

Female Genital Mutilation: Right of Passage or Violation of Basic Human Rights?

By [Sian Bitner](#)

“They took me into an empty room and tying my arms behind my back, they hold my legs very tight so that I would not be able to move them. Then, another lady started to get a new blade and took the cover off of it. She was holding the blade in her hand when she disappeared between my legs, and I screamed more and more. This did not deter her nor did it make her to stop cutting my body any further. She continued slicing away until I lost consciousness. Even though this event took place over twenty years ago, I can still easily visualize the scene and feel the pain and trauma all over again when I start to talk about it.”

This is a direct quote from Khadra Hassan Farahetal, a victim of female genital mutilation. When reading this, one might have many reactions. In most cases anyone reading this would be sickened, disturbed, angered and sympathetic. Some people might even begin to wonder what they could do to help stop this ritual from continuing. Others may be confused about why the ritual was ever allowed in the first place.

In many countries, primarily in Africa, this ritual is not seen as cruel or barbaric. This ritual is seen as a rite of passage for young women, and it is a ritual that few laws can seem to eradicate regardless of efforts. The fact that the ritual is most prominent in countries that favor tradition over the justice only adds to the lack of support received by the victims.

So what is female genital mutilation? According to the Female Genital Mutilation Network, “It is a term used to refer to a practice which includes the removal or alteration of a female’s genitalia.” The practice is typically performed by non-medical professional, and is always performed without any anesthetic. The tools used to perform the ritual range from knives to razor blades, and pieces of glass. It is estimated that 140 million young women have already undergone the procedure and an ongoing 2 million girls per year will continue to be circumcised. The common age for a young woman to undergo the procedure is between the ages of birth and 14 years old.

Aside from the pain a woman obviously endures while undergoing this procedure, there are additional physical and mental damages she must cope with. All women who have had the ritual performed on them will suffer from one or more of the following: infection, hemorrhage, vaginal cysts, toxic shock, painful intercourse or difficult childbirth.

In more severe cases, an estimated 30% of these young women will die within hours or days after having the procedure done due to uncontrollable blood loss. There is also some question around the affects this ritual may have on the risk of spreading the HIV virus. In most countries, it is common for many women to be circumcised with the same instrument without that instrument being sterilized beforehand.

With the cases of HIV climbing to 3 million per year in Africa alone and 60% of the infected being women, it is reasonable to wonder if this procedure may be to blame for a large percentage of these cases. In addition to the physical damages caused by female genital mutilation, this ritual leaves behind many emotional scars as well.

Women who undergo the ritual tend to have very low body confidence, experience severe forms of sexual dysfunction, feel forced into their gender-controlled roles and display a sense of self-worthlessness in their daily activities.

At this point, one might ask how such a practice could ever be justified. The answer is simple: it is the culture and tradition of the people who perform it that allows for its justification. The Amnesty International USA web site states that, “female genital mutilation is practiced as a ritual signifying the acceptance of a woman into society and establishes her eligibility for marriage.”

The act of circumcision is seen as a “great moment in the life of a woman” and cause for celebration in the community. Most cultures believe that a woman uncircumcised is dirty, or unfit to marry. Any form of female stimulation is seen as non-hygienic and thought to kill a child during childbirth. There is also the belief that circumcision is the only way to control a woman’s insatiable and irresponsible sex drive.

In most of the countries that still practice the ritual, it is very unlikely that a woman who is uncircumcised will ever be able to marry, so the families will typically force the circumcision on their daughter as soon as she is considered to be ready for marriage. Some women decide for themselves to undergo the circumcision while still young in order to avoid being circumcised as an adult. In most of the countries that still practice the ritual, it is customary for women who avoided circumcision as a child, to be mutilated by their husbands while giving birth to their first child.

All this information poses another thought. Aside from the physical pain, mental anguish and possible death that are brought about to these young women by this ritual, there is also the forced sexual discrimination and violation of basic human rights.

Amnesty International USA claims that, “female genital mutilation is an instrument for socializing girls into prescribed gender roles within a family and community. It is therefore linked to unequal position of women in political, social and economic structures of society.” They also claim that the circumcision procedure is a deliberate infliction of severe pain and suffering on a woman, which is a direct violation of a woman’s human rights, which are defined as: the right to health, security, and physical integrity.

The ritual is additionally a violation of a woman’s personal rights as “it is the diminishment of a woman’s sexual pleasure (since the removal of the clitoris precludes orgasm), the control of her sexual and social life, and even a physical modification of her body to satisfy a male partner”. Female genital mutilation additionally violates a woman’s right to life, as the procedure can and often will eventually lead to death.

As if the concern for women's lives were not enough, there is the additional concern of the violation to the rights of a child. These basic rights are broken down into the following five separate Articles:

I. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Prohibition of torture, inhuman or degrading treatment.

II. Article 2 of the Convention on the Rights of a Child: Gender equality.

III. Article 19 of the Convention on the Rights of a Child: Prohibiting all forms of physical violence and mistreatment.

IV. Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of a Child: The right to the highest attainable standard of health.

V. Article 37 of the Convention on the Rights of a Child: Taking effective and appropriate measures to abolish all traditional practices prejudicial to children's health.

Each of these rights is clearly violated by not only the act of female genital mutilation itself, but also by the physical, social and mental after-effects that accompany it.

The question to ask now is what is being done to stop female genital mutilation? Currently, there are several government related organizations dedicated to the education and prevention of this ritual.

Some of these organizations include: Amnesty International, WHO, Rising Daughters Aware (formerly the Female Genital Mutilation Network), RAINBO (Research, Action and Information Network for Bodily Integrity of Women), and UNICEF. In addition, there are 66 local non-governmental organizations involved in research, education, and campaigns against female genital mutilation including; the National Association of Nigerian Nurses and Midwives, the Maendeleo Ya Wanawake Organization in Kenya, the national Research Network in Senegal, and the Seventh Day Adventist Church in Kenya.

Still, with all this education, support and legislation, female genital mutilation continues in more than 25 countries. Most agencies, both local and government organized say it is a result of cultural resistance.

It is difficult to say which fact of the supporting evidence is the most disturbing, or the most imperative reason to put a stop to female genital mutilation. One might even question if, in a society so supportive of culture and traditions, anything can even be done to bring an end to the ritual. As a human being, it should be impossible for anyone to ignore the torture and extreme disregard for human life that occurs beyond our borders.

There is no doubt that fighting this violent tradition will be a war that will take many battles to win. Education will be required. Vigor will be required. Determination and passion will be required. But mostly, change will be required. That change must come from the governments

who overlook the torture, choosing culture over law. It must come from the tribes that continue to fear the modernization that seeking alternate forms of rite of passage may bring to their lifestyle. It must especially come from the mothers and fathers who look past the tears, past the anguish and past the lost lives of their daughters for the mere sake of tradition. Bringing an end to this ritual will indeed require a long and intricate fight but frankly, is there anything more important than human life to fight for? I think not.