

## GENDER PERSPECTIVES

## Female Circumcision

No other cultural practice has raised the ire of social activists as much as **female circumcision**. Human rights and feminist groups, medical practitioners, religious and political organizations, and many others have raised their voices against this ancient custom. Yet, many anthropologists believe we must look beyond the “shock” value and *listen* to the people who value female circumcision. Only then will we understand the cultural meanings behind female circumcision, and only then can we offer an informed opinion, one that is not rooted in cultural imperialism.

The origin of female circumcision remains unclear, although it dates back at least 3000 years. The practice is widespread in Africa, and is found in some areas of the Arabian Peninsula, and Indonesia and Malaysia. The World Health Organization (WHO) conservatively estimates 130 million women worldwide have undergone some form of female circumcision. Until the early 1900s, clitoridectomies were also practised in Western Europe and the United States to cure everything from masturbation to frigidity, and today immigrants have reintroduced female circumcision to the West.

Female circumcision involves the cutting, removal, or altering of part or all of a female’s external genitalia, often without anaesthetic and sterilized tools. The least invasive procedure, known as *sunna* circumcision, involves removing the clitoral prepuce (hood). In a clitoridectomy part or all of the clitoris and labia minora is removed. The most invasive procedure, pharaonic circumcision, involves the complete removal of external genitalia, and infibulation—stitching the cut tissue to leave a small opening for urine and menstrual flow. Government-trained midwives or an older relative such as the woman’s aunt perform the procedure. Babies as young as a few weeks are circumcised in some cultures, while in others women may not be circumcised until just before marriage, at around age 15.

Besides excruciating pain and terror, the young women may experience physical problems following the procedure, including infection, hemorrhage, septicemia, shock, and even death. Infibulation can cause urine and menstrual retention, bladder and bowel incontinence, and urinary tract and pelvic inflammations. When an infibulated woman is married, she must be cut open before intercourse, and then re-stitched following childbirth. This series of cutting and stitching causes a buildup of scar tissue and complications during childbirth. These health risks are used by outsiders as justification for ending the procedure, although much of the information on complications dates back to British colonial medical practitioners in the 1930s and ’40s, and these “facts” are often not supported by the experiences of the women. Nor can outsiders fully comprehend the significance of female circumcision. For example, the lack of anaesthetic during the procedure horrifies Westerners; however, the ability to bear pain with courage is an important part of these initiation rites, bringing honour to the young woman and her family.

Many reasons for continuing this practice have been offered—tradition being one. When asked, many adherents will explain it is the custom and always has been. A woman’s status may be closely linked to her role as a mother and wife, and men will marry only circumcised females. Indeed, Jomo Kenyatta, the first president of Kenya (1964–1978) unequivocally stated: “No proper Kikuyu would dream of marrying a girl who has not been circumcised.” Controlling women’s sexual behaviour is another reason. Losing her clitoris reduces a woman’s sexual pleasure, and presumably desire. Infibulation means a woman is “sewn up” and cannot be unfaithful, ensuring virginity before marriage and fidelity after marriage. Religious beliefs are also cited as an underlying reason. Many Sudanese believe that Islam commands pharaonic circumcision. Although Islamic scholars vehemently refute this interpretation, the belief that the Prophet Mohammed commanded the practice persists.

**Female circumcision.** The removal of all or part of a female’s genitalia for religious, traditional, or socioeconomic reasons

For people unfamiliar with the cultural significance of female circumcision, it is difficult to understand why anyone, especially mothers, would allow this procedure to be performed on their daughters. It is important to understand that female circumcision is not an act of cruelty; these parents care about their daughter's well-being as much as any parents do. The most contentious issue is global advocacy for human rights—a vague term often used or misused to satisfy various agendas. Opponents assert that forcing young women to undergo this unnecessary ritual is against their human rights. Yet, forcibly ending this practice, and taking away a woman's right to be circumcised and enjoy her new-found status could also be construed as a violation of her rights. The word *choice*, bandied around by feminists and social activists, is also at issue. Do the parents and the young woman really have a choice? Fulfilling the societal expectations in a community is a powerful force—and this holds true in all societies. Men are often blamed for perpetuating female circumcision, yet the procedure is controlled and maintained by women, and rather than oppression, female circumcision may actually empower women. Finally, to suggest that women who continue to practice female circumcision are submissive or "brainwashed" into continuing the practice is an insult to the intelligence and strength of all women.

Efforts to abolish female circumcision have met with limited success, especially in rural areas. WHO and UNICEF have pressured governments to ban female circumcision, and a few African governments have complied. Others have attempted to modify the procedure or provide more sanitary conditions, with little effect. The 1995 International Conference on the Status of Women, held in Beijing, China, declared female genital mutilation<sup>1</sup> a violation of human rights, and Canada and the United States have granted women political asylum based on the likelihood they or their children will face the procedure if forced to return to their homeland. However, some African feminist scholars take exception to the West's insensitive condemnation of this practice—what Morsy (1991) calls "rescue and civilizational" missions that are really attacks on their culture.

Even anthropologists have difficulty reaching a consensus concerning this issue. Mary Daly calls female circumcision "a manifestation of planetary patriarchy," and she accuses anthropologists

of ignoring or minimizing this ritual under the guise of cultural relativism. On the other hand, Janice Boddy points out that female circumcision downplays the sexuality of women and emphasizes their role as future mothers of men. Thus female circumcision is an important component of gender identity. Anthropologist Fuambai Ahmadu has firsthand experience with this procedure; she was circumcised during initiation into a secret women's society in Sierra Leone. From her perspective, protecting the rights of "a minority of women who oppose the practice is a legitimate and noble cause . . . mounting an international campaign to coerce 80 million African women to give up their tradition is unjustified."<sup>2</sup>

Female circumcision presents an ethical dilemma for anthropologists. Should they ignore the fundamental principle of anthropology—cultural relativism—and work toward the abolishment of female circumcision? Or should they remain neutral, acting only as observers? It seems clear that genuine, lasting change must come from within the societies that practise female circumcision, in the form of social movements led by women, and only after the socioeconomic problems faced by these women are addressed. Outside interference will do little to eradicate this practice, and excessive pressure from foreign agencies will only create a backlash and force the practice underground.

<sup>1</sup>The politics of words is evident here, the term *female genital mutilation* is used to symbolize Western disapproval.

<sup>2</sup>Shell-Duncan, B., & Hernlund, Y. (2000). Female "circumcision" in Africa: Dimensions of the practice and debates. In B. Shell-Duncan & Y. Hernlund (Eds.), *Female "circumcision" in Africa: Culture, controversy, and change* (p. 2). London: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

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