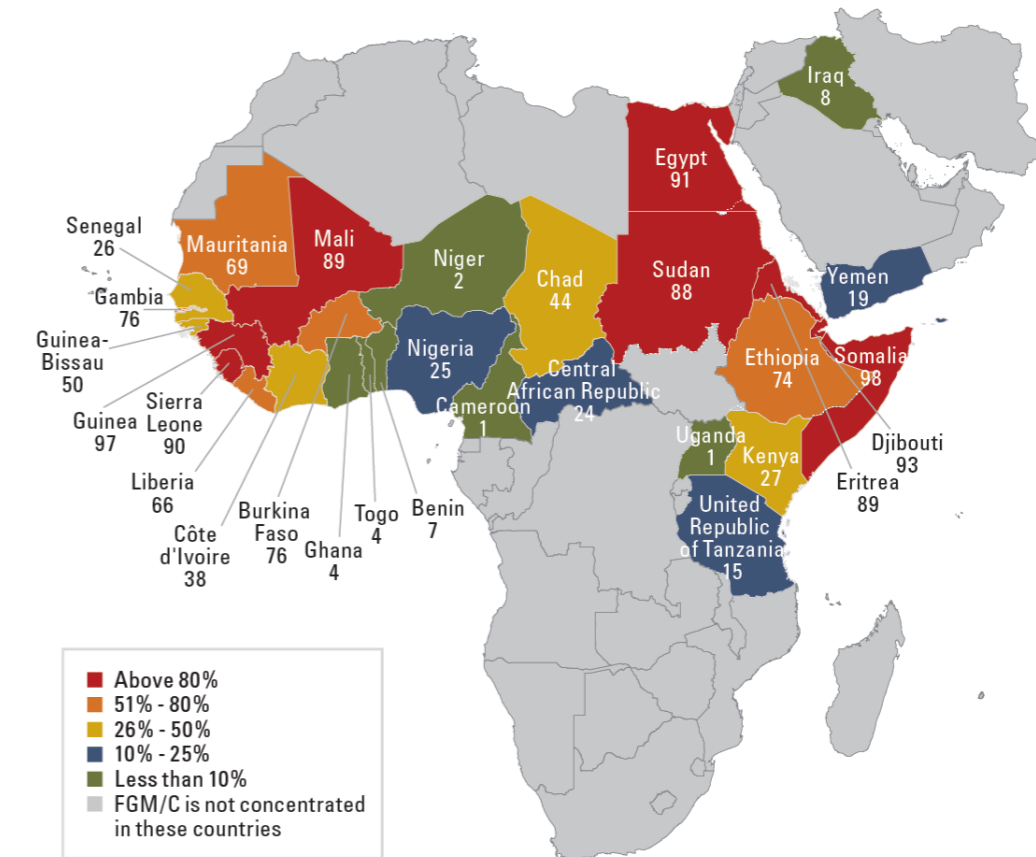
### Distribution of FGM/C

The prevalence of FGM/C has been estimated through surveys asking women aged 15 to 49 years of age whether they had been cut. It is predominantly practiced in 30 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East (Iraqi Kurdistan, Yemen) and Asia (Indonesia, Malaysia)<sup>6</sup>. Due to the migration of people who follow this tradition, FGM/C is today found in Europe, Australia, Canada, and the United States of America, mainly among migrants from Sub-Sahara Africa.

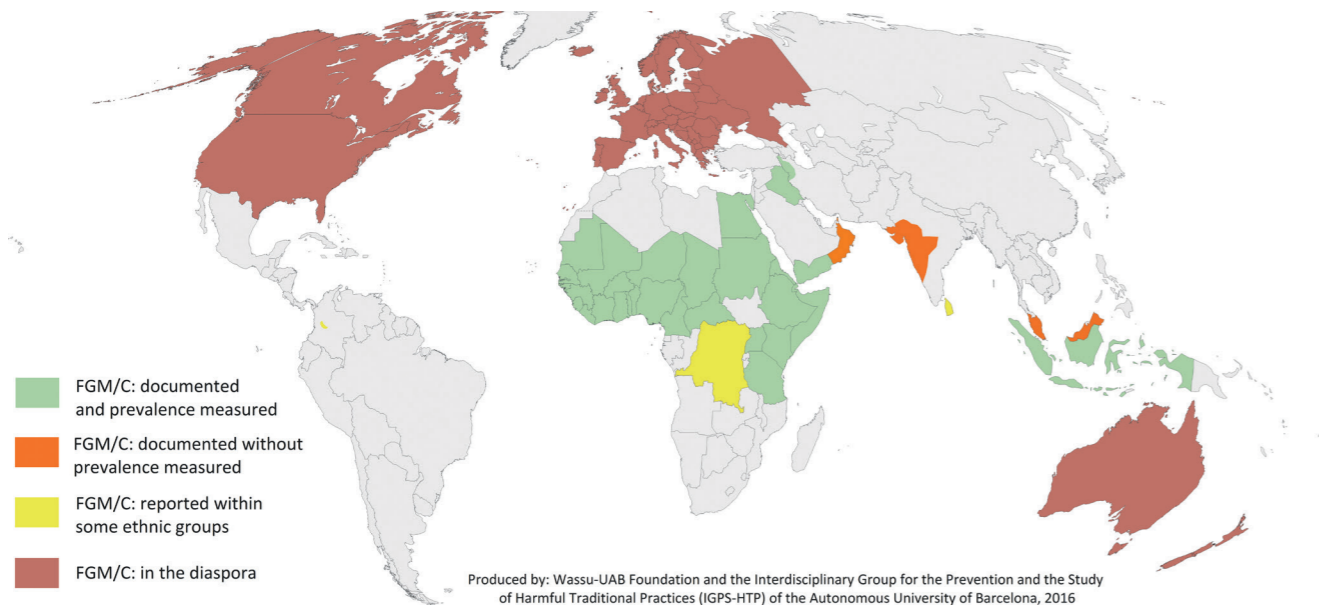
This prevalence varies considerably, both between and within regions and countries. Ethnicity is the most decisive factor. In eight countries the national prevalence is almost universal, over 85% (Somalia, Guinea Conakry, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Mali, Sierra Leone and Sudan); five countries have high prevalence, 60–80% (Gambia, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Mauritania, Liberia); medium prevalence, 25–60%, is found in six countries (Guinea-Bissau, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, Nigeria and Senegal); and low prevalence ranging from 1% to 24% is found in the remaining ten countries (Central African Republic, Yemen, United Republic of Tanzania, Benin, Iraq, Ghana, Togo, Niger, Cameroon, Uganda). However, national averages hide marked variations in prevalence in different parts of most countries<sup>6</sup>.

In 1997, the World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) issued an interagency statement on FGM/C<sup>2</sup>. It describes the implications of the practice for public health and human rights and declared support for its abandonment. According to the statement, between 125 and 200 millions girls and women in the world are estimated to have undergone the procedure and 3 million girls are calculated to be at risk every year.

Map 1. Percentage of girls and women aged 15 to 49 years who have undergone FGM/C, by country  
Source: UNICEF (2013), UNICEF global databases, 2014, based on DHS, MICS and other nationally representative surveys, 2004-2013.



Map 2. FGM/C world map



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### Procedures, decision-making and age

#### FGM/C procedures

FGM/C is usually carried out using blades or razors<sup>1</sup>. Other instruments used include special knives, scissors or pieces of glass. On rare occasions sharp stones have been reported to be used, for instance in Eastern Sudan. Cauterisation, or burning, is practiced in some parts of Ethiopia. Finger nails have been used to pluck out the tip of the clitoris of babies in some areas in The Gambia. Instruments used for cutting may be re-used without being cleaned. Anaesthesia is rarely used and the girl is held down by a number of women, often including her own relatives. The procedure may take 15 to 20 minutes, depending on the skills of the exciser, the extent of excision and the amount of resistance put up by the girl. The wound is dabbed with anything from alcohol or lemon juice to ash, herb mixtures, porridge or cow dung, and the girl's legs may be bound together until healing is completed. In certain countries scalpels are used for cutting in local health clinics.

#### Decision to perform FGM/C

Decisions to perform FGM/C on girls involve a wide group of people who may have varying degrees of influence in society. Consultations usually take place behind closed doors between close family members. In some instances, FGM/C can give rise to intense arguments within family circles or localities. There are cases in which some family members have organised the procedure against, or not taking into account, the will of others, including the mother of the girl to be cut. Women are usually responsible for the practical arrangements of the ceremony.

### Age at which FGM/C is performed

The age at which girls undergo FGM/C varies widely, depending on the ethnic group or geographical location. Timing is often flexible even within communities. The procedure may be carried out on infant girls, during childhood or adolescence, at the time of marriage or during the first pregnancy. In most societies, parents and close family members have the greater say in the timing of the practice. In some African communities, circumcision age has been deliberately brought down in response to heightened efforts to abolish the practice.

In half of the countries with data available, the majority of the women experience it before five years old<sup>1</sup>, when girls are young and uninformed. They are generally conscious when the painful operation is undertaken as no anaesthetic is used and have to be physically restrained because they struggle. Sometimes, they are forced to watch the mutilation of other girls, increasing the probabilities of psychosocial problems as a consequence.

### Excisers and medicalisation of FGM/C

#### Description of the excisers

In cultures where FGM/C is a tradition, the operation is performed by excisers, usually elderly women in the community specially designated for this task. In most societies, the practice is handed down through family lineage. Traditional Birth Attendants (TBAs) are known to be involved in the practice in many societies. Excisers are powerful and well-respected members of the community, who keep the tradition alive.

#### “Medicalisation” of FGM/C

FGM/C is increasingly being performed in hospitals and health clinics by health professionals, using anaesthetics and antiseptics. The justification is that it reduces pain and the risks to the victim's health because the operation is performed under hygienic conditions. Health professionals who perform FGM/C claim that medicalisation is the first step towards prevention of the practice. They also argue that if they refuse to carry out an operation, the girl/woman will simply have it performed by a traditional exciser in unhygienic conditions and without pain relief. In Egypt, the majority of FGM/C are performed

by health professionals, mainly doctors, and in Kenya there is nowadays a substantial proportion of FGM/C performed by health professionals, the majority nurses, midwives or others, no doctors<sup>1</sup>. In Tanzania, almost all FGM/C are performed by traditional practitioners. Egypt is unique in having had a period in which the government gave its consent for FGM/C when performed by health personnel. In other countries, government policies have either been absent or actively opposed to healthcare providers performing the procedure. In Kenya, for instance, the Ministry of Health issued a policy in 2001 making illegal to perform FGM/C in healthcare facilities<sup>1</sup>.

Health professionals should acknowledge the fact that FGM/C, whether carried out in a hospital or any other modern setting, is wilful damage to healthy organs for non-therapeutic reasons. It violates the professional injunction to “do no harm”, and is unethical by any standards.

According to the World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki (1964) the physician's mission is to safeguard people's health. Trained health professionals who perform FGM/C are violating girls' and women's right to life, to physical integrity and health. Yet, in some countries and societies, health professionals have performed it and continue performing it<sup>2</sup>. Evidence shows the trend to be increasing in many of them. In addition, FGM/C in the form of reinfibulation has been documented as being performed as a routine procedure after childbirth in some countries. Reports also indicate that among groups that have immigrated to Europe and North America reinfibulation is occasionally performed even where it is prohibited by law.

A range of factors can motivate health professionals to perform FGM/C, including financial gain and pressure from society. In countries to which groups that practice FGM/C have emigrated, some health personnel abuse the principles of Human Rights. They perform reinfibulation in the name of upholding what they perceive is the patient's culture and her right to choose medical procedures, even in cases where the patient did not request it.

There are serious risks associated with the medicalisation of FGM/C. Its performance by health personnel may wrongly legitimise the practice as beneficial for girls' and women's health. It can also further institutionalise the procedure, as health professionals often hold power, authority, and respect in society. In Egypt, the issue of medicalisation was intensely debated but the tradition has now become almost legitimised.

## Regulatory Bodies

Medical licensing authorities and professional associations have joined the United Nations organisations in condemning actions to medicalise FGM/C.

All countries have regulatory bodies for doctors, nurses and midwives. These bodies have the legal mandate to take appropriate action against a health professional who acts against the standards set for professional conduct. The International Confederation of Midwives (ICM) and the International Council of Nurses (ICN) are the regulatory bodies in all matters concerning professional midwifery and nursing respectively. Both have policies against the practice of FGM/C.

The International Federation of Gynaecology and Obstetrics (IFGO) passed a resolution in 1994 at its General Assembly opposing the performance of FGM/C by obstetricians and gynaecologists. The Federation “recommends strong opposition to any attempt to medicalise the procedure or to allow its performance under any circumstances in health establishments or by health professionals”<sup>3</sup>.

## Customs and traditions underpinning FGM/C

All human behaviour has an explanation and FGM/C is no exception. In societies where FGM/C is practiced, it is entrenched in the traditional beliefs, values and attitudes of the people. Traditions are the customs, beliefs and values of a community which govern and influence people’s behaviour. Traditions constitute learned habits which are passed on from generation to generation.

In some communities, FGM/C is valued as a rite of passage into womanhood (e.g. Kenya, The Gambia and Sierra Leone). Others value it as a means of preserving a girl’s virginity until marriage (e.g. Sudan, Egypt and Somalia). In each community where FGM/C is practiced it is an important part of gender identity, which explains why many mothers and grandmothers defend the practice. They consider it a fundamental part of their own womanhood and believe it is essential to their daughters’ acceptance into their society. In most of these communities, FGM/C is a pre-requisite to marriage, and marriage is vital to a woman’s security.

## Discussion on Tradition

Beliefs, values and attitudes are formed and developed under a multitude of influences – parents, families, society, culture, traditions, religion, peer groups, the media (TV, music, videos, magazines, advertisements and so on), school, climate, environment, technology, politics, the economy, personal experiences, friends, and personal needs. They are also influenced by age and gender.

### Beliefs:

A belief is defined as a conviction, a principle or an idea accepted as true or real, even without positive proof. There are many belief systems, including religious and cultural beliefs.

### Values:

Values are defined as moral principles and beliefs or accepted standards of a person or social group. Values are the criteria against which people make decisions. Many values are inherited from the family, but they are also influenced by religion, culture, friends, education, and personal experiences as people go through life.

### Attitudes:

Attitude is a mental view or disposition. They are largely based on personal values and perceptions.

Examples of Beliefs, Values and Attitudes with regard to FGM/C:

- FGM/C improves fertility;
- FGM/C prevents maternal and infant mortality;
- FGM/C prevents promiscuity;
- FGM/C helps keep the genitalia clean;
- FGM/C prevents the clitoris from growing;
- FGM/C is an essential part of culture;
- FGM/C is performed to please husbands;
- Type I FGM/C does not lead to any complications; it is therefore acceptable;
- Performing FGM/C in a hospital environment is more hygienic and less painful for the girl/woman;
- Type IV FGM/C is harmless, thus its practice should be allowed to continue;
- FGM/C is not a health issue;
- FGM/C is an equivalent of male circumcision.

People develop a unique set of values and attitudes that guide them through life and give them their cultural identity. By understanding their own values and how they were formed, healthcare providers can gain understanding and respect to the values and belief systems of communities with which they work.

### **The role of men**

The data on boys' and men's opinions of FGM/C is generally less up to date than data on girls and women, and may not reflect recent attitudinal changes<sup>1</sup>. The most recent data show that the level of support for the continuation of FGM/C among boys and men varies widely across countries. In four countries with high prevalence (Mauritania, Mali, Egypt and Guinea Conakry), the majority of boys and men report that they wanted the practice to continue. By contrast, in the rest of the countries, the majority of them favour stopping the practice. In Egypt and Eritrea, almost twice as many older men think the practice should continue compared to adolescents. This is similar to the findings for girls and women in those countries<sup>1</sup>.

A study conducted in a rural area of Sudan along the Blue Nile in March-May 1997 was focused on the role of men regarding FGM/C<sup>4</sup>. A total of 59 young men and grandfathers were interviewed. Male complications resulting from FGM/C, such as difficulty in penetration, wounds/infections on the penis and psychological problems were cited by the majority of respondents. The first and second responses came up most frequently in chronological order. They also mentioned decreased sexual desire and enjoyment of the woman. Many of them also felt that the man 'hurts' the woman during sexual intercourse. Most of the subjects were also aware of the female complications of FGM/C. Interestingly, a majority of men said they would have preferred to marry a woman without FGM/C. There was a high level of awareness that FGM/C has negative health consequences for women. The study revealed that even the majority of grandfathers answered that the practice negatively affects the health of girls and women.

Acknowledging the gap on the role of men in FGM/C, a new line of research is emerging interested in exploring how men position themselves on the matter, with the objective of assessing their potential inclusion in preventive actions and programmes. The study by Kaplan et al. (2013)<sup>13</sup> intends to contribute to this field, by exploring the knowledge and attitudes of Gambian men towards FGM/C, as well as practices in their family and household. The study was integrated in the Practicum of Community Medicine of the School for Enrolled Community Health Nurses and Midwives at Mansakonko, Lower River Region. The survey was implemented through face-to-face questionnaires in three regions of

the country. The overall sample was composed by 993 men with a mean age of 36.5 years old with Muslim affiliation (96.2%). Seen through men's eyes, the secret world of women remains embedded in cloudy concepts shaped by culture and influenced by religion. The practicing ethnic groups considered FGM/C as a religious injunction or as "Sunna", finding justification for its continuation. Almost all those from traditionally non-practicing groups, deny that the practice is mandatory from Islam. Even within traditionally practicing groups, the support towards the practice is highly dependent on ethnic identity. Amongst older men, FGM/C is seen as mandatory by religion, but a window of opportunity for change is found amongst younger generations. Men between 31 and 45 are the less supportive towards the practice and have the lowest intention to perform it to their daughters. Although few men are active participants in the decision-making of the practice, in a patriarchal society, men are still decision-makers and can promote a positive change to the secret world of women.

### **Reasons for FGM/C existence and persistence**

There is a wide variety of reasons why FGM/C continues to be practiced. The reasons given by practicing communities are as follow:

- Socio-cultural;
- Spiritual and religious;
- Hygienic and aesthetic;
- Psycho-sexual.

#### **Socio-cultural reasons**

In some communities, FGM/C marks the rite of passage into womanhood and is accompanied by ceremonies to mark the occasion when the girl becomes a mature woman. In communities that practice it, girls and their mothers are generally subjected to powerful social pressure from their peers and family members to undergo the procedure. They are threatened with rejection by the group or family if they do not follow tradition.



There is a belief that unless a girl's clitoris is removed she will not become a mature woman, or even a full member of the human race. She will have no right to associate with others of her age, or her elders.

Some communities believe that a woman's external genitalia have the power to blind anyone attending her during delivery. Others believe that the external genitalia have the power to cause the death of an infant or bring about physical deformity or madness.

In some societies, it is believed that being uncircumcised can cause the death of one's husband or harm his penis. FGM/C is believed to ensure a girl's virginity. In many traditional societies, virginity is a prerequisite for marriage, which is necessary to maintain a family's honour. The societies practicing FGM/C are largely matrilineal. Women's access to land and security is through marriage, and only excised women are considered suitable for that purpose.

### **Spiritual and religious reasons**

Some communities believe that removing the external genitalia is necessary to make a girl spiritually clean and is therefore required by religion. In some Muslim societies where FGM/C is practiced, people believe that it is required by the Qur'an or Sunna, even though the practice is not mentioned in the Holy Book. It is noteworthy that neither the Bible nor the Qur'an subscribe to the practice of FGM/C, although it is carried out in many societies with Muslim, Coptic-Christian and Jewish Falasha communities (e.g. Egypt and Ethiopia).

The practice pre-dates both Christianity and Islam. The response of religious leaders to FGM/C varies. Those who support it tend either to consider it a religious act or to see efforts aimed at eliminating it as a threat to culture and religion. Other religious leaders support and participate in efforts to eradicate it. When such leaders are unclear or avoid the issue, they may be perceived as being in favour of FGM/C.

### **Hygienic and aesthetic reasons**

In FGM/C practicing communities it is believed that a woman's external genitalia are ugly and dirty. Removing these structures makes a girl clean and smart. In many societies it is believed that eating food prepared by an unexcised girl is taboo. This is considered true in many communities in The Gambia.

### **Psycho-sexual reasons**

The uncut girl is believed to have an overactive and uncontrollable sex drive and is thus likely to lose her virginity prematurely, and girls who have lost their virginity before marriage are a disgrace to their families. The belief of FGM/C as means of controlling sexual urge still persists in The Gambia and Kenya. In some communities, uncut girls have slim chances of marriage. The belief is that the uncut clitoris will grow big and the slightest touch of the organ will arouse intense sexual desire.

It is also believed that the tight vaginal orifice of an infibulated woman or a woman who has had chemicals placed in the vagina to narrow it will enhance male sexual pleasure, thus preventing divorce or unfaithfulness. In some communities it is believed that excising a woman who fails to conceive will solve the problem of infertility.

### **Why FGM/C continues to be practiced**

FGM/C is a manifestation of gender inequality that is deeply entrenched in the life of the community. Harmful traditional practices like FGM/C tend to perpetuate gender roles that bring inequality and harm girls and women. In societies where it is widely practiced it is supported by both men and women, usually without questioning it. Anyone departing from the norm may face humiliation and harassment. In extreme cases, girls and women who have not undergone FGM/C are ostracised. FGM/C is a social convention influenced by rewards and punishments which are a powerful force for continuing the practice. In view of this complex nature of FGM/C, it is difficult for families to abandon the practice without support from the wider community. In fact, it is often carried out even when it is known to inflict harm upon girls, because the perceived social benefits of the practice are deemed higher than its disadvantages.

There is a strong perception in many societies that FGM/C is a rite of passage. It forms part of raising a girl properly and preparing her for adulthood and marriage. In some societies, the practice is an entry point into women's secret societies, which are considered necessary for girls to become adults, responsible members of the society. Girls themselves may desire to undergo the procedure as a result of social pressure from peers and because of fear of stigmatisation and rejection by their communities if they do not follow the tradition.

Girls who undergo the procedure are given rewards such as celebrations, public recognition and gifts. Thus, in cultures where it is widely practiced, FGM/C has become an important part of the cultural identity of girls and women. It may also impart a sense of pride, a coming-of-age (the feeling that one is now mature) and a feeling of community membership.

The desire for a proper marriage may play an important part in the persistence of the practice. In many societies where FGM/C is performed it is considered necessary for a woman to become a “proper” wife. As mentioned before, it is often believed that the practice ensures and preserves a girl’s or woman’s virginity.

FGM/C is also considered to make girls “clean” and beautiful. Removal of genital parts is thought of as eliminating such “masculine” elements as the clitoris. It is also felt that infibulation is performed in order to make the genitalia ‘smooth’ thereby making a woman/girl beautiful. A belief sometimes expressed by women is that FGM/C enhances men’s sexual pleasure.

The practice is often upheld by influential people and local structures of power such as traditional and religious leaders, circumcisers, elders, and even some health professionals.

In some countries there is evidence of an increase in the performance of FGM/C by medical personnel. In many societies, older women who have themselves been mutilated often become advocates of the practice, seeing it as essential to the identity of women and girls. This is probably one of the reasons why women are more likely to support the practice and tend to see efforts to combat the practice as an attack to their culture.

Preservation of ethnic identity to mark a distinction from non-practicing groups is also an important factor. For example, it is carried out by immigrant communities living in countries that have no tradition of the practice. FGM/C is also occasionally performed on women and their children from non-practicing groups when they marry into groups/societies in which it is widely practiced.

## Religion and FGM/C

### Is the voice of religious leaders heard?

In Africa, the practice of FGM/C is driven significantly by religious misperceptions. The ordinary people in African countries, where the practice is common, have little knowledge of the fundamental teachings of Islam. In particular, women have less chances of learning the fundamental teachings of Islam because they have less access to education in general. Moreover, misconceptions like the uncertainty regarding the origins of the practice lead to link the practice with religion. Many Islamic academics and authorities in these countries however demonstrate a positive position on the issue and condemn the practice when they are given the opportunity to articulate their views. Despite these attitudes among Islamic religious scholars, the practice still persists on a large scale. Perhaps the explanation for this phenomenon needs further research.

In July 1998, a symposium for religious leaders and medical personnel was held in Banjul, The Gambia. Participants came from 15 countries in Africa. Also in attendance were delegates from the Inter-African Committee (IAC) on Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children, international NGOs and representatives from several UN agencies. The participants made strong declarations at the meeting. They declared “We, the participants at the symposium for Religious Leaders and Medical Personnel on FGM/C as a Form of Violence, organised by the IAC in collaboration with The Gambia Committee on Traditional Practices (GAMCOTRAP) declare as follows:

- Having examined and appreciated the health and human rights implications of violence against women and girls, particularly FGM/C;
- Having recognized that in Africa over 100 million women and girls are victims of FGM/C;
- Having confirmed that FGM/C has neither Islamic nor Christian origin or justification;
- Seriously concerned about the incorrect interpretations and misuse of Islamic teaching to perpetuate violence against women, particularly as regards FGM/C;
- Upholding the principle of equality and justice for all, without discrimination between men and women;
- Reaffirming the universality of human rights principles and their indivisibility;

- (I) Hereby strongly condemn the continuation of FGM/C;
- (II) Prohibit the misuse of religious arguments to perpetuate FGM/C and other forms of violence;
- (III) Commit ourselves to clarify the misinterpretation of religion and to teach the true principles of Islam and Christianity with regard to violence against women, including FGM/C<sup>9</sup>.

In October 2007, the Fourth Symposium for African Religious Leaders on Human Rights, Gender and Violence against Women was held in Abidjan, Ivory Coast. Thirty-six (36) participants from 25 African countries attended. A strong declaration and a string of recommendations were made at this symposium too<sup>10</sup>. The spirit and letter of the declaration and recommendations are very similar to those made at the Banjul symposium in July 1998.

In September 2011, the Colloquium on “Islam and FGM/C” is held in Nouakchott (Mauritania). The debate generated during this colloquium, leads to the promulgation of a Fatwa (resolution) for the prevention of FGM/C – a significant step in a country with a prevalence of 72% where religion is the main justification for the practice. With these results, the Office of the Vice-President of The Gambia, organizes every year since 2011 a meeting with the religious leaders from the Supreme Islamic Council of The Gambia, opening a dialogue with the purpose of driving an effective legislation to prevent the practice.

## Ethics, legal implications and rights in FGM/C

### Ethical Implications

Professional ethics are moral statements or principles which guide professional behaviours. Ethics are not bound by law. For example, nursing ethics include maintaining confidentiality and showing respect for patients as individuals regardless of their cultural background, socioeconomic status or religion.

In some countries physicians, nurses, midwives and other health personnel are reported to be performing FGM/C in both health institutions and private facilities. The WHO and most governments have expressed their unequivocal opposition to the “medicalisation” of the practice. The WHO position is that under no circumstance should FGM/C be performed by health professionals or in health institutions. The practice of FGM/C by medical professionals is a serious betrayal of professional ethics, since it involves causing harm without therapeutic reasons.

### Legal implications of FGM/C

The enactment of a law to protect girls and women from FGM/C makes it clear what is wrong and what is right. Having a law in place offers legitimacy to the police, women’s organizations, advocacy groups, health professionals, social workers and others to intervene.

Passing laws is not enough in its own to protect girls and women from FGM/C. There is a danger that fear of prosecution will inhibit people from seeking help in the case of complications. Therefore, laws must go hand in hand with community education to raise awareness of the harmful effects of FGM/C and to change attitudes.

**Table 1. Countries with laws against FGM/C<sup>1</sup>**

COUNTRY	LEGISLATION
BENIN	2003
BURKINA FASO	1996
CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC	1966, 1996, 2006
CHAD	2003
COTE D’IVOIRE	1998
DJIBOUTI	1995, 2009
EGYPT	1996, 2008
ERITREA	2007
ETHIOPIA	2004
GAMBIA	2015
GHANA	1994, 2007
GUINEA	1965, 2000
GUINEA BISSAU	2011
KENYA	2001, 2011
MAURITANIA	2005
NIGER	2003
NIGERIA	2015

COUNTRY	LEGISLATION
SENEGAL	1999
SOUTH AFRICA	2000
SUDAN (some states)	2008-2009
TANZANIA	1998
TOGO	1998
UGANDA	2010
ZAMBIA	2005- 2011

In other countries, national laws make provisions for protection against injury, even if FGM/C is not specified. Laws and decrees have a variety of stipulations that can be used to regulate or ban the practice of FGM/C. In the United Republic of Tanzania and some non-African countries FGM/C is illegal only among minors<sup>1</sup>. In 2011, Kenya expanded the 2001 ban on FGM/C among minors to apply to adult women and added an extraterritoriality clause, extending restrictions to citizens who commit the crime outside the country's border<sup>1</sup>.

### Human Rights and FGM/C

Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting violates a series of well-established human rights principles, norms and standards. Key among these are:

- The right to life when the procedure results in death;
- Equality and non-discrimination on the basis of sex;
- The right to freedom from torture or cruel/inhuman treatment;
- Freedom from degrading treatment or punishment.

As FGM/C interferes with healthy genital tissue and can lead to severe consequences for a woman's

physical and mental health, it is clearly a violation of a person's right to the highest attainable standard of health, being characterised by the following:

- Gender inequalities;
- Discrimination against girls and women;
- Torture, cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment of girls and women;
- Abuse of the physical, psychological and sexual health of girls and women.

### The rights of the child

Because of children's vulnerability and their need for care and support, human rights law grants them special protection. One of the guiding principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child is the primary consideration of "the best interests of the child". Parents who take the decision to subject their daughters to FGM/C perceive that the benefits to be gained from this procedure outweigh the risks involved. However, this perception cannot justify a violation of the fundamental human rights of girls and women.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child refers to the capacity of children to make decisions regarding matters that affect them. Even in cases where there is an apparent desire by girls to undergo the procedure, in reality it is the result of social pressure, community expectations and girls' aspiration to be accepted as full members of the community. That is why a girl's decision to undergo FGM/C cannot be called 'free'.

FGM/C is nearly always carried out on minors and is therefore a violation of the rights of the child. The practice also violates the rights to health, security and physical integrity of the person, the right to be free from torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, and the right to life, as the procedure may result in death.

Legal instruments for the protection of children's rights call for the abolition of traditional practices damaging to their health and lives. The Convention on the Rights of the Child makes explicit reference to harmful traditional practices. The Committee on the Rights of the Child, as well as other United Nations Human Rights Treaty Monitoring Bodies have frequently raised FGM/C as a violation of human

rights. They have called on State Parties to the Convention to take all effective and appropriate measures to abolish the practice.

### Treaties and consensus

The Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Committee on the Rights of the Child and the Human Rights Committee are all active in condemning FGM/C and recommending measures to combat it. They are pushing for criminalisation of the practice.

The Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women issued its General Recommendation on Female Circumcision. It calls upon states to take appropriate and effective measures with a view to eradicating the practice. It also requests them to provide information about measures being taken to eliminate FGM/C in their reports to the Committee<sup>12</sup>.

### International Treaties of direct relevance to FGM/C include:

- Universal Declaration on Human Rights, 1948;
- Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of Others, 1949;
- Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages, 1964;
- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966;
- International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1966;
- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and its Optional Protocol, 1981;
- Convention Against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, 1987;
- Recommendation 19 of the Committee on the CEDAW, 1992;
- Vienna Declaration and Plan of Action (VDPA Vienna), 1993;
- United Nations Declaration on Violence Against Women, 1993;
- Declaration and Programme of Action of ICPD (International Conference on Population and Development), 1994;
- The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, 1995;
- The Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols, 1949 and 1977;
- Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 and its two Optional Protocols 2000;
- Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and its Optional Protocols, 2000;

- African Charter on Women's Right, Maputo Protocol, 2005;
- UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, 2001;
- United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), Commission on the Status of Women. Resolution on the Ending of Female Genital Mutilation, 2007;
- United Nations General assembly first resolution calling on States to intensify efforts to eliminate FGM/C, 2012.

### Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)

- Protection of all fundamental rights irrespective of sex;
- The right to the highest attainable levels of health;
- Freedom from all forms of mental and physical violence and maltreatment.

The Vienna Declaration and the Programme of Action of the World Conference on Human Rights (1993): These two instruments expand the international human rights agenda to include gender-based violence which includes FGM/C.

The Declaration on Violence against Women (1993): This Declaration states that violence against women must be understood to include physical and psychological violence occurring within the family, including FGM/C and other traditional practices harmful to women.

The Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD, 1994): includes a recommendation on FGM/C which commits governments and communities to: "urgently take steps to stop the practice of female genital mutilation and to protect women and girls from all such similar unnecessary and dangerous practices".

The Platform of Action of the Fourth World Conference on Women (1995): includes a section on the girl-child and urges governments, international organisations and non-governmental groups to develop policies and programmes to eliminate all forms of discrimination against the girls, including FGM/C.

## Regional treaties

- African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (the Banjul Charter) and its Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa, 2005;
- African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, 1999;
- European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, 1956.

### African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC):

The ACRWC was adopted in July 1990 by Heads of State and Governments of the African Union and entered into force in November 1999. The Charter has 48 Articles covering a wide range of issues affecting children. Article 21 is specifically committed to 'Protection against Harmful Social and Cultural Practices'. It states that "State Parties to the Charter shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate harmful social and cultural practices affecting the welfare, dignity, normal growth and development of the child and in particular (a) those customs and practices prejudicial to the health or life of the child and (b) those customs and practices discriminatory to the child on the ground of sex or other status".

Article 16 provides "Protection against Child Abuse and Torture. State Parties to the Charter shall take specific legislative, administrative, social, economic and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of torture, inhumane or degrading treatment and especially physical and mental injury or abuse, neglect or maltreatment including sexual abuse, while in the care of the child". The spirit and intent of these two articles clearly run against the practice of FGM/C. Seen from a human rights perspective, the practice reflects deep-rooted inequality between the sexes, and constitutes an extreme form of discrimination against women.

## Violence against women

### Definition of violence against women

Article 1 of the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, proclaimed by the UN General Assembly in its resolution 48/104 of 20 December 1993, defines the term "violence against women" as: "Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women". The Article further states that violence includes "threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life". Three contexts of violence are differentiated in Article 2 of the Declaration – family, community and state. The forms of violence are classified as follows:

#### (I) Physical, sexual, psychological, and emotional violence occurring in the family:

- Wife beating;
- Sexual abuse of female children in the household;
- Dowry-related violence;
- Marital rape;
- Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting and other traditional practices harmful to women;
- Spousal and non-spousal violence;
- Violence related to exploitation;
- Violence related to exercise of authority and power.

#### (II) Physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring within the general community:

- Rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment and intimidation in the work place, at leisure or educational institutions and other settings outside the household;
- Trafficking in women and forced prostitution;

#### (III) Physical, sexual and psychological violence perpetrated or condoned by the State in any form:

The various forms of violence listed in Article 2 may not be exhaustive but they show that much violence against women stems from unequal power relations and society's insistence on controlling women's sexuality.

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### Country profile

The Republic of The Gambia is situated on the Atlantic coastline of West Africa, being one of the smallest countries in the continent, with a total land area of 11,295 square kilometers<sup>1</sup>. Divided horizontally by the River Gambia, the country stretches 400 km from the Atlantic coastline inland and it is surrounded by the Republic of Senegal in all sides except from a short strip of the Atlantic coastline at its western end. Climatic conditions are typically tropical savannah, with a distinct hot and rainy season from early June to late October, and a cooler dry season with winds blowing from the central Sahara from November to May.

After gaining independence from the United Kingdom on 18<sup>th</sup> February 1965, The Gambia is today a sovereign presidential republic with a unicameral legislature in which elections are celebrated every five years by universal adult suffrage<sup>2</sup>. With more than 1,860 settlements, the country is divided into 6 regions: Lower River Region (Mansakonko), Central River Region (Janjanbureh), North Bank Region (Kerewan), Upper River Region (Basse), Western Region (Brikama) and Banjul, the capital city of the country (see Map 3). There are also divisions by Local Government Areas (LGA): Mansakonko, Janjanbureh, Kerewan, Basse, Brikama, Kuntaur, Kanifing and Banjul.



Map 3. Political Map of The Gambia

Source: Ephotopix



According to the Census 2013, the population of the country raises 1,882,450 persons, with an annual growth rate of 3.3%<sup>3</sup>. With a density rate of 176 persons per square kilometer, The Gambia is one of the most densely populated countries in mainland Africa. The current crude birth rate is 40.5/1,000 persons. The country has an infant (under 5) mortality rate of 54/1,000 live births<sup>4</sup>. Average life expectancy at birth is 58.8 years<sup>5</sup>. The main ethnic groups are Mandinka, Fula, Wollof, Jola, Sarahuleh, Manjago, Serere and Aku.

The Gambia is one of the world's least developed countries, ranking 172 out of 187 on the UNDP Human Development Index for 2013<sup>5</sup>. It is primarily an agricultural nation with a relatively undiversified economy. Foreign exchange earnings are based primarily on groundnut exports, tourism and remittances from a large migrant population of the country abroad.

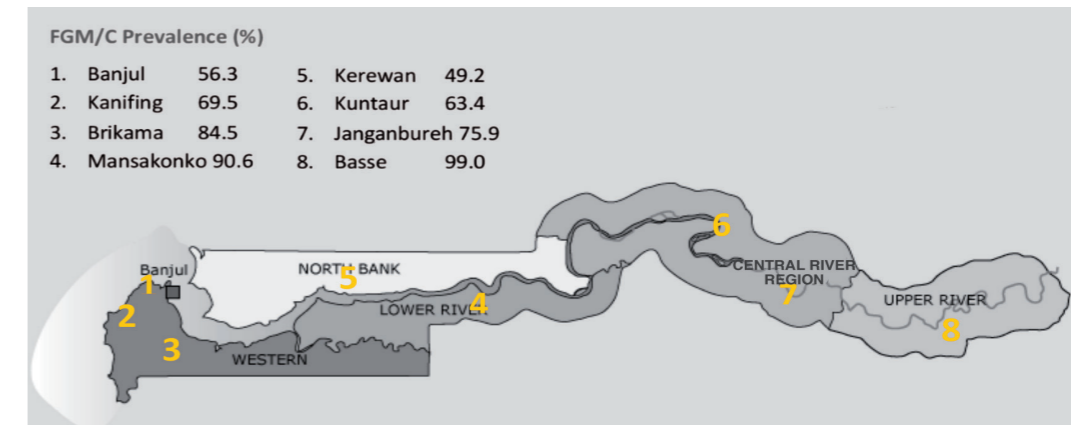
## FGM/C situation

### Prevalence and type of FGM/C

According to UNICEF (MICS, 2010), the national prevalence in The Gambia is as high as 76.3%. There are important differences in the prevalence of FGM/C between regions (see Map 4) and ethnic groups (see Table 2). The regions with higher prevalence are Basse, Upper River Region (99%); Mansakonko, Lower River Region (90.6%); and Brikama in Western Region (84.5%). The percentages of women who had undergone FGM/C per ethnic group are as follow: 97.8% of Sarahuleh, 96.7% of Mandinka, 87.3% of Fula, 87% of Jola, 43% of Serere and 12.4% of Wollof had signs of FGM/C. The prevalence of FGM/C among women is slightly higher in rural than in urban areas (78.1 and 74.6 respectively), among those with no education than with secondary education (76.7 and 73.9 respectively) and among those in the lowest wealth quintile than in highest (72.7 and 69.8 respectively)<sup>6</sup>.

Map 4: FGM/C by Local Government Areas

Source: Data from UNICEF MICS, 2010



**Table 2: FGM/C per local government areas, area of residence and ethnicity**

Source: UNICEF MICS 2010

LGA	Percent distribution of women age 15-49 years					Total	Percentage who had any form of FGM/C	Number of women age 15-49 years
	No FGM/C	Who had FGM/C						
		Had flesh removed	Were nicked	Were sewn closed	Form of FGM/C not determined			
Banjul	43.7	47.3	0.4	5.4	3.2	100	56.3	394
Kanifing	30.5	63.6	0.1	3.2	2.6	100	69.5	3645
Brikama	15.5	80.7	0	3.5	0.3	100	84.5	4041
Mansakonko	9.4	86.5	0.1	3.1	0.9	100	90.6	853
Kerewan	50.8	44.2	0.1	1.2	3.7	100	49.2	1832
Kuntaur	36.6	43.9	0	19.4	0.1	100	63.4	726
Janjanbureh	24.1	61.1	0.2	11.8	2.7	100	75.9	1134
Basse	1	79.6	0	19	0.3	100	99	2060
<b>Area of Residence</b>								
Urban	25.4	68.5	0.1	4.2	1.8	100	74.6	7565
Rural	21.9	67.2	0	9.5	1.3	100	78.1	7120
<b>Ethnicity of household head</b>								
Mandinka/Jahanka	3.3	88.4	0.1	5.9	2.3	100	96.7	4546
Wolof	87.6	11.5	0.1	0.6	0.3	100	12.4	2153
Jola/Karoninka	13	83.5	0	1.4	2.1	100	87	1859
Fula/Tukulori/ Lorobo	12.7	75	0	11.2	1	100	87.3	2885
Serere	57	40.5	0	1.6	0.8	100	43	578
Sarahuleh	2.2	77.6	0	18.9	1.2	100	97.8	1503
Creole/Aku Marabou	75	19.4	0	3.1	2.5	100	25	89
Manjago	81.9	13.6	0	4.5	0	100	18.1	230
Bambara	7.9	81.4	0	5.3	5.4	100	92.1	219
Other ethnic group	34.4	53.4	0	10.8	1.3	100	65.6	206
Non-Gambian	39.1	50.3	0.8	5.3	4.6	100	60.9	249
Missing/DK	19.6	72.1	0	8.1	0.2	100	80.4	167
<b>Total</b>	<b>23.7</b>	<b>67.9</b>	<b>0.1</b>	<b>6.8</b>	<b>1.6</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>76.3</b>	<b>14685</b>

The Gambia and Senegal vary in colonial history, size, official language and economic circumstances. Nevertheless, they share much in common in terms of culture, landscape, climate, ethnicity, dominant religion (Islam) and subsistence activities. Along the border between the two countries it is not uncommon to find communities sharing very similar characteristics and even extended families divided on different sides of the boundary.

There is ample evidence that the practice of FGM/C is closely tied to ethnic affiliation. Because of this factor, prevalence rates for the two countries vary: in The Gambia it is 76.2% while the figure in Senegal is 26%. For instance, the Wolof, who do not practice FGM/C on a large scale, make up 16% of the Gambian population but are the majority in Senegal (43%), while the Mandinka, who almost universally practice FGM/C, constitute 42% of the population in The Gambia but constitute less than 9% in Senegal.

Types I and II FGM/C are the most prevalent in The Gambia. Wassu Gambia Kafo conducted the first clinical study<sup>7</sup> in the country in 2011, which involved 871 girls and women who sought consultation for whatever problem requiring a medical gynecological examination and who had undergone FGM/C. According to this study, the prevalence of patients with different types of FGM/C was: type I, 66.2%; type II, 26.3%; and type III, 7.5%.

A second clinical study<sup>8</sup> conducted by Wassu Gambia Kafo in 2013 in the Western Health Region of The Gambia, showed that FGM/C prevalence percentages were 17.5% among Wolof and 46.2% among Serere, whereas Mandinka, Fula, Sarahuleh and Jola practice FGM/C extensively, with prevalences in the range of 94.3% - 96.7%.

Even if the study was limited to the Western Health Region, it confirmed the prevalence previously found by UNICEF MICS, 2010 (see Table 2).

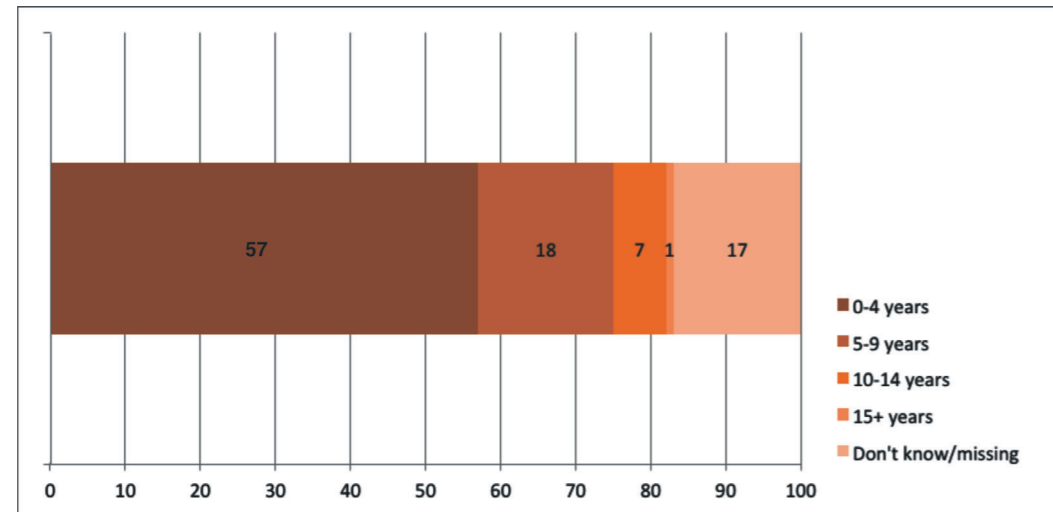
### Age at which FGM/C is performed

There is no fixed age at which the practice is carried out on girls. It ranges from young, even week-old babies to girls in adolescence. There are significant ethnic variations when it comes to age. In Sarahuleh communities, babies are cut in their first week of life while in many Fula communities the practice is performed on girls from 3 to 7 years old. In Jola communities, girls are spared until they attain the age of puberty. According to UNICEF 2014, 57% of the girls were cut between 0 and 4 years old, followed by an 18% between 5 and 9 years old<sup>9</sup> (see Table 3).

One survey conducted in 1999<sup>10</sup> revealed that the maximum age for cutting was 16. In most communities, FGM/C is scheduled by elderly women in consultation with the excisers. Communal FGM/C schedules are now more flexible because people are highly socially mobile and migration is common. The age at which FGM/C is performed seems to be diminishing.

**Table 3: Percentage distribution of girls and women age 15 to 49 years who have undergone FGM/C, by age at which cutting occurred**

Source: UNICEF 2014 "Statistical Profile on Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting, The Gambia" (data from MICS 2010).



### Decision-making

FGM/C is widely perceived as a women's affair and, as such, decisions regarding the practice are taken predominantly by elderly women. Grandmothers and paternal aunts are typically in the forefront of decision-making.

A study conducted by Wassu Gambia Kafo amongst Gambian men on their knowledge and attitudes towards FGM/C<sup>11</sup>, shows that the decision to subject or not a girl to the practice appears as the result of a complex process involving multiple actors. Ethnic identity, more than religion, is the decisive shaping factor on how men conceive and value the practice. The greater support towards the practice is found among traditionally practicing groups. A substantial proportion of men intend to have it performed on their daughters, although reporting a low involvement in the decision making process, with very few taking alone the final decision. Only a minority is aware of the health consequences of the practice, but those who understand its negative impact are quite willing to play a role in its prevention.

Shell-Duncan et al. explains that "Decision making is often done by multiple family members, and despite being described as "women's business," fathers were often involved" (2010:11).

### Procedures

The operation is performed by elderly women, mainly of the blacksmith caste. Excisers are believed to be people who possess supernatural powers. It is carried out in a variety of settings: the bush, the backyard and, occasionally, indoors. It is usually done without anaesthesia. The girl is physically held tight by close family members, mainly elderly women. After the operation, the girl is treated with a variety of herbal concoctions or other substances, which may include leaves, tomato paste, engine oil, cooking oil and cow dung, intended to aid healing. Some excisers have tried to modernize dressing by using iodine, gentian violet, antibiotic ointments, vaseline or balms.

### The ritual and seclusion period

Girls who are to be cut are seldom informed in advance. Preparations are made by the girl's parents and/or grandmother. Usually, the family concerned has to raise money to meet the cost of the ritual, which depends on several factors. The exciser and her assistant are paid or given in-kind donations; food is provided in abundance; medicines and healing devices are procured and celebrations are paid for. Presents and gifts are given to the girls during the seclusion period.

The girls are led, one by one, to the place of cutting by an aunt or grandmother. They may or may not meet other girls before the operation. During the period, which lasts until the wound is healed, the girls are initiated into women's secret societies. The teachings consist of practical skills and communication by use of signs. The girls also learn songs, stories, fables and proverbs. The initiates are threatened that if they

reveal the secrets of the seclusion to those girls/women who are not cut they will suffer, even die. The day they come out, the *nansingjanjango* takes place and the girls are presented as initiates in their new stage. This is celebrated with a big party and fanfare, bringing ethnic and gender identity, as well as belonging to the secret society of women.

### **Cutting without ritual - an emerging phenomenon**

The rituals that go with FGM/C in The Gambia are taking a downward turn. Many girls are now excised alone, or together with very few others. This trend is explained by several factors, key among them the lowering of the age at which FGM/C is performed, the lavish celebrations, and schooling. In addition, some clans that adhere to a more orthodox interpretation of Islam argue that cutting without ritual is better, because they consider traditional "circumcision" rituals as un-Islamic.

Although traditionally the practice was part of the rite of passage to womanhood among certain ethnic groups, over the past generation several changes have been occurring. Shell-Duncan et al. (2010) found that the physical cutting is increasingly becoming divorced from the traditional ritual. FGM/C is not a condition to ensure marriageability, but mainly a way to facilitate entry into a social network and have access to social support and resources, with peer pressure playing a major role in its perpetuation<sup>12</sup>.

A study conducted by Wassu Gambia Kafo confirmed this change, since only 34.4% of the health professionals believe that FGM/C is a rite of passage<sup>13</sup>.

### **Perceptions of the need for FGM/C**

Reasons given for the practice of FGM/C in Gambian communities are wide and varied, the most commonly being:

- "FGM/C is a rite of passage in life"
- "It shows that one is coming of age"
- "It is a means of controlling the sexual urge of girls/women"
- "Uncircumcised women are not clean spiritually"
- "If the clitoris is not cut it will grow to unimaginable proportions"
- "It gives girls a sense of belonging to the community"

The rituals and ceremonies surrounding the practice are a form of social incentive. Another reason for practicing FGM/C strongly defended in Gambian communities is respect for tradition and conventional norms of behavior.

### **Scientific knowledge on FGM/C**

Compared to several other countries in Africa, there has been paucity of research data on FGM/C in The Gambia. This situation affects the planning and programming of strategies aimed at eradicating the practice. It also casts a shadow of doubt over international available data on FGM/C regarding The Gambia.

Since 2008, the *Transnational Observatory of Applied Research and New Strategies for the Prevention of Female Genital Mutilation* has provided new scientific knowledge on the issue with two research field stations, based in The Gambia and Spain. It provides inside information obtained from clinical and qualitative research. The KAP questionnaires explore the knowledge, attitudes and practices of health professionals and other key agents, and enable the design of suitable educational materials and programs, aimed at their training in the care, management and prevention of FGM/C.

The main results of the studies are as follow:

During the first clinical study conducted in The Gambia in 2011<sup>7</sup>, Wassu Gambia Kafo, in collaboration with the Cuban Medical Mission, found that the prevalence of patients with different types of FGM/C was: type I, 66.2%; type II, 26.3%; and type III, 7.5%. Complications due to FGM/C were found in 34.3% of the patients. Even type I, the most practiced form of FGM/C in The Gambia, presented complications in 1 of 4 girls and women examined.

A second clinical study<sup>8</sup> was conducted with the collaboration of midwifery students of ECHN School during their practicum, to determine the complications during delivery and for the newborn for women with and without FGM/C. Women with FGM/C had a significantly higher prevalence of long-term health problems (dysmenorrhea, vulvar or vaginal pain), problems related to anomalous healing (fibrosis, keloid, synechia) and sexual dysfunction than women without FGM/C.

Moreover, it was found that women with FGM/C are 4.5 times more likely to have complications during delivery (perineal tear, obstructed labor, episiotomy, cesarean, and stillbirth). These consequences can lead to complications also for the baby such as fetal distress, caput of the fetal head and even death.

In 2013, Wassu Gambia Kafo analyzed the KAP regarding FGM/C among rural Gambian health-care professionals (HCPs)<sup>13</sup>. The conclusions of the study show that 42.5% of Gambian HCPs working in rural areas embraced the continuation of FGM/C, 47.2% intended to subject their own daughters to it, and 7.6% of them reported having already performed it during their medical practice. However, differences were found depending on sex and ethnic identity. Women showed less approval for continuation of FGM/C than men. Among ethnic groups the differences were even more substantial. "The prevalence of FGM/C is higher among Mandinka, Djola and Fula, which are traditionally practicing groups. They are also groups who more strongly embrace the continuation of FGM/C, express more skepticism about its eventual elimination, and are less supportive of prevention strategies than the other groups" (Kaplan et al., 2013c: 8).

In the same year, Wassu Gambia Kafo analyzed the KAP regarding FGM/C among men<sup>11</sup>. Although the decision to perform FGM/C on the girls involves multiple actors, the study shows that men's intention is likely to influence it. In addition, ethnic identity is a more decisive shaping factor than religion and men from traditionally practicing groups are more likely to support the practice. Only a minority is aware of FGM/C health consequences, but those who understand its negative impacts on the health and well-being of girls and women are quite willing to play a role in its prevention. Therefore, one of the main conclusions of the study is that "a strategy of acknowledging men's ethnic background and focusing on increasing their understanding of FGM/C negative impact on health, might well be an effective way to influence and promote a positive change to the secret world of women" (Kaplan et al., 2013b: 10).

In 2016, WGK analyzes the KAP of 1,288 health care professionals (including students) in The Gambia<sup>16</sup>. The data was collected between 2012 and 2014 and concludes that 76.4% of HCPs are eager to abandon FGM/C and 71.6% regard it as a harmful practice with negative consequences on life and health. In comparison with the study of 2013, on the one hand, there is a decrease on the HCP that still embrace the continuation of the practice (42.5% vs. 25.4%) and on the intention of subjecting their own daughters to it (47.2 vs 24.4%). On the other hand, there is a slight increase on the performance of FGM/C during the professional practice (7.6% vs. 10.5%), proving the increase on the trend of medicalization. Compared to the data obtained between 2009/2011, there has been a decrease of support to the practice from HCPs belonging to ethnic groups with higher FGM/C prevalence – Mandinka (33.1% vs. 57.3%), Fula (27% vs. 42.9%) and Jola (24.6% vs. 39%). Furthermore, while the study of 2009/2011 reflected strong resistances of female HCP to the inclusion of male, the present results show that men's participation is almost universally defended. (Kaplan et al., 2016: 115).

## Legislation

In November 2015, the President of The Gambia made a public statement on the abolition of FGM/C in the country. In December 2015, the Gambian Parliament passed a bill banning and sanctioning the performance of the practice. There was an amendment of Womens' Act 2010/December 2015:

### Insertion of Section 32A

"32A. Prohibition of female circumcision

- 1) A person shall not engage in female circumcision
- 2) A person who engages in female circumcision commits an offence and liable on conviction
  - (a) to imprisonment for a term of three years or a fine of fifty thousand dalasis or both and;
  - (b) where female circumcision causes death, to life imprisonment."

### Insertion of Section 32B

"32B. Accomplices to female circumcision

- 1) A person who requests, incites or promotes female circumcision by providing tools or by any other means commits an offence and is liable on conviction to imprisonment for a term of three years or a fine of fifty thousand dalasis or to both.
- 2) A person who knows that female circumcision is about to take place or has taken place, and fails, without good cause, to warn or inform, as the case may be, the proper authorities promptly, commits an offence and is liable on conviction to a fine of ten thousand dalasis."

### Before the new bill, The Gambia had already signed international human rights conventions opposing FGM/C:

#### *Women's Human Rights*

- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, 1980 (ratified 1993);
- Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime Preamble, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, 2000 (ratified 2003).

#### *Protection from Torture, Ill-Treatment and Disappearance*

- Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, 1985.

#### *Rights of the Child*

- Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1990 (ratified 1990).
- Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflicts., 2000.

Moreover, even if FGM/C is not explicitly named, the Children's Act 2005 includes an article on harmful practices:

"19. No child shall be subjected to any social and cultural practices that affect the welfare, dignity, normal growth and development of the child and, in particular, those customs and practices that are:

- (a) prejudicial to the health and life of the child; and
- (b) discriminatory to the child on the grounds of sex or other status"

In addition, the section 21 of the Women's Act 2010 guarantees the women's right to protection of health, including the right to safeguard their reproductive health. The section 31 of the Act also includes the right of women "to be educated on the health aspects of harmful traditional practices".

### I International Forum on Harmful Traditional Practices: Exploring strategies and good practices: from local to global

The first International Forum on Harmful Traditional Practices was held in The Gambia between the 5th and 7th May 2009 organized by Wassu Gambia Kafo and the Interdisciplinary Research Group for the Prevention and Study of Harmful Traditional Practices of the Department of Anthropology of the Autonomous University of Barcelona in collaboration with UN agencies (UNICEF and UNFPA). Her Excellency the Vice President inaugurated the Forum and endorsed the first public declaration of the overriding need to prevent the practice. She fully embraced the documentary "Initiation without Cutting"<sup>15</sup>, displayed at the Forum, considering it to be culturally sensitive and requesting its translation into five local languages.

*The Brufut Declaration* (see the document below), signed by the participants, captures the success of this initiative, as it expresses the commitment to join efforts towards FGM/C prevention, while highlights the need to conduct further research.



## International Forum on Harmful Traditional Practices BRUFUT DECLARATION

We, participants at the International Forum on Harmful Traditional Practices (HTPs) held in Brufut, The Gambia, from 5 to 7 May, 2009, have come together to explore strategies and good practices in efforts to promote the abandonment of harmful traditional practices, and in particular, female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C).

Expressing our sincere and deep gratitude to Wassu Gambia Kafo and the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB) in Spain for organizing this conference sponsored by Foundation "la Caixa", and to the Government of The Gambia, for supporting this initiative.

Agreeing that:

- a) FGM/C is a global issue, and that, as a result, the movement of several decades to end HTPs has become increasingly active both in Africa and in the African diaspora.
- b) HTPs, and FGM/C in particular, significantly erode the human rights and dignity of women and girls and adversely affect prospects for achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), that require multisectoral strategies.
- c) Religion is often misinterpreted to sustain HTPs and FGM/C.
- d) Organizations and stakeholders working to end FGM/C still face many challenges and constraints.
- e) Quality scientific knowledge is essential to policy formulation and its application

Urge that:

- a) Informed religious scholars be engaged in the movement to end FGM/C and other HTPs.
- b) Universities provide intellectual leadership to promote research on the abandonment of FGM/C and related issues.
- c) Policy makers and funding institutions base their decisions on the conclusions of sound scientific knowledge and support ending FGM/C by fostering policies and projects for the well being of women and girls, with a specific mention and attention to HTPs and FGM/C.
- d) Civil society and governments initiate and/or strengthen community initiatives with an educational and human rights foundation, in an effort to explore alternatives to FGM/C (e.g. initiation without mutilation, where appropriate) and with a commitment to avoid stigmatizing the uncircumcised within communities, as well as migrant groups in general.
- e) All those involved foster closer cooperation between the diaspora and home countries, by building networks and coalitions based on a non confrontational approach and focusing on prevention strategies to enable real personal and collective commitment to change, rather than interventions that create dependence.

Finally, **The Brufut Declaration** emphasizes that:

Information is power, and people should be empowered by providing them information.

Health, education, social services professionals as well as community mediators and facilitators play a crucial role in the movement for abandonment of FGM/C, and should be so engaged.

Governments, development partners and other funding institutions must increase budgetary allocations and funding for efforts to end FGM/C and other HTPs.

Brufut, The Gambia, May 7<sup>th</sup>, 2009



Collaborators: Gambia Family Planning Assoc,  
Gamcotrap, Tostan, Bafrow and APGWE.

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# 4

## COMPLICATIONS OF FGM/C

FGM/C violates the integrity of the female reproductive organs and is almost always practiced with rudimentary instruments such as glass, knives and razor blades. It causes multiple complications both in the short and in the long term and some girls die because of bleeding or due to infections after the cutting. Circumcised women have more problems during delivery than those not circumcised. FGM/C can also lead newborns to death. The practice currently affects around 140 million women and girls around the world.

The complications caused by FGM/C can be classified into: immediate physical complications, long term physical complications, psychosocial complications, sexual complications and dangers of FGM/C to childbirth<sup>1</sup>.

### **Overview of the female genitalia**

The normal external female genitalia comprise the following parts<sup>2</sup>:

- Skene's and Bartholin glands: lubrication of the vagina;
- Vaginal orifice: allows menstrual flow, sexual intercourse and delivery of baby;
- Urethral meatus: allows emptying of the bladder within a few minutes;
- Clitoris: assists the woman to achieve sexual satisfaction;
- Perineum: supports the pelvic organs and separates vagina from anus;
- Labia Minora: protects internal structures and orifices;
- Labia Majora: protects the inner structures and orifices.

Figure 1. Female genitalia

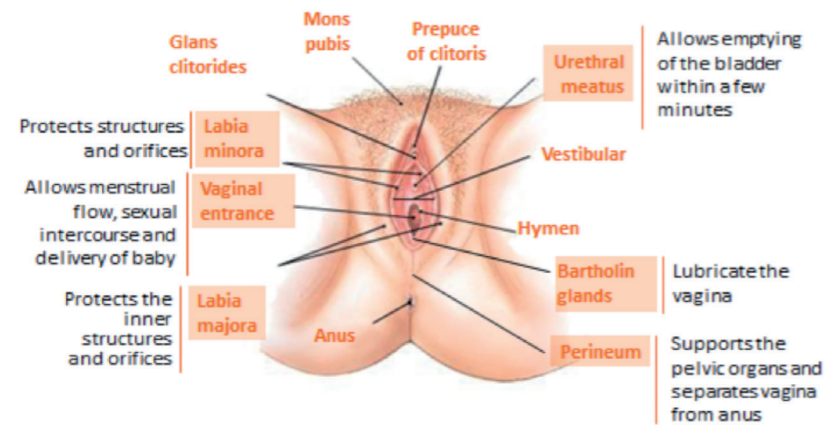
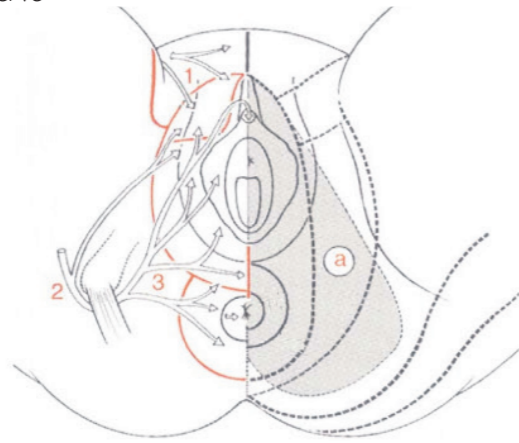


Figure 2. Innervation of the vulva

a. pudendal nerve area; 1. iliohypogastric, ilioinguinal and genitofemoral nerves; 2. posterior thigh cutaneous nerve; 3. pudendal nerve



## Immediate complications

The range of complications associated with FGM/C is wide. The most immediate include: pain, haemorrhage, shock, tissue injury, acute urine retention, fracture or dislocation, infection, and failure to heal.

### Pain

Severe pain is one of the immediate physical complications and is produced by two fundamental aspects: first, by the extensive innervations of female genitalia (Figures 1 and 2), and second, because this operation is practiced with inappropriate instruments and without anaesthetics. Sometimes the pain is so intense that it can cause shock.

### Haemorrhage

Excision of the clitoris involves cutting the clitoral artery which has a strong blood flow at high pressure. Packing, tying or stitching to stop bleeding may not be effective and this can lead to haemorrhage. Secondary haemorrhaging may occur after the first week as a result of sloughing of the clot over the artery due to infection. Cutting of the labia causes further damage to blood vessels and Bartholin glands. Haemorrhage is the most common and life-threatening outcome of FGM/C.

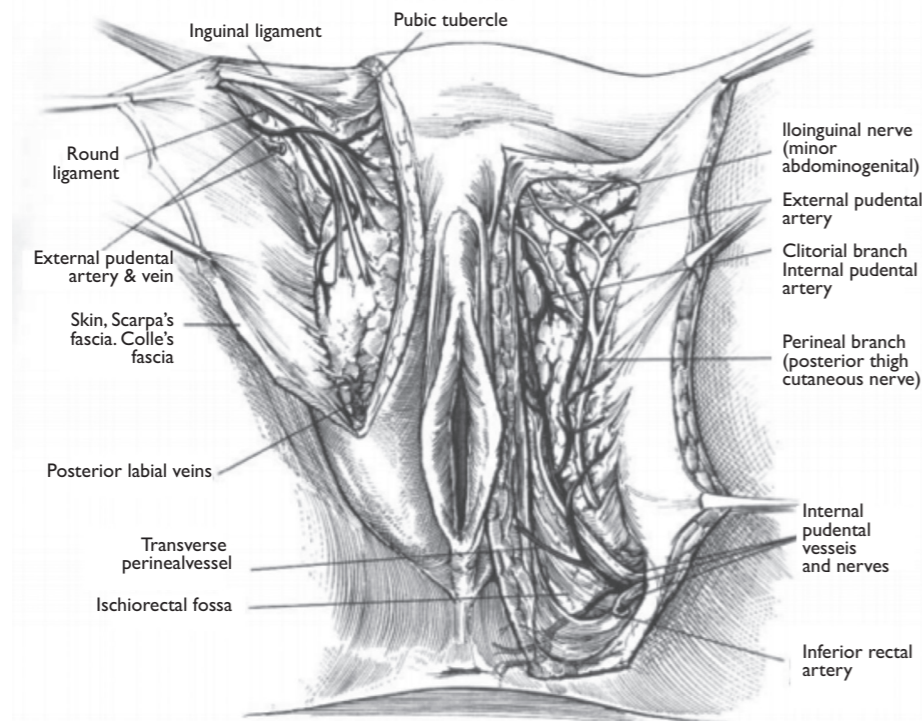
### Shock

Immediately after the procedure, the girl may go into shock as a result of the sudden loss of blood (haemorrhagic shock), severe pain and trauma, which can be fatal.

It is important to know that a large part of the female population in these regions has chronic anaemia that does not exclude girls. With anaemia, the onset of haemorrhagic shock is faster.

In Figure 3, we can observe the irrigation of the female reproductive system. The variety of small, medium and large blood vessels available at that level, illustrates the potential damage that may be life threatening to their integrity.

Figure 3. Irrigation and Innervation of the Feminine Reproductive Tract



66

### Injury to tissue

Injury to the adjacent tissue of the urethra, vagina, perineum and rectum can result from the use of rudimentary instruments, or because the operator is ignorant of the anatomy and physiology of the female external genitalia. Poor eyesight of circumcisers, the use of careless techniques or poor lighting increase the risk of injury, which is especially likely if the girl struggles because of pain and fear. Damage to the urethra can result in incontinence.

### Acute urine retention

Urine retention can result from swelling and inflammation around the wound, the girl's fear of the pain when passing urine on the raw wound, or injury to the urethra. Retention is very common and it may last for hours or days. This condition can lead to urinary tract infections.

### Fracture or dislocation

Fractures of the clavicle, femur or humerus, or dislocation of the hip joint can occur if heavy pressure is applied to restrain the struggling girl during the cutting. It is common that several adults hold a girl down during the mutilation/cutting.

### Infection

Infection is very common as a result of the following:

- Unhygienic conditions;
- Use of unsterilized instruments;
- The application of substances such as herbs or ashes to the wound, which may act as a growth medium for bacteria;
- Binding of the legs following FGM/C type III (infibulation), which prevents wound drainage;
- Contamination of the wound with urine and/or faeces.

Infections may prevent the wound healing, and may result in an abscess, fever, ascending urinary tract infection, pelvic infection, tetanus, gangrene or septicaemia. Severe infections can be fatal. Group mutilations, in which the same unclean instruments are used on several girls may pose a risk of transmission of blood-borne diseases such as HIV and hepatitis B. Nevertheless, there have been no confirmed cases of such transmission to date.

### Failure to heal

The wounds may fail to heal quickly because of infection, irritation from urine or rubbing when walking. This can lead to a purulent, weeping wound or to a chronic infected ulcer.

67

## Long-term complications

Long-term physical complications may include the following:

- **Difficulty in passing urine**

This can occur as a result of damage to the urethral opening or scarring of the meatus.

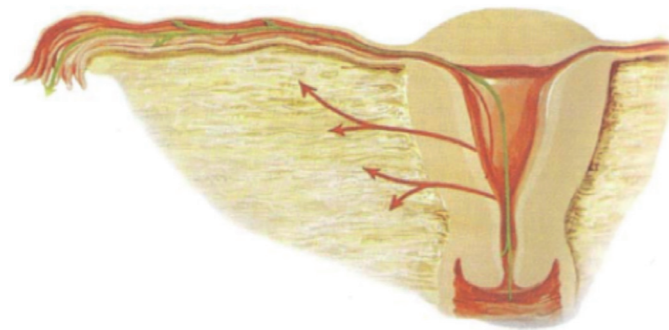
- **Recurrent urinary tract infection**

Infection near the urethra can result in ascending urinary tract infections. This is particularly common following FGM/C type III, when the normal flow of urine is affected and the perineum remains constantly wet and susceptible to bacterial growth. Stasis of urine resulting from difficulty in micturition can also lead to bladder infections. These infections can spread to the urethra and kidneys.

- **Pelvic infections**

They are painful and may be accompanied by a discharge. Infections may spread to the uterus, fallopian tubes and ovaries, and may cause infertility (See Figure 4).

Figure 4. Spread of the Infection



- **Infertility**

Infertility can result if pelvic infection causes irreparable damage to the reproductive organs.

- **Keloid scar**

Slow and incomplete healing of the wound and post-operative infection can lead to the production of excess connective tissue in the scar (keloids). This may obstruct the vaginal orifice, leading to dysmenorrhoea (painful menstrual period). Following infibulation, scarring can be so extensive that it prevents penile penetration and may cause sexual and psychological problems.

- **Abscess**

Deep infection resulting from defective healing or an embedded stitch which may require surgical intervention (See Figure 5).

Figure 5. Abscess on the vulva



- **Cysts on the vulva**

Implantation dermoid cysts are the most common complication of infibulation. They vary in size, sometimes growing as big as a ball, and occasionally becoming infected. They are extremely painful and inhibit sexual intercourse.

- **Clitoral neuroma**

A painful neuroma can develop as a result of the clitoral nerve being trapped in a stitch or in the scar tissue of the healed wound, leading to hypersensitivity and dyspareunia.

- **Difficulty in menstruation**

Difficult menstruation can occur as a result of partial or total occlusion of the vaginal opening.

- **Occlusion of the vagina**

This can cause difficulties such as dysmenorrhoea and accumulation of menstrual blood in the vagina (haematocolpos); Haematocolpos may appear as a bluish bulging membrane in the vaginal orifice and can prevent penetrative sexual intercourse. It can also cause distension of the abdomen which, together with the lack of menstrual flow, may give rise to suspicions of pregnancy, with potentially serious social implications to the women affected.

- **Calculus formation in the vagina**

This can occur as a result of the accumulation of menstrual debris and urinary deposits in the vagina or in the space behind the scar tissue formed after infibulation.

- **Fistulae**

These are holes or false passages between the bladder and the vagina (vesico-vaginal) or between the rectum and vagina (recto-vaginal); they can develop as a result of injury to the soft tissues during mutilation/cutting, opening up infibulation or re-suturing an infibulation, sexual intercourse or obstructed labour. Urinary or faecal incontinence can be life-long and have serious social consequences, such as the isolation of these women.

- **Dyspareunia (painful sexual intercourse)**

This is a consequence of many forms of FGM/C because of the scarring related to the practice, the reduced vaginal orifice and such complications as infection. Vaginal penetration may be difficult or even impossible and re-cutting may be necessary. Vaginismus may result from injury to the vulval area; the vaginal opening spasms, causing considerable pain and soreness.

- **Sexual dysfunction**

Sexual dysfunction may affect both partners because of pain and difficulty in vaginal penetration, and reduced sexual sensitivity following a clitoridectomy.

- **Problems in childbirth**

These are more common following severe forms of FGM/C, because the tough scar tissue that forms causes partial or total occlusion of the vaginal opening. Difficulty in performing an examination during labour can lead to incorrect monitoring of the stage of labour and foetal presentation. Prolonged and obstructed labour can lead to tearing of the perineum, haemorrhage, fistula formation, as well as uterine inertia, rupture or prolapse. These complications can cause harm to the neonate (including stillbirth) and maternal death. In the event of miscarriage, the foetus may be retained in the uterus or birth canal.

## Psychosocial complications

Various circumstances related to this practice can lead to psychosocial problems. FGM/C is commonly performed when girls are young. It is often preceded by acts of deception, intimidation, coercion and violence by people surrounding the child. Girls are generally conscious when the painful cutting occurs. They are often physically restrained because they struggle. In some instances they are also forced to watch the mutilation of other girls.

For some girls, mutilation is an occasion marked by fear, ambivalence and suppression of feelings. The experience leaves a scarring memory that can affect their mental development. They suffer in silence.

Girls may suffer feelings of betrayal, bitterness and anger at being subjected to such an ordeal even if they receive support from their families immediately following the procedure.

Long-term memories of the pain of FGM/C may affect the relationship between the girl and her parents, and may also affect her ability to develop trusting relationships in the future.

The experience of FGM/C has been associated with a range of mental and psychosomatic disorders. For instance, girls have reported disturbances in their eating patterns, sleeping habits and mood. Symptoms include sleeplessness, nightmares, loss of appetite, weight loss or excessive weight gain. Some victims experience panic attacks, difficulty in concentration and learning, and other symptoms of post-traumatic stress.

As they grow older, women may experience some of the following disorders:

- Stress
- Feelings of incompleteness
- Feelings of fear of humiliation and betrayal
- Loss of self-esteem
- Depression
- Chronic anxiety
- Phobias
- Panic attacks

Girls who have not been excised may be socially stigmatised, rejected by their communities, and unable to marry locally, which may also cause psychological trauma.

### Sexual complications

Sexual problems as a result of FGM/C can affect both partners in a marriage, from fear of the first sexual intercourse onwards. As explained before, excised women may suffer painful sexual intercourse because of one or some of the following:

- Scarring
- Vaginal dryness
- Narrow vaginal opening
- Obstruction of the vagina due to elongation of labia minora
- Complications such as infection

Vaginal penetration for women with a tight introitus may be difficult or even impossible without tearing or re-cutting the scar. This may lead to loss of self-esteem and sexual dysfunction. Vaginismus may result from injury to the vulval area. Inhibition of coitus due to fear of pain may damage marital relationships and even lead to divorce.

Findings from a study conducted in the Ismailia Governorate in the Suez Canal area of Egypt reveal that over 80% of women who were circumcised complained of some form of psychosexual impact of the practice. Their complaints included: dysmenorrhoea (80.5%); vaginal dryness during intercourse (48.5%); lack of sexual desire (45%); less frequency of sexual desire per week (28%); less initiative during sex (11%); being less pleased by sex (49%); being less orgasmic (39%); less frequency of orgasm (25%); having difficulty reaching orgasm (60.5%)<sup>3</sup>.

### Dangers for childbirth

Findings from a WHO multi-country study, in which more than 28,000 women participated, confirm that women who had undergone FGM/C had significantly increased risks for adverse effects during childbirth. Higher incidences of caesarean section and post-partum haemorrhage were found in the women with type I, II and III compared to those who had not undergone FGM/C, and the risk increased with the severity of the procedure<sup>4</sup>.

A striking new finding from the former study is that FGM/C practiced in mothers has negative effects on their newborn babies. Most seriously, death rates among babies during birth and immediately after were higher for those born of mothers who had undergone the practice compared to those who had not. The risk of death among babies is as follows:

15% higher for those whose mothers had type I;  
32% higher for those with type II;  
55% higher for those with type III.

The consequences of FGM/C for most women who deliver outside the hospital setting are expected to be even more severe. The high incidence of postpartum haemorrhage, a life-threatening condition, is of particular concern where health services are weak or women cannot easily access them.

In The Gambia, two clinical studies have been carried out by Kaplan et al. about the health consequences of FGM/C (2011, 2013)<sup>5,6</sup>. The first, proved that 299 of 871 patients (34,3%) presented complications due to having undergone the practice, specially infections. Even with type I, 1 out of 5 women examined presented complications. The second clinical study focused on the long term consequences and complications during delivery and for the newborn. Women with type I and II had a significantly higher prevalence of long term health problems (dysmenorrhea, vulvar or vaginal pain), problems related to anomalous healing (fibrosis, keloid, synechia), and sexual dysfunction. Women with FGM/C were also much more likely to suffer complications during delivery (perineal tear, obstructed labour, episiotomy, caesarean, stillbirth) and complications associated with anomalous healing after FGM/C. Similarly, newborns were found to be more likely to suffer complications such as fetal distress and caput of the fetal head.

At the clinical level, good documentation is necessary for the efficient management of cases, and for providing quality health care and follow up for women with FGM/C. In some countries, protocols have been provided for nurses and midwives to record the presence of FGM/C, the type involved and the relevant complication as a matter of routine. Some health institutions have incorporated record keeping in their internal policies.

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# 5

## MANAGEMENT OF WOMEN WITH PHYSICAL COMPLICATIONS OF FGM/C

During and after the completion of the FGM/C, complications may arise in the short, medium and long term that students of medicine, nursing, midwifery and public health should be aware of. They include bleeding at different levels, anaemia, severe pain and tissue damage, infection and septic shock, and the retention of urine.

### Management of immediate physical complications

#### Bleeding

Excision of the clitoris involves cutting the clitoral artery in which blood flows under high pressure. Cutting of the labia also causes damage to the blood vessels. Haemorrhage is the most common and life threatening complication of FGM/C. Bleeding usually occurs during or immediately after the procedure. Secondary bleeding may occur after the first week due to sloughing of a clot over the artery due to infection. The management of bleeding associated with excision is the same as the management of bleeding in any other circumstances.

Health professionals should observe the following procedure:

- Inspect the site of the bleeding.
- Clean the area.
- Apply pressure at the site to stop the bleeding by packing with sterile gauze or pad.
- Assess the seriousness of the bleeding and the condition of the girl or woman.
- If client is in shock, see instructions under shock.
- If necessary, replace fluid lost. If you are managing the client at a primary level facility, give I.V. fluids, monitor vital signs and transfer her immediately to a secondary level facility for blood transfusion if necessary.



- If you are seeing her at a secondary level facility where blood transfusion is not available but is required because of severe bleeding, transfer her to a tertiary level facility immediately.
- It may be the policy of the health institution to prescribe Vitamin K, especially in the case of babies. If so, take action as required by the policy.
- A traditional compound (e.g. containing ash, herbs, soil, cowdung) may have been applied to the wound, and this can lead to tetanus or other infection. Therefore, you should give tetanus vaccine and antibiotics in accordance with national guidelines.
- If the problem is not serious, clean the site with antiseptic and advise client or attendants to keep it dry. Follow up client to monitor progress by making an appointment for her to return so that you can check her progress.

### Severe pain and injury to tissues

Usually pain is immediate, and can be so severe that it causes shock. The management of pain associated with FGM/C is the same as pain management under any other circumstances.

Health professionals should observe the following procedure:

- Assess the severity of pain and injury.
- Give strong analgesic and treat injury.
- Clean site with antiseptic and advise the patient or her attendants to keep it dry.
- If the patient is in shock, see instructions under shock.
- If there is no relief from pain, refer patient for medical attention.
- If injury is very extensive refer patient for surgical intervention.

### Shock

Shock can occur as a result of severe bleeding and/or pain. The management of shock associated with FGM/C is the same as the management of shock under any other circumstances.

Health professionals should observe the following procedure:

- Assess the severity of shock by checking vital signs.
- Treat the shock by raising the client's extremities above the level of the head to allow blood to drain to the vital centres in the brain.

- Cover the client to keep her warmth.
- If she is having difficulty breathing, administer oxygen.
- Have a resuscitation tray nearby.
- Give I.V. fluids to replace lost fluid (if facilities for I.V. are not available, fluids may be given rectally).
- Check vital signs and record every 15 minutes.
- If client's condition does not improve, refer her to the hospital.

### Infection and septicaemia

Infection may occur as a result of unhygienic surroundings and dirty instruments used to carry out FGM/C. The patient will present an elevated temperature and a dirty, inflamed wound.

Health professionals should manage the condition as follows:

- Take a vaginal swab and a urine sample to test the presence of infection and identify the organisms involved.
- Inspect the vulva carefully for signs of an infected wound, and to check for anything that might be contributing to the infection, such as urine obstruction.
- Any obstruction found should be removed, and the client treated with antibiotics and analgesics.
- If the wound is infected, it should be cleaned and left dry.
- Follow up client after 7 days to assess the progress.  
If infection persists refer the client to the hospital.

### Urine retention

Urine retention may be the result of injury, pain and fear of passing urine, or occlusion of the urethra during infibulation. Acute retention of urine occurs due to swelling and inflammation around the wound.

The management of this condition is as follows:

- Carry out an assessment to determine cause.
- Use appropriate nursing skills and techniques to encourage the client to pass urine, such as turning on a water tap.

- If she is unable to pass urine because of pain and fear, give her strong analgesics and personal encouragement and support.
- If inability to pass urine is due to infibulation, open up the infibulation after counselling the client, or her attendant if the client is a child.
- If retention is due to injury of the opening of the urethra, refer for surgical intervention under anaesthetic.

### Anaemia

Anaemia can be due to bleeding or infection or it can be due to malaria, especially in children.

The management of this condition is as follows:

- Assess the severity of anaemia and send blood for haemoglobin (Hb) and grouping.
- If anaemia is mild, give folic acid and iron tablets and advise on nutritious diet.
- In cases of infection or malaria treat appropriately
- If anaemia is severe, refer for blood transfusion.

### Management of long-term physical complications

The long-term physical complications of FGM/C include the formation of keloids, as well as cysts, clitoral neuroma, vulval abscesses, urinary tract infection (UTI), chronic pelvic infection, infertility, fistulae and incontinence, vaginal obstruction, menstrual disorders and ulcers.

Their management should be carried out as follows:

#### Keloid formation

- Inspect patient genitalia to assess size of keloid;
- If the keloid is small, advise the woman to leave it undisturbed, and reassure her that it will not cause harm;
- If the keloid scar is large, causing difficulty during intercourse or possible obstruction during delivery, the woman should be referred to a specialist experienced in removing keloid scars;

- The presence or appearance of a keloid may cause excessive distress to a woman, in which case you should consider referring her for surgery for psychological reasons.

#### Cysts

- Inspect the site to assess the size and type of cyst;
- Small and non-infected cysts may be left alone after counselling the woman about her condition. Alternatively the woman may be referred to have them removed under local or regional anaesthesia;
- However, before interfering with a small cyst it is important to find out if the procedure could result in further damage and scarring of existing sensitive tissue. If such danger exists, the woman should be fully informed and allowed to choose for herself whether to proceed with removal, with full understanding of the risk involved;
- In the case of a large or infected cyst, the patient must be referred for excision or marsupialisation; the procedure is usually performed under general anaesthetic. During the operation, great care should be taken to avoid further damage to sensitive tissue or injury to the blood or nerve supply of the area.

#### Clitoral neuroma

The clitoral nerve may be trapped in the fibrous tissue of the scar following clitoridectomy. This may result in an extremely sharp pain over the fibrous swelling. With such a condition, intercourse or even the friction of underpants will cause pain. In the case of clitoral neuroma:

- Check for the presence of a neuroma. A neuroma cannot usually be seen, but can in some cases be diagnosed by carefully touching the area around the clitoral scar with a delicate object and asking the woman if she feels any pain;
- Under general anaesthetic, the neuroma may be able to be felt as a small pebble under the mucosa;
- Advise the woman to wear loose pants and give her a local anesthetic cream to apply to the area, as lidocaine cream;
- If the symptoms are severe, refer the woman for surgical excision of the neuroma. This is not commonly required and the woman should be carefully counselled before such a step is taken since the symptoms may be psychosomatic – the result of the traumatic experience of excision or the fear of sexual intercourse.

### Vulval abscesses

- Inspect the site to assess the extent of the problem;
- Dress the abscess with a local application to relieve pain and to localise the swelling;
- Refer for surgical intervention, which may involve incision and drainage of the abscess under local anaesthesia;
- Send drainage fluid for microscopy, culture and sensitivity;
- Administer antibiotics as appropriate/prophylactically.

### Chronic Urinary Tract Infection (UTI)

UTIs are a common complication of women who have undergone FGM/C in any of its forms. Practitioners should manage UTI as follows:

- Examine the vulva carefully for any anatomical abnormalities that may establish a link with FGM/C;
- If infibulation is the cause, counsel the woman on the need to open up the infibulation (see section on defibulation);
- Carry out urine analysis and vaginal swab for discharges to identify causative organisms and for appropriate antibiotics;
- Give antibiotics and/or urinary antiseptics as required (a mixture of potassium may also be prescribed);
- Advise the patient on adequate fluid intake and on vulva hygiene;
- If UTI is recurring, refer patient for further medical attention.

### Chronic pelvic infection

- Examine the woman. Identify type of FGM/C based on history and exam;
- Establish the connection between FGM/C and the infections;
- If the woman has type III, counsel her and/or her attendants on the possible need to open up the infibulation and seek her/their informed consent;
- Take vaginal swab for culture and sensitivity;
- Give antibiotics that are appropriate and locally available;
- If the cause of the infection is obstruction due to stones or injury, refer the woman for surgical intervention.

### Infertility

Infertility can be primary or secondary. It is usually a complication of pelvic infection. In some cases it may be due to failure of penetration because of a very tight vaginal opening. Medical practitioners should manage infertility as follows:

- Make a good assessment and inspect the genitalia to identify the problem;
- If infertility is the result of failure to penetrate, counsel the woman and her partner on the possible need for surgical opening.
- Otherwise, refer the woman to a gynaecologist for further management.

### Fistulae and incontinence

Vesico-vaginal fistula (VVF) or recto-vaginal fistula (RVF) – fistula resulting in incontinence – occur as a result of injury to the external urethral meatus or obstructed labour. Practitioners should manage the condition as follows:

- Assess the child or woman to identify cause of incontinence and type of FGM/C;
- Ascertain the severity and level of fistula;
- In cases of stress incontinence, counsel the patient and start a programme of exercises to strengthen the pelvic floor muscles, or refer the woman to a urologist for treatment;
- Patients with vesico-vaginal fistula (VVF) or recto-vaginal fistula (RVF) must be referred for specialist repair;
- If patient has infection, give antibiotics as appropriate.

### Vaginal obstruction

- Assess the patient to identify the problem and type of FGM/C;
- If the patient has been infibulated, counsel on the probable need for deinfibulation. This might include family members or other people who are close to the patient;
- If the patient has haematocolpos, stones or stenosis, refer her for surgical intervention under general anaesthetic.

### Menstrual disorders

Many excised women report severe dysmenorrhoea with or without menstrual regularity. There are many possible causes. Management is as follows:

- Establish the cause of dysmenorrhoea by taking a history and performing a clinical examination of the patient's genitalia;
- Counsel the patient to find out how she feels and support her in dealing with the situation;
- Give antispasmodic drugs to relieve the pain;
- If dysmenorrhoea is due to the accumulation of menstrual flow (haematocolpos) as a result of infibulation, counsel the patient on the possible need for opening up;
- If the condition is severe refer patient to a gynaecologist for further management.

### Ulcers

- Counsel the patient on the need for opening up her infibulation, and advise her that her vulva should be kept open thereafter;
- Perform the procedure after obtaining her informed consent;
- Apply antibiotics locally with or without 1% hydrocortisone cream;
- If the ulcer is chronic and fails to heal, refer patient for surgical excision of the tough fibrous walls.

*In managing women with FGM/C, practitioners should always document the type of FGM/C and its associated complications.*

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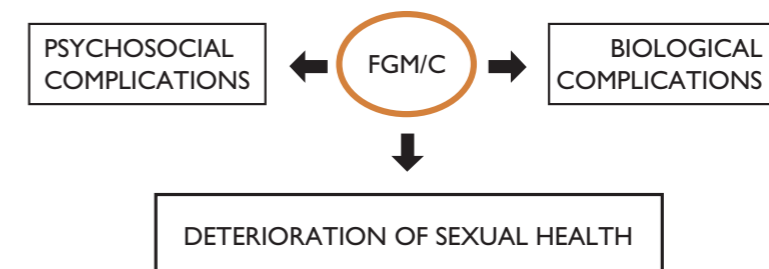
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# 6

## MANAGEMENT OF GIRLS AND WOMEN WITH PSYCHOSOCIAL AND SEXUAL COMPLICATIONS OF FGM/C

All medical practitioners should remember that counselling is the principal tool used in managing psychosocial and sexual problems. Counselling of a girl or woman should be strictly confidential. If the patient has a partner, he should be counselled separately if necessary, until the right moment arrives for them to be counselled as a couple (see Module 9: Counselling).

The woman who has undergone FGM/C frequently presents psychosocial and sexual complications that will easily develop in biological complications having negative consequences in her sexual health.



## Managing psychosocial complications

Psychosocial problems include:

- Chronic anxiety;
- Feelings of fear of humiliation and betrayal;
- Stress;
- Loss of self-esteem;
- Depression and phobias;
- Panic attacks.

These may manifest as psychosomatic symptoms such as nightmares, sleeping and eating disorders, disturbances of mood and cognition, loss of appetite and excessive weight loss or gain.

Psychological problems are managed as follows:

- Assess woman to identify the exact problem (take a detailed history);
- Counsel woman, and partner where appropriate;
- If she has type III FGM/C, counsel her on the need for opening up;
- If she has other types of FGM/C, counsel her until she is relieved of her symptoms;
- If symptoms are severe, refer patient for further management.

## Managing sexual problems

The manifestation of these complications is influenced by several factors ranging from the type of FGM/C that was practiced on the woman, to the preparation for the sexual life that she (and her sexual partner) have had. Each girl or woman should be treated as a unique individual with distinct needs. It is very important to take into account that sexual complications are a delicate matter to be dealt with high care and sensitivity (see also chapter 9 - Counselling). To illustrate this, the following paragraph describes a case treated by an Ob-Gyn with a Master's degree in Sexology.

*Mr. MJ, 27 years young, is a businessman married to two wives. He has been married to his second wife for two months but has not yet been able to have sexual penetration with her, so he goes to ask the doctor to check her out and operate on her, because "she was closed when she was a child". When examining Mrs. MJ, the doctor finds a type I FGM/C. This should readily allow the passage of the penis, but the hymen is intact.*

*It is decided to call Mr. MJ to be examined, but a very large penis that might have difficulty in penetrating any virgin woman is ruled out. Upon further questioning it is discovered that attempts to penetrate were frustrated because of pain in the woman, even though Mr. MJ said they had engaged in prior sexual games. The physician suggests focusing on the couple's sexual games and using a gel lubricant for penetration, as well as Mr. MJ being patient and gentle when penetrating. A week later, Mr. MJ called to thank him because the problem had been resolved. In this case the influence of the FGM/C practiced is clear, producing long-lasting fears and psychological problems in the woman, an additional factor being the couple's lack of preparation to approach sex.*

## Management of painful intercourse (dyspareunia)

Another frequent problem is dyspareunia or pain during sexual contact, mediated by biological rather than physiological conditions. This means anatomical changes at that level secondary to FGM/C, in addition to psychological traumas generated by the practice. Dyspareunia may induce the loss of sexual desire and even anorgasmia, but it cannot be assumed that all women subjected to FGM/C suffer from it because of the existence of other areas of sexual arousal, among other factors. It is necessary to conduct qualitative research from a scientific point of view to know more about the sexuality of these women and how to handle it.

Health practitioners should manage sexual problems as follows:

- Interview the woman to identify the real problem;
- Assess her to identify the type of FGM/C;
- If opening up the introitus is needed, counsel her and her husband/partner about the need for this, obtaining their informed consent. Follow the procedure for opening up and repair by giving antibiotics and analgesics, or refer to the appropriate facility for the procedure;
- Where opening up is not necessary, encourage foreplay to stimulate maximum arousal, and the use of appropriate lubricating jelly;
- Follow-up the patient to monitor the progress;
- Counsel the patient and her husband/partner about the importance of discussing sexual matters;
- Invite them to come back whenever they have problems;
- Advise the couple of the changes to expect as a result of the opening up operation – for example, changes in urine flow and during sexual intercourse. If the sexual problem is severe and recurring, refer patient to a gynaecologist;
- Offer psychological support and ongoing counselling.

### Other sexual problems

Failure or difficulty in penetration by husband/partner is a common form of sexual problem. This is managed as follows:

- Assess the type of FGM/C;
- Interview the patient to find out what the problem is;
- Counsel the woman and her husband/partner together;
- Obtain informed consent for opening up of the introitus;
- Follow the opening-up procedure as explained elsewhere in this material.

### Referral procedures

- Perform a proper assessment of the woman;
- Provide necessary information and offer counselling on the importance of referral;
- Carefully document the findings of the assessment, the clinical findings and any measures taken before the referral;
- Check that she has understood what you have said;
- Involve others, such as her husband/partner; who will accompany her to the referral facility;
- Give them detailed information about what to expect and what to do at the referral point;
- Write and give the referral letter to the patient, or escort when appropriate, and give detailed instructions about who to give the letter to at the referral point;
- Ask the woman to return for following-up and monitoring of progress after she has received specialist treatment;
- Evaluate counselling and assess patient's understanding.

#### A referral note must include the following information:

- Woman's demographic data including age, marital status and any other relevant information;
- Summary of health history;
- Clinical findings;
- Management, including both medical and surgical care given to patient prior to referral;
- Reason for referral;
- Contact for feedback.

The surgery to correct complications is performed in a hospital where appropriate conditions exist with qualified medical personnel. This procedure is used primarily for the process of opening women with type III, sometimes having difficulty and pain during penetration.

### Opening up of type III<sup>2</sup>

The surgical procedure required is usually simple. The majority of de-infibulation can be done under local anaesthesia, but this could not be appropriate for elective reversal when the patient is apprehensive. Deinfibulation may bring back memories of the original infibulation and be psychologically traumatic. For this reason, a short general anaesthesia or spinal anaesthesia may be more appropriate. Any skilled health care provider who can perform and repair episiotomy in normal maternity settings can perform de-infibulation.

#### Minimum clinical equipment

The following are the equipment required for de-infibulation: Two 10" sponge holding forceps, two long curved artery forceps, two small curved artery forceps, needle holder, one stitch scissors, surgical blade and blade holder, curved operating blunt pointed scissors, dissecting forceps tooth and non tooth, kidney dish, gallipot and gloves.

#### Step One:

Observe an aseptic technique through washing hands thoroughly, wearing gloves, etc. In lithotomy the vulva is washed with antiseptic solution. Often it is not possible to clean inside the vagina due to the narrowness of the vaginal opening.

#### Step Two:

Infiltrate 2-3 mls of local anaesthetic into the area where the cut will be made, along the scar and in both sides of the scar. Take care that you do not cause injury to the structures underneath the scar (urethra, labia minora and clitoris). With type III FGM/C, these structures are commonly found intact below the scar. Once the local anaesthesia has taken effect, locate the remaining opening, using a finger feel inside

the opening, behind the closed scar tissue for any dense adhesions. Usually the finger slides easily under a free flap of skin. If the opening is too small to allow passage of one finger the closed points of an artery forcep can be inserted and opened to allow initial division from the posterior part of the closed flap for a centimeter or so which will then allow entry of a finger. Palpate the clitoral region to ascertain if a buried clitoris is present below the scar.

### **Step Three:**

Raise the scar tissue from the underlying tissues using a finger or dilator. Make an anterior midline incision with a curved tissue scissors to expose the urethral opening. Do not incise beyond the urethra. Extending the incision forward may cause haemorrhage, which is difficult to control. Take great care not to incise a buried clitoris.

### **Step Four:**

After dividing the fused labia majora, an intact clitoris and labia minora have sometimes been found concealed by scar tissue. However this operation is more complex and requires careful dissection in good light and with good anaesthesia; it should only be carried out in a health facility/ hospital setting. A more extensive opening up of the fused labia majora may not be culturally acceptable to all women, but could be considered in specialized centres. Appropriate counselling and the consent of the women are essential before proceeding with more extensive de-infibulation. Suture the raw edges using absorbable interrupted sutures to secure haemostasis and prevent adhesion formation. Healing should take place within one week.

### **Opening beyond the urethra**

- Using a dilator to elevate the scar tissue, the scar is frequently perforated due to inadequate healing.
- Careful dissection anterior to the urethra will reveal an intact, normal clitoris.
- Suture the raw edges with fine 3/0 plain catgut to prevent any adhesion formation. Plain catgut dissolves rapidly and the whole area is healed within a week.

### **Post operative care**

De-infibulation can be carried out on a day care basis. The choice of anaesthetic is important. For women who are not pregnant, fear of pain and memories of the FGM/C procedure make it advisable to select a general anaesthesia. Postoperative analgesia is also important and can be provided by infiltrating under the wound with 1% lignocaine, followed up with analgesia for the first 48 hours. It is important to follow up clients after a de-infibulation procedure.

Many women report increased sensitivity in the vulval area that was previously covered by the scar skin for 2 to 4 weeks following the procedure. They may also report discomfort about having wet genitals and a feeling that air is entering the vulva. Prepare the woman for these experiences by explaining to her that there will be changes in appearance and that she is likely to have increased sensibility. Reassure her that the sensibility will disappear after a while and that she will get used to the feeling of wet genitals.

Suggest that she takes sitz bath (warm water containing salt) three to four times a day followed by gentle drying of the area. As this will not be possible for many women who do not have access to water or bath, discuss alternatives that would also assist in the healing and recuperation process. Application of a soothing cream can be prescribed for the first 1-2 weeks. Advise her and her husband when to resume sexual intercourse- typically this will be after 4 to 6 weeks to allow adequate time for the wound to heal. Counselling regarding sexual matters requires great sensitivity, and should be carefully tailored according to the needs of the client and her family and to what is culturally appropriate. It may also require over several sessions.

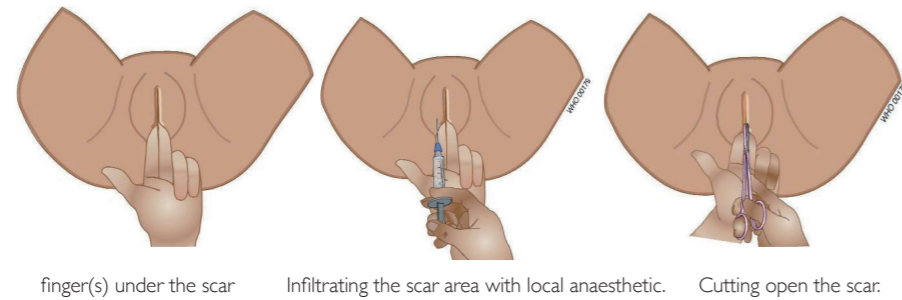
Advise the client on the importance of personal hygiene. Make a follow-up appointment to monitor healing progress and to deal with any other issue that may have arisen concerning the genitals or sexual relationship. In the months following surgery, vulval hypertrophy often occurs, presumably due to some erectile tissue remaining in the base of the residual vulva. In favourable cases, by six months, the vulva is indistinguishable from normal.

It is important to be aware of women's expectations surrounding sexuality after surgery, and to provide appropriate counselling. Some women have very high expectations and have consequently been disappointed. Traditionally, in some communities, intercourse occurs immediately after the woman has been de-infibulated to prevent the wound edges adhering. It is therefore important to counsel the couple to wait at least ten to fourteen days for the wound to heal and lubricant should be offered to assist with intercourse. Women should be advised to bathe or wash daily, and a follow up appointment should be given.

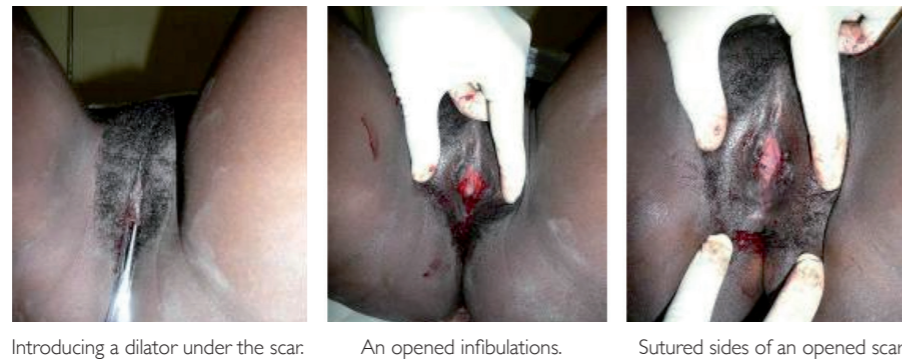


In the following images, we can observe the procedure for the opening up of type III (see Figure 6 and 7).

**Figure 6. Procedure for opening up type III'**



**Figure 7. Surgical intervention of opening up type III**



## References

1. WHO (2001) Female Genital Mutilation. Integrating the prevention and the management of the health complications into the curricula of nursing and midwifery. A student's manual. Geneva, WHO/FCH/GWH/01.4.
2. REPUBLIC OF KENYA MINISTRY OF HEALTH (2009) *Management of complications in pregnancy, childbirth and the postpartum period in the presence of FGM/C. A reference manual for Health Service Providers.* Nairobi, Ministry of Health.

# 7

## MANAGEMENT OF WOMEN WITH FGM/C DURING PREGNANCY, LABOUR AND DELIVERY

Women with FGM/C require sensitive antenatal care. Types I, II and III can produce severe vulval and vaginal scarring which may cause obstruction during labour and delivery. Infection and inflammation at the time FGM/C was performed may result in vulva adhesions which narrow or completely occlude the vaginal orifice. Insertion of herbs or other substances may also cause severe scarring and stenosis.

Where FGM/C did not result in any particular complications (did not limit the space or skin turgor of the introitus, and did not lead to any chronic complications), the woman will require no special management or treatment during pregnancy. Some women do not require any special management during pregnancy other than emotional/social support and anticipatory guidance for the delivery. Reassure the woman that you do not expect any FGM/C-related complications and invite her to ask any questions related to FGM/C or other issues.

- Remember that many women approach pregnancy and delivery with great fear of its outcome, including fear of death. Therefore special support and counselling is required during this period.

## Management of women with FGM/C during pregnancy

The woman who has undergone FGM/C is at risk of complications during this period. The consequences of FGM/C in the female genital tract hinder the required accurate examinations for proper antenatal care. Sometimes, insertion of the vaginal speculum and bimanual vaginal exam is difficult because of stenosis or narrowing of the vaginal introitus. This makes it difficult for a proper examination and specimen collection for diagnosis of diseases such as vaginal infections, urinary tract infections and sexually transmitted infections. Furthermore, the lack of proper diagnosis causes inadequate treatment of the above-mentioned infections, increasing the risk of premature rupture of membranes, chorioamnionitis, preterm birth and dystocic delivery (caesarean).

In case of type III, defibulation will have to occur prior to delivery. It is recommended that defibulation is done in the second trimester of pregnancy, but can also be done just prior to delivery (See Module 6 of the present Manual and/or reference 5 of the bibliography).

## Management of women with FGM/C during labour and delivery

### Procedure

In addition to the standard management of all women in labour the following points should be given special consideration in women who have undergone FGM/C:

- If there is a problem with assessment such as a tight introitus making vaginal examination impossible, the scar can be opened along the midline. The incision should be made at the height of a contraction, and usually after the administration of a local anaesthetic. Use of episiotomy may be preferred. There tends to be little bleeding from the relatively avascular scar tissue and suturing of the incision can be delayed until after delivery. If the situation allows, labour can be assessed using other parameters such as contractions, descent of the presenting parts, and foetal heart rates.
- Observe the woman closely and monitor vital signs as condition requires;
- Give clear and simple information to the patient about what she should expect during delivery, and allay anxiety/fear;
- Record all observations in the partograph.

## Assessment of the introitus during labour

It is important to inspect the introitus carefully during the second stage of labour to assess whether it is going to be able to stretch sufficiently during delivery of the baby.

The procedure is as follows:

- Prepare the woman psychologically for this procedure by telling her what you are going to do and why such an assessment is needed;
- Ask her permission to examine her genitalia;
- Prepare equipment – a tray with antiseptic, sterile swabs and gloves;
- Prepare the woman by putting her into a lithotomy position; expose only the necessary parts of the body;
- Wash hands with soap and water and put on gloves;
- Clean the external genitalia with antiseptic swab;
- Kindly request the patient to relax by taking a deep breath while you are introducing a finger into the introitus;
- Try slowly and carefully to introduce first one finger into the vagina to measure the tightness of the introitus. If it allows one finger, try to move the finger upward and downward and left to right. If there is space for a second finger, try to widen the two fingers and check the resistance;
- If it is impossible to introduce a finger, or even the tip of a finger, the introitus is extremely tight – equivalent to type III;
- If it is possible to introduce a finger but impossible to stretch the opening at all because of resistance due to scar tissue, it will be necessary to open up the introitus by performing an episiotomy;
- If there is need for an episiotomy, inform the patient and perform the procedure following the guidelines described in this material.

It is important for practitioners to know that when labour is slow, they should anticipate a difficult delivery and make appropriate arrangements in good time:

- If it is clear that an episiotomy would facilitate delivery, it should be performed skilfully;
- If there is a need for opening up the infibulation, the woman should be prepared and the procedure should be undertaken;
- If a caesarean section is required, the woman should be referred in good time to a health centre with appropriate facilities.

In many cases, the doctor decides to perform caesarean section on patients in labour and delivery for various reasons. In the cases when the problem is due to stenosis caused by FGM/C, it may be hard to introduce the Foley catheter. In these cases, the patient is subjected to caesarean section without a bladder catheter, which presents as a challenge to the surgeon and a great risk of injury to the bladder during surgery.

### **Assessment and management of women with types I, II and III FGM/C during labour**

Management of women with FGM/C during labour is the same as for any other woman, except where FGM/C has caused vaginal stenosis and inelasticity of the perineal muscle. In such cases, there may be a need for an episiotomy (in women with type III, the infibulation must be opened up during the second stage of labour).

Women with type I tend to be able to deliver vaginally without episiotomy unless there is extensive scarring causing inelasticity of the perineum.

- If FGM/C has caused a tight introitus there is a need to increase the vaginal opening by performing an episiotomy. This is usually performed during the second stage of labour, when the presenting part is pressing on the vulva.
- Usually a tight introitus will have been identified during the first stage of labour, and the woman should have been prepared for the performance of episiotomy at that time.
- If the woman has arrived at the ward already in the second stage of labour, explain to her the need to increase the opening by performing an episiotomy, and inform her of when and how this will be done.

If a woman presents with type III and Caesarean section is more appropriate than defibulation and vaginal delivery, explain the need for the operation and ask her consent to perform it, or refer her to a major health center.

The performance of an episiotomy is as follows:

- Prepare the patient;
- Prepare a tray with antiseptic swabs, episiotomy scissors, sterile gloves, a 5 ml syringe and local anaesthetic;
- Inform the patient that you are going to cut open the perineal area to increase space for the baby to pass easily;
- Wash hands, put on gloves, clean the perineal area;
- Introduce one or two fingers (they should go in easily), positioning them where you are going to administer the anaesthetic. This protects the baby's head;
- Infiltrate 2-3 ml of local anaesthetic along the fingers to avoid injuring the baby and into the area where the cut will be made;
- With your finger or fingers inside the vagina – they should be between the scissors and the baby's head – introduce the scissors and cut along the fingers to avoid injury to the baby. Start at the centre of the perineum and angle (slant) your scissors out at a 60 degree angle. If you are right-handed, cut towards the mother's right buttock. If left handed, cut towards the mother's left buttock. Following cutting, the baby is usually delivered slowly;
- Press a gauze firmly over the cut area while the woman continues to push;
- Immediately after delivery, the cutting and any tears must be sutured;
- Take care of the mother and the baby;
- Educate patient on vulva hygiene and keeping the perineum clean;
- Wash hands and clear equipment.

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# 8

## MANAGEMENT OF WOMEN WITH FGM/C DURING THE POSTPARTUM PERIOD AND CONDITION OF BABY

### Management of women with FGM/C following delivery

#### Procedures for assessment

Immediately after delivery, the mother should be assessed as follows:

- Check for retained products and make sure uterus is well contracted. Check the bladder and empty it if necessary, or administer oxytocic drugs;
- If you have delivered the baby, change gloves for another sterile pair;
- Check for tears on the vulva and inside the birth canal;
- Clean the vulval area to enable you to look into the external genitalia;
- Use good light to assess for tears in the vaginal wall and on the cervix if you are unable to visualise a speculum maybe required;
- If necessary, introduce the speculum very slowly as this may cause pain to the woman;
- Look along the inside of the vaginal wall and at the cervix;
- If there is bleeding or tears, take appropriate action immediately.

Practitioners must ensure that the baby is assessed immediately after delivery as follows:

- Apply the Apgar score test;
- If the baby is asphyxiated, resuscitate and send for appropriate medical attention.

### Complications after delivery

Complications after delivery for a woman with FGM/C may include the following:

- Excessive primary bleeding due to injury of the arteries and veins as a result of tears;
- Secondary bleeding as a result of retained products;
- Infection which may lead to septicaemia;
- Urine retention;
- Injury to adjacent tissue due to tears, if the delivery is not managed correctly. This may result in incontinence of urine and/or faeces, vesico-vaginal fistula (VVF), and sexual problems if repair was not carried out properly;
- Neonatal asphyxia due to obstructed labour; this may result in brain damage to the baby.

Remember that the management of women with FGM/C during the postpartum period is the same as for any other woman. However, these women will need more psychological care in cases where the vulva has been opened up and not closed to restore the genitalia to the condition they were in before pregnancy and delivery.

### Immediate care in cases of haemorrhage:

The medical practitioner should do the following:

- Suture any tears and episiotomies immediately. Also suture any lacerations on an opened infibulation. Never refibulate;
- If the uterus does not contract, expel any clots, massage the uterus to aid contraction and administer oxytocic drugs if necessary;
- Keep the patient warm;
- Collect blood sample for full blood count (FBC), grouping and cross matching;
- If postpartum haemorrhage is severe, call or refer for adequate medical intervention.

In cases of neonatal asphyxia resuscitate the newborn and send for specific medical attention.

### References

- WHO (2000) *Management of pregnancy, childbirth and the postpartum period in the presence of Female Genital Mutilation. Report of a WHO Technical Consultation. Geneva 15-17 October 1997.* Geneva, WHO/FCH/WMH/00.7.

# 9

## COUNSELLING

Counselling is defined as helping someone to explore a problem so that they cope more effectively and make an informed choice or decision. It is an important element in the prevention of FGM/C and in the management of complications. Counselling of a girl or woman with FGM/C complications should be strictly confidential. If the patient has a partner, he should be counselled separately until the right moment for them to be counselled as a couple. The aim of counselling is to help a woman, couple, or family to come to terms or solve problems. During a counselling session it is important to build a trusting relationship with the patient so that he/she feels safe in discussing her/his concerns with you as the counsellor.

The strategy is to provide confidential counselling support to help people in need. It is a tool to prevent damage and promote positive changes regarding FGM/C in girls and women. Counselling as a tool of communication takes place in the environment where people who need it live. It establishes a dialogue that allows participants to engage, starting out from their own needs and emotions. Counselling provides orientation, information, emotional support and help in decision-making.

The counselling should be addressed to women and girls who have been subjected to FGM/C, and to couples, families and the whole community. It is a way to offer knowledge about the issue, explained by a person from the community itself properly trained.

There are different types of counselling. Select those that are more feasible given the situation where it takes place. The most widely used and effective is face-to-face counselling, which establishes a direct dialogue between counsellor and counselee.



This is usually the most suitable, taking into account the ethical and human aspects of the FGM/C issue. There are alternatives, such as using email or telephone to provide information, but the final choice depends, among other factors, on the actual conditions and the subject matter being addressed.

Who provides the counselling service?

People who are previously trained in the subject and experienced in this type of professional help. They should be characterised as being sensitive, tolerant, unbiased, sincere, trustworthy, discreet, understanding and willing to self-train.

There are several factors to be considered in making the counselling more effective. These are related to the place where it is developed, the attitude of the counsellor and the relationship between him or her and the other party. There must at all times be an atmosphere of confidentiality, respect, trust and safety for the patient.

Important elements to consider are:

- **Reception** - Receive the patient warmly and greet her;
- **Privacy and confidentiality** – make sure that counselling is carried out in a room where nobody can come in without permission, and where the discussion cannot be overheard by other people;
- **Patience** – you should be relaxed and not pressed for time;
- **A carefully considered seating plan** – counsellor and patient should be on the same level and seated opposite to each other, with no barriers between them so that the counsellor can lean towards the patient to demonstrate attentiveness and support during the discussion;
- **Eye contact** – it is important to look at the patient directly and to observe her carefully so that you become aware of her facial expressions (body cues), as these may tell a different story from her words. You should not look her straight in the eye all the time, but observe the whole person and her actions;
- **Attentive listening** – observe the patient's tone of voice as well as what she is saying as this may tell you more than her words. You should allow the patient to do most of the talking, but try to summarise what has been said from time to time to confirm that the information shared is well understood by both;

- **Show concern** (empathising) – try to put yourself in the patient's position and show that you care;
- **Appropriate facial expressions** – you should be aware of your facial expression and ensure it is appropriate to what is being said. Smile when you greet the patient, but if she cries during the session your facial expression should show sympathy and concern;
- **Respect** – you should always show respect for your patients as dignified human beings with their own values and religious and cultural beliefs;
- **A non-judgmental attitude** – it is very important not to be judgmental. As a counsellor you need to be aware of your prejudices so that they do not interfere with the counselling process.

#### **In counselling there are certain rules that facilitate communication and can serve as a guide to establish dialogue:**

- Welcome the patient (and her partner/husband if appropriate) and invite her to sit down;
- Greet her and introduce yourself in the culturally appropriate manner;
- Ask the patient her name and ask if you can help her with anything;
- Let the patient talk and encourage her by nodding or saying "yes" from time to time;
- Give the patient information about the services available (e.g. management of FGM/C complications) in your clinic or centre and the staff who will care for her;
- Let the patient explain her concerns;
- Be patient, as she may find it hard to express her experiences and feelings;
- Listen carefully and observe non-verbal clues (e.g. body language, tone of voice) to enhance your understanding of the patient's situation;
- Summarise the patient's information from time to time to check that you have heard her correctly and avoid misunderstanding;
- Show concern throughout the session by being attentive and making eye contact from time to time;
- Empathise with the patient when she is describing a disturbing experience, which may make her weep;
- Explain to the patient how you can help if the purpose of counselling is to discuss the need to manage an FGM/C related complication;
- Give her detailed information about the problem and the procedure you will use to address it;
- Give her information about any operations that may be necessary and the post-operative care;
- If counselling is for psychosocial or sexual problems, ask such questions as may be appropriate to draw out as much information from the patient as possible about her problems;

- Assist the patient, and her partner where appropriate, to make an informed decision on the steps to be taken to solve the problem;
- Assist them to act on their decision by giving advice on how to proceed;
- Give the patient an appointment for another counselling or follow-up session to prepare for the next step, if necessary;
- If the problem persists, refer to a specialist.

It must be taken into account that the patient's problem may not be resolved in a single counselling session. Several sessions may be required to resolve a relationship problem and reach optimal psychological well-being. The counsellor should be prepared to spend as much time as necessary for this process.

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# 10

## COMMUNITY HEALTH EDUCATION AND ADVOCACY

Prevention of FGM/C and enabling people to cope with its effects require concerted and collective action. Health workers have an important role to play in influencing people's perceptions, attitudes and behaviours as regards to FGM/C. Communities need to be involved in appraising and addressing the issues related to FGM/C through organised health education.

Health professionals are influential members of society and as such they are key actors in community education against FGM/C. It is important that they understand the art of effecting positive behaviour change with regard to FGM/C. They need to involve communities in this process.

A **community** is a social unit of any size that shares common values. The community may share beliefs, resources, preferences, needs and risks, and may have cultural, ethnic, religious or other characteristics in common. In the context of FGM/C, the community is a group of people (including individuals and families) who either live in an urban or rural area and who tend to share beliefs, values and attitudes regarding this practice. Community involvement means working with the people to address their needs and find solutions to their problems. It is a process where community members take the lead.

### **Community Health Education**

Health education is recognised as an essential strategy to achieve good health indicators, addressing the impact of the disease and prolonging capable and autonomous life. It includes the processes that enable people to understand and accept responsibility for their own health, as well as to develop the skills necessary to maintain it. It fosters positive habits that promote individual and collective welfare.

Health education is the process of bringing about positive change of attitudes and behaviours among individuals, groups and the community. It enables individuals and groups to make informed decisions and choices. The objective of community health education in the context of FGM/C is to encourage and promote positive change of attitudes and behaviours towards the practice. It is important that community members take full control and responsibility for any decisions reached by them as individuals, families and groups. As health professionals are respected by individuals, families and communities they have a major role to play in promoting positive responses to FGM/C. Some are already members of civil society organisations (CSOs) working to bring about change in their communities with regard to the practice.

The doctor or health worker is no longer considered the only source of expert information or engine of change in the population. Nowadays there is talk of participatory and liberating education in a positive environment for creativity, helping to train individuals in self-esteem, motivation, social awareness and commitment. Thus one objective of health education in relation to FGM/C is to encourage self-care in girls and women, or to foster the personal decision to protect their own health. This is a very complex process and to achieve change it is not enough simply to give information; it becomes necessary to change behaviour with the active participation of the community.

It is also necessary to promote the participation of community leaders in health education with regard to FGM/C. These include religious leaders, politicians, midwives and so on. Recognising the high level of influence that these individuals exert within the community is one of the elements to modify people's knowledge, attitudes and practices in relation to FGM/C.

Another element to consider is the training of women health promoters. It is known that gender inequality and discrimination directly and indirectly harm the health of girls and women throughout their life cycle. It is therefore important that they take an active attitude to FGM/C. One of the strategies that facilitate educational activities on FGM/C in the community is to train girls and women. This can be achieved when the specific conditions of each place allow trained health professionals to develop the process, which consists in selecting girls and women who will voluntarily receive preparation that allows them to inform, advise and support women in their own community with regard to FGM/C.

## Strategies and means

One aspect that influences the impact of health education of communities against FGM/C is that it must be organised and systematic.

The first requirement is to learn about the practice and to be clear about the reasons given by people for practicing it. Health professionals should know that FGM/C is not just a health issue but a gender, human rights and ethical issue. The solution to the problem lies not only in giving information on the health consequences of FGM/C but also in advising on the various dimensions of the problem. The health workers' role is to contribute to the process of change. Health professionals can assist individuals, families and communities in this process using the following strategies:

- Building a good, strong relationship with the community through influential people;
- Demonstrating a caring attitude in the community and participating in community life;
- Integrating education and counselling against FGM/C into day-to-day practice as doctors, nurses, midwives and public health officers;
- Identifying and collaborating with influential leaders and other key individuals and groups within the community;
- Interacting with individual people or groups in the community;
- Forging partnership with CSOs and organised community groups that may have a stake in FGM/C or other harmful traditional practices;
- Conducting small focus group discussions;
- Enrolling, training and using volunteers and peer health educators in the community;
- Assisting people to think through the practice of FGM/C and its effects on health and on human rights;
- Identifying resources within the community that could be used in FGM/C prevention programmes/activities;
- Suggesting strategies for changing the practice, e.g. a culturally acceptable alternative ceremony to mark the rite of passage; and training women, men and youth in problem-solving skills;
- Supporting individuals and families to cope with the problems of FGM/C and with adjusting to change;
- Using other good communication practices of proven effectiveness in the country/community;
- Working through credible agents and intermediaries in the community.

When discussing sensitive issues like FGM/C in traditional settings, it is advisable to always set the scene with a short story or sharing of personal experiences.

Because of the personal and cultural sensitivity of the subject, it is important that discussions are carefully planned and conducted appropriately. As a general rule, discussions should be held with individuals, families and groups alone, unless and until people are ready to discuss the issue more openly in the community.

### Setting the stage for Community Health Education

It is always advisable to know the depth of the pool before jumping into it. Likewise, it is important that health professionals or other agents of change involved in FGM/C prevention have adequate working knowledge of the local social environment. Remember to always take the back seat and let local agents/facilitators lead the process.

- **Assess and decide on appropriate ways of communicating on FGM/C.** For example:
  - One-to-one discussions;
  - Group discussions, such as with a family, organised group or focus groups;
  - Health talks at clinics;
  - Use of drama;
  - Songs by traditional communicators;
  - Story telling;
  - Use of peer educators;
  - Workplace sessions;
  - School-based activities including Coranic Schools.
- **Know the target audience:**
  - Identify the participant group (individuals, families or groups);
  - Decide who to reach (women, youth, men or mixed);
  - Know the background of the intended participant group (educational level, language, age, socio-economic status, level of exposure).

- **Find out about the practice of FGM/C locally. Explore the following:**
  - What type of FGM/C is performed locally?
  - What are the reasons for practicing FGM/C?
  - What perceived problems or complications do people experience during or after the procedure and how they are handled?
  - Who performs FGM/C?
  - Perceptions about girls who are not cut.
- Identify who the chief decision-makers are in the community regarding FGM/C;
- Ensure that people who will be involved in implementing the Community Education programme are well trained.
- **Prepare yourself very well:**
  - Have all the information and materials you need;
  - Organise your materials and equipment;
  - Make sure the intended programme participants are well informed and prepared before any session;
  - Ensure that any communication materials and messages used are based on research.
- **Create and maintain trusting relationships:**
  - Establish a rapport with the target audience;
  - Show respect for people's beliefs and values regarding FGM/C;
  - Greet people in a culturally respectful manner;
  - Always introduce yourself and the rest of the team;
  - Make sure people are comfortable with you and with the setting before opening a dialogue;
  - Show regard for the community's values and norms;
  - Anticipate possible questions and get your facts together.

### Strategies for involving specific community groups

In order to involve a particular group or section of the community in the prevention of FGM/C, the change agent should do the following:

- Identify all appropriate forums and opportunities for engaging the target group;
- Establish good relationships with and use community leaders and other influential people as an entry point;
- Share clear information about the health effects, human rights implications and other undesirable effects of FGM/C for children and women;
- Share clear information about the anatomy and physiology of the female genitalia;
- Identify and discuss misconceptions;
- Work hard to enrol local advocates and work with them;
- Use film shows, posters or other types of communication aid, as appropriate, and encourage everyone to participate in the discussions;
- Assist the participant groups with developing their own strategies for prevention;
- Use drama groups where feasible;
- Explore current beliefs, perceptions and attitudes of community members and use the information to plan the FGM/C communication/education strategy;
- Identify and discuss misconceptions;
- Use participatory communication approaches in discussions;
- Borrow any good communication/education practices;
- Involve men and youth right from the beginning to avoid FGM/C being perceived as a women's affair;
- Address women's lack of power and self-esteem by promoting self-awareness, assertiveness, and problem-solving skills;
- Ensure that positive community attitudes and values are identified and reinforced in the Community Health Education programme/activities.

### Advocacy

#### Concept and definition

Advocacy means speaking up or making a case in favour of a specific cause in order to win support for it. The involvement of political and community leaders and key policy-makers at all levels in the effort to eliminate FGM/C is very important. These people are major opinion-leaders and decision-makers in society.

Advocacy includes tools to facilitate the active participation of people involved in the processes of social and political management and resource mobilisation in the different fields, at regional, national and international levels. It is a strategy to influence policy that includes several sectors of the population. In the case of FGM/C it contributes to bringing together women and girls and building of a new vision in defending their rights.

Over the last decade numerous organizations and individuals have become involved in community-based activities aimed at the elimination of FGM/C. These efforts have raised awareness of FGM/C worldwide and brought the issue to the attention of influential people at all levels of those societies where FGM/C is practiced. Elimination of the practice depends on the concerted effort of everyone with an interest in protecting the health of women and girls.

There are different steps to be considered in advocacy, such as information gathering and analysis, identification of target audiences and key individuals for advocacy, the setting of advocacy objectives and monitoring and evaluation.

#### Steps

Information gathering and analysis

Before launching an advocacy programme it is necessary to collect reliable information on FGM/C, including the following:

- Prevalence of the practice locally and nationally;
- Who the excisers are;

- Rationale and reasons given for the practice;
- Age at which excision is performed;
- Factors that motivate the community and individuals to maintain the practice;
- Those who make the decisions;
- Perceptions of girls who are not cut;
- Current knowledge of the health and social consequences of the practice;
- Responses of the community to past efforts directed at preventing the practice.

Detailed background information is essential for planning advocacy strategies and formulating appropriate messages/arguments.

### **Identification of target audiences and key individuals for advocacy**

Politicians, government officials, private sector executives and the civil society fraternity are key agents in the prevention of FGM/C and addressing the issues related to it. Media practitioners, community/religious leaders, organisations for women and youth organisations are also key stakeholders. All of these categories should be targeted for advocacy.

### **The setting of advocacy objectives**

The change sought on the part of each target audience for advocacy should be clearly spelt out. For instance, advocacy could be aimed at legislation against the performing of FGM/C or at establishing penalties for health professionals who engage in the practice. A variety of positive responses is needed from political leaders, legislators and key policy and decision-makers in both the public and private sectors, as well as in civil society.

### **Monitoring and evaluation**

The advocacy programme must be monitored using clearly developed indicators and objectives. Through routine monitoring, managers of an advocacy programme will be able to keep track of successes, changes and problems.

### **Essence of advocacy in FGM/C**

Advocacy should be aimed at achieving the following:

- Development of professional regulations and programmes;
- Visible political commitment to eradicating the practice;
- Signing of international declarations that condemn the practice;
- Making local conditions conducive to application of international conventions (domestication of conventions and protocols);
- Developing policies and plans of action for eliminating the practice, including setting targets for elimination and developing national and district-level indicators for monitoring and evaluating programmes;
- Integrating efforts to include FGM/C into mainstream health and education programmes;
- Legislating against the practice;
- Building partnerships with NGOs, CSOs and communities in order to bring about change.

### **Advocacy strategies**

Organised communication is the backbone of advocacy. The selection of an advocacy strategy from the many possibilities that may be considered is influenced by objectives, the issue at hand and the intended target audience.

### **The most important strategies in advocacy include:**

- Building coalitions with, for example, NGOs, CSOs or institutions with similar interests;
- Effective use of mass media;
- Working with communities;
- Conferences and seminars;
- Lobbying through direct personal contact.

### **Building coalitions**

Building partnerships with other active organizations or individuals in the same field has several advantages. It allows for the sharing of experience and expertise, and the pooling of resources. Besides, there is strength in numbers. Well-briefed pressure groups can be a key ally in a coalition which intends to push for changes in policies, laws and programmes or services and to influence major decisions. Examples of pressure groups include trade unions, student unions, communities, consumer groups and professional bodies.

### **Working with the mass media**

Both the electronic and print mass media can be used to reinforce advocacy activities. The media is a powerful tool and can provide significant impact if used properly. The media may be employed to articulate the views of advocates and those affected by an issue. Articles published in newspapers or stories broadcast on the radio and television spread the message far and wide. Building partnerships with media organisations is therefore a valuable exercise and the first task in establishing such a relationship is to educate relevant people in the media about FGM/C.

### **Working with communities**

Change will only occur when people who practice FGM/C are convinced of the case for eliminating it. Thus working through community gatekeepers to raise awareness of the issues, educating and informing them is a vital part of any advocacy programme.

### **Lobbying**

This means canvassing support 'behind closed doors' and applying pressure to try to influence people's opinions and actions. It is usually a slow process, requiring great patience and persistence on the part of the lobbyist, and can take the form of one to one direct personal contact.

### **Conferences**

Conferences are the most suitable type of strategy for some categories of intended target audience. They usually need a great deal of planning.

### **Advocacy kits**

An advocacy kit is a collection of facts neatly packaged and disseminated to an audience. It contains strong and compelling arguments to support a cause.

### **Public events**

Public events can also be used as a channel to articulate FGM/C as an undesirable and harmful traditional practice. They can range from rallies, exhibitions and celebrations to parades and seminars.

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## A

In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful  
Peace and salvation on the Holy Prophet Mohammed  
International Conference of Islamic Scholars (Ulemas) of the West African Region On the Position  
of Islam Regarding Practices Harmful to Women  
FATWA  
Praise be to Allah

An International Conference of Islamic Scholars (Ulemas) of West Africa, Egypt and Sudan on the position of Islam regarding practices harmful to women was held in Nouakchott, capital of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania during the period of 14 to 16 Shawwl 1432 AH corresponding to September 12-14, 2011.

The symposium brought together Islamic Scholars from Egypt, Sudan, Senegal, Gambia, Guinea Conakry, Guinea Bissau, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, in addition to an elite of scholars and imams from Mauritania. The symposium was devoted to discussion of the phenomenon of Female Genital Mutilation/cutting (FGM/C), common in the above cited countries, and brought to light the texts and purposes of The Sharia, in addition to the experiences of experts and views of doctors on the topic.

After much discussion on the fatwas issued by Al-Azhar Cherif and other Islamic scientific institutions, After learning about the foundations of the fatwa issued by some of the scholars of Mauritania in January 2010.

Considering all this, and based on the following general information and specific Islamic teachings:

1. The legal discourse on FGM/C states that it is not on the level of a mandatory requirement of Islam, but it has constituted an honor among the Maalikis, and he who leaves it behind incurs no penalty and is not condemned by the Sharia and therefore its abandonment has become widespread among many Muslim nations including some areas of Mauritania.
2. The form practiced in parts of Mauritania and West Africa is similar.
3. International health institutions have demonstrated through research the damage of this practice for girls and women in the short term and the long term of their lives.
4. Among the accepted rules of Sharia is that warding off all harm to one's self trumps all other interests.

Considering the above and based on the verse: "... Do not expose yourself unnecessarily to deadly dangers," Qur'an, II, 195 and: "Truthfully Allah is compassionate towards you," Qur'an, IV, 29.

In light of the hadith of the Prophet, peace and salvation to him, "You will do no harm and will not suffer prejudice."

And on the basis of the decision of the scholars of the foundations of the Sharia changing the fatwa is not a change in the rules but an application of the rules to specific deeds and cases. Considering all this, the form of FGM/C known and practiced in Mauritania and Islamic countries being the same is not justified and it is prohibited by Sharia.

It is Allah who knows all!

Nouakchott, September 14, 2011

#### **On behalf of the participants, the drafting committee:**

- The Scholar Hamden Ould Tah: Mauritania
- Dr. Abdallah Al Nejjar: Egypt
- Dr. Youssouf Al Kewda: Sudan
- Cheikh Ousmane Sow: Senegal
- Dr. Ali Limam: Niger
- Professor Sidi Mohamed Ould Chawaf: Mauritania
- Professor Mohamed Abdallahi Ould Al Moustaphe: Mauritania
- Professor Baba Ould Maata: Mauritania
- Rapporteur Dr. Cheikh Ould zeine Ould Limam: Mauritania

#### **Participants: Ulemas from Visiting Countries**

1. Dr. Mohamed Wissam Abbas: Egypt
2. Dr. Abdallah Al Nejjar: Egypt
3. Dr. Youssouf Al Koda: Sudan
4. Faghiha Ahlam Elhassan: Sudan
5. Mahaman Bachir El Oumarou: Niger
6. Cheikh Ali Limane: Niger
7. Cheikh Souleymane Konfe: Burkina Faso
8. Mme Assita Toure Boro: Burkina Faso
9. Cheikh Imam Mangué Sylla: Guinea Conakry
10. Cheikh Imam Ibrahima Camara: Guinea Conakry
11. Dr. Aboubacar Abdullah Senghore: The Gambia
12. Imam Khalifa Diammeh: The Gambia
13. Cheikh Mahamadou Traoré: Mali
14. Cheikh Mahamadou Diallo: Mali
15. Imam Malam Djassi: Guinea Bissau
16. Imam Tchemo Embaló: Guinea Bissau
17. Imam Mouhamed Cherif Diop: Senegal
18. Imam Ousmane Sow: Senegal

#### **The Ulemas of Mauritania**

1. Hamden Ould Tah
2. Mohameden Ould Mahmouden
3. Aboubecrine Ould Ahmed
4. Lemrabott Ould Mohamed Lemine
5. Faqih Sidi Mohamed Ould Chewaf
6. Faqih Mohamed Abdallahi Ould Al Moustaphe
7. Dr. Cheikh Ould Zein Ould Limam
8. Imam Haddemine Ould Salek
9. Imam Cheikh Ould Cheikh Ahmed
10. Imam Abdel Wehab Ould Mohamed Lemine
11. Imam Mohamed Ould Biye

12. Imam Mohamed Abderrahmane Ould Zoueine
13. Imam Ball Mohamed El Bechir
14. Imam Mohamed Lemine Ould Oumehoud
15. Baba Ould Maata
16. Abbass Diabi
17. Boun Oumar Ly
18. El kory salem Ould Moctar El Haj
19. Abdallahi Cissé
20. Mohamed Ghally Ould Mahmoud
21. Mohamed Lemine Ould Brahim
22. Mohamedou Salem Oumar Sghair
23. Saad Bouh Ould Hamahoullah
24. Aw Amadou Aliou
25. Sid Brahim Ould Baba Ahmed
26. Tah Ould Mamoune
27. Mohamed Ali Ould Al Boukhari
28. Faqih Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Hamadi
29. Mohamed Abdallahi Ould Al Housseine
30. Khadil Ould Abderrahmane
31. El Hacem Ould Moulaye Ely
32. Moulaye Idriss Ould Eddewla
33. Cheikh Sid Ahmed Ould Sidi
34. Cheikh Sid El Mahjoub



**Women's Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equality  
Muslim Women's Shura Council**

**FEMALE GENITAL CUTTING: HARMFUL AND UN-ISLAMIC**

The Shura Council is a global and inclusive council of Muslim women scholars, activists, and specialists. The Council endeavors to connect Islamic principles to society's most pressing issues and develop holistic strategies for creating positive social change. In this statement, the Shura Council condemns Female Genital Cutting as a harmful and un-Islamic practice and makes suggestions for its elimination. In this, the Council is in accordance with the rising religious consensus on the issue, the views of the international human rights community, and published medical research.

**INTRODUCTION**

Female Genital Cutting (FGC) is the partial or total removal of the external female genitalia for non-medical reasons. The term describes a varied range of practices, including the following: slight pricking or nicking of the clitoral hood; hoodectomy (excision of the clitoral hood); clitoridectomy (excision of the clitoris); the excision of the clitoris and labia minora and majora; and infibulation (suturing) with excision of the external genitalia.

Commonly cited reasons for the practice include the faulty beliefs that FGC is "a good tradition" or a religious requirement or that it ensures "cleanliness" and prevents excessive clitoral growth. FGC is also deeply connected to marriage rituals and ideas about protecting virginity and preventing promiscuity. FGC is practiced openly in 28 different African countries, as well as secretly in parts of the Middle East,

Europe, Australia, and the United States. Over 130 million women worldwide have been affected by some form of FGC, and three million girls are at risk every year. Most children are subjected to FGC between the ages of four and ten years; however, there has been a recent downward shift in the age of victims.

### FGC IS HARMFUL

Medical consequences of FGC include, but are not limited to, the following: death through shock and/or excessive bleeding; infection; sepsis; urine retention; ulceration of the genital region; injury to adjacent genital tissue; scarring; infertility; cysts; painful sexual intercourse; increased risk of transmission of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS; and a range of resulting psychological and psychiatric problems.

The procedures are often performed in unsterile environments and with little or no anesthesia. Children who develop uncontrolled bleeding or infection under such conditions die within hours of the first incision. Risks associated with FGC are reduced but not eliminated when FGC is performed in modern medical facilities.

The practice has been widely condemned by medical, political, and religious authorities and is banned by a wide network of local, national, and international laws.

### FGC IS UN-ISLAMIC

**FGC is not a Muslim Practice:** FGC precedes the birth of both Islam and Christianity. Virtually unknown in many Muslim-majority countries, it is performed by Muslims, Christians, Jews and members of non-Abrahamic religions in areas where it is common.

**FGC contradicts every principle of Islam and every source of Islamic law:** Based on every single source guiding Islamic ethics, it is clear that FGC is unjustifiable on Islamic grounds. These sources include the Qur'an, the example and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (*sunnah and hadith*), the objectives and principles of Muslim religious law (*maqasid al-shari'a*), religious consensus (*ijma*), legal opinions (*fatawa*), and analogical deduction (*qiyas*).

### I. FGC Contradicts The Holy Qur'an:

- The Qur'an does not mention female genital cutting, and the Qur'anic messages of health, justice, and compassion clearly contradict the practice.
- The Qur'an promotes mutual pleasure during marital sexual intercourse (2:187 and 30:21), which is severely limited by FGC.
- The Qur'an repeatedly condemns acts that negatively affect the human body (30:30 and 2:195).

### II. FGC Contradicts the Prophet's Example (Sunnah) and Words (Hadith):

- There is no evidence that any female members of the Prophet's household were cut, whereas there is evidence that his grandsons were circumcised.
- The Prophet was exemplary in his kindness and gentleness towards all members of his family and is known to have said, "Whoever becomes the father of a girl, he should neither hurt her nor treat her with contempt."
- Scholars past and present have deemed all hadith that mention FGC weak, therefore not suitable for legal argumentation; even these weak hadith depict a curbing of the practice.

### III. FGC is Not Supported by Legal Consensus (Ijma) or Legal Opinions (Fatawa)

In accordance with the principle of protecting life and in confirmation of the important hadith, "there should be neither harming nor reciprocating harm," Islamic law forbids any attack on the human body, including any form of corporal harm or sexual assault. There is no consensus within classical legal (*fiqh*) schools on FGC; however it is likely that classical scholars who called FGC permissible were not aware of its harm, because only a cultural practice that does not hurt an individual or the society can be called permissible under Islamic law.

With the increase in scientific and medical knowledge on the effects of FGC on children, women, and families, extensive scholarly consensus has begun to form among contemporary scholars. Numerous learned fatwas have been issued against the practice worldwide, and an increasing tide of Islamic scholarship has been wearing down the cultural walls of FGC. In a global 2006 conference, an impressive array of high-level Islamic religious scholars from around the world declared FGC to be both contrary to Islam and an attack on women. In 2009, Egypt's Dār al-Iftā', the international flagship for Islamic legal research, released a fatwa, which denounced "female circumcision" as a harmful cultural rite: "Anyone who is acquainted with the reality of the matter cannot speak except in favor of its prohibition."

#### IV. FGC Cannot Be Supported by Analogy (Qiyas)

FGC is not analogous to male circumcision because a) it has no basis in Islamic texts b) functional organs as opposed to skin tissue are cut c) there is no unity of practice: it is performed only in some Muslim communities who differ to the extent of the incision d) there are proven medical benefits to male circumcision, including protection against HIV/AIDS, yet only medically proven harm from FGC, including increased transmission of HIV/AIDS.

#### V. FGC Contradicts the Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence (maqasid al-shari'a)

According to scholarly consensus, the six objectives and principles of Muslim religious law (Shari'a) include the protection and promotion of religion (*al-din*), life (*al-nafs*), mind (*al-'aql*), family (*al-nasl*), wealth (*al-mal*), and dignity (*al-'ird*). FGC violates at least five of these principles:

**The Protection of Life:** FGC harms infants, girls, and women, endangering their lives and the lives of their future children. In fact, FGC practicing regions have the world's highest maternal and infant mortality rates.

**The Protection of Mind:** FGC harms girl's minds by undermining their mental and psychosexual health, causing psychosis and trauma.

**The Protection of Family:** FGC prevents the proper fulfillment of conjugal relations and forecloses mutually pleasurable sexual relationships for husband and wives. It has been linked to infertility and divorce.

**The Protection of Dignity:** FGC harms a woman's dignity, condemning her to a life of serial infections and intimate scars. Disfiguring genitalia, on the unproven assumption that the practice prevents promiscuity, denies humans their divine right to free will and dignity.

**The Protection of Religion:** In many cases, suturing and scars make it impossible for the cut female to attain ritual cleanliness (*tahara*), denying her the right to worship. The unnecessary health problems caused by FGC prevent a woman from enjoying the two blessings the Prophet has praised: "health and free time for doing good."

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Shura Council condemns FGC as a harmful and un-Islamic practice that contradicts the spirit and the letter of Islam, violates international laws on children's and women's rights, and endangers populations in need. Research suggests that FGC can be eliminated very rapidly if communities themselves decide to do so. The Shura Council believes that the dissemination of religious information of FGC will help eradicate FGC, especially when combined with context-specific, culturally sensitive, grassroots measures. The Council suggests that activists seek the collaboration of local, national, and international religious authorities in the struggle to eliminate FGC.

## CAMPAIGNS AND ACTIVISM

To read the longer Shura Council statement against FGC, find information about current campaigns, and to connect with organizations and activists working to eradicate FGC, please visit: <http://www.wisemuslimwomen.org/currentissues/femalegenitalcutting>.





