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Female Genital Mutilation¹ in Africa

Lorraine Koonce Esq

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is routinely practiced as tradition in twenty nine countries in Africa and the Middle East nations², many of them in West Africa³ distributed more or less contiguously across a zone running from Senegal in the west to the east.⁴ Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Tanzania, Togo and Uganda practice FGM.⁵

Definitions

FGM is a collective term used for the various degrees of cutting on the female external organs but despite the degrees of cutting, women and girls are subject to excruciating pain.⁶ It takes one of three forms: Sunna, Clitoridectomy and Infibulation or commonly a form of each three.⁷

- Sunna involves the removal of the clitoral prepuces with part of the clitoris remaining intact. It is also the rarest form.⁸
- Clitoridectomy mutilation is the removal of the clitoris and all or part of the labia minora. This particular form of FGM causes profound bleeding in the artery and extreme pain due to the sensitivity of this area that is constituted by special receptacles of nerve endings that are clustered in the clitoris.⁹
- Infibulation¹⁰ the most harrowing and common, involves the removal of all the genital parts. The vaginal introitus is obliterated except for a small posterior opening to allow the passing of urine and menstrual blood. The skin of the inner surface of the labia majora is scraped and stapled with strings and dwarf acacia thorns.¹¹

The vast majority (85%) of FGM performed in Africa consist of clitoridectomy or excision.¹² This particular practice affects essentially the entire female population of Somali, Djibouti and Sudan

¹ Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting: A Statistical Overview and Exploration of the Dynamics of Change, New York: United Nations Children's Fund, July 2013 (hereinafter UNICEF 2013) pp. 6–7.

² FGM in Africa: Information by Country (ACT 77/07/97).

³ West Africans fight FM in France, IRIN Paris 23 June 2008

⁴ ID.

⁵ Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting: A Statistical Overview and Exploration of the Dynamics of Change, New York: United Nations Children's Fund, July 2013 (hereinafter UNICEF 2013) pp 26 27

⁶ WHO | Classification of female genital mutilation (hereinafter WHO 2014)

⁷ There has been put forth the notion of five forms of FGM. Type IV makes specific references to a range of miscellaneous or unclassified practices including stretching of the clitoris and or labia, cauterization by burning of the clitorious and surrounding tissues, scraping (angurya cuts) of the vaginal orifice or cutting (gishri cuts) of the vagina and introduction of corrosive substances or herbs into the vagina to cause bleeding or for the purpose of tightening or narrowing it. Type V refers to symbolic practices that involve nicking or pricking the clitoris to release a few drops of blood. See also WHO 2014, FACTSHEET no 241 updated February 2014.

⁸ Eliminating Female Genital Mutilation: An Interagency Statement", New York: World Health Organization, 2008 (hereinafter WHO 2008) p25

⁹ WHO 2014 , FACTSHEET at 7

¹⁰ The term infibulation is derived from the Latin word fibula which means a clasp or pin

¹¹ Comfort Momoh, "Female genital mutilation" in Comfort Momoh (ed.), Female Genital Mutilation, Oxford: Radcliffe Publishing, 2005, p7

¹² WHO 2014 FACTSHEET at 7.

(except for the non-Muslim population of southern Sudan) Southern Egypt, the Red Sea coast of Ethiopia, northern Kenya, northern Nigeria and some portions of Mali.¹³

It is estimated that worldwide eighty million women and girls are harmed by at least one of the above practices. Over 130 million women and girls have experienced FGM in the 29 countries in which it is concentrated.¹⁴ Over eight million have been infibulated, a practice found largely in Djibouti, Eritrea, Somalia and Sudan.¹⁵ More than 125 million girls and women alive today have been cut in the countries in Africa and Middle East where FGM is concentrated.¹⁶ Egypt, Ethiopia and Nigeria have the highest number of women and girls living with FGM, 27.2 million, 23.8 million and 19.9 million respectively.¹⁷ There are no known health benefits.¹⁸

When is FGM performed?

FGM is performed on infants, girls, and women of all ages ranging from birth to age 15.¹⁹ However, the age at which FGM is performed varies from country to country²⁰ as it often depends upon the girl's country of origin and can vary widely even within countries. Quite frequently FGM is done before a girl reaches puberty. Sometimes, however, it is done just before marriage or during a woman's first pregnancy. In some areas it is carried out during infancy (as early as a couple of days after birth), in others during childhood, at the time of marriage, during a woman's first pregnancy or after the birth of her first child. The most typical age is 7 - 10 years or just before puberty, although there are indications that the age is decreasing in some areas.²¹ This decrease in age can be seen in Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Egypt, Kenya, and Mali. This has been attributed to making it easier to hide it from authorities in countries where there may be laws against it, younger girls are less able to resist,²² to reduce the trauma to the child and to avoid government interference and/or resistance from children as they get older and form their own opinions.

Some statistics and key facts

Over 80 percent of girls who experience FGM are cut before the age of five in Nigeria, Mali, Eritrea, Ghana, and Mauritania.²³ The percentage is reversed in Somalia, Egypt, Chad and the Central African Republic, where over 80 percent of those cut are cut between five and 14.²⁴ In Egypt, about 90 percent of girls who have undergone the procedure in Egypt are between the ages of 5 and 14²⁵ whilst in Ethiopia, 60 percent or more of the girls who underwent the procedure are before the age of 5.²⁶ Yet in Yemen, more than 75 percent of girls undergo FGM whilst they are still neonates at the age of 2

¹³ P. Stanley Yoder, Shane Khan, "Numbers of women circumcised in Africa: The Production of a Total"

¹⁴ Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting: What Might the Future Hold?, New York: UNICEF, 22 July 2014 (hereafter UNICEF 2014), p. 3/6:

¹⁵ P. Stanley Yoder, Shanxiao Wang and Elise Johansen, "Estimates of Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting in 27 African Countries and Yemen pp. 13–14.

¹⁶ UNICEF 2013 at 1 p2

¹⁷ ID

¹⁸ Female genital mutilation", New York: World Health Organization, February 2014.

¹⁹ UNICEF 2013 at 1 p50.

²⁰ Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting: What Might the Future Hold?, New York: UNICEF, 22 July 2014 (hereafter UNICEF 2014), p 50

²¹ Mutilation/Cutting: Promoting Gender Equality: UNFPA www.unfpa.org/gender/practices2.htm

²² Female genital cutting fact sheet | womenshealth.gov, Office on Woman's Health, US Dept. of Health and Human Services

²³ UNICEF 2013 at 1 50

²⁴ ID pp. 47 and 183

²⁵ Abeer Allam, Egypt: A toxic mix of tradition and religion – Financial Times July 7, 2012

²⁶ UNICEF 2013, pp. 47, 183. See also Demographic and Health Survey Ethiopia, Mali, 2001 Mauritania, 2000-01.

weeks old.²⁷ Females range from a few days old as amongst the Jewish Falashas in Ethiopia, and the nomads in the Sudan. Mutilation is performed as young as 20 days old by the southern half of Mali;²⁸ within the first two weeks after birth in Mauritania; at about seven years old in Egypt and Central Africa, where contrasted to adolescence with the Ibo of Nigeria. It is also performed before the birth of the first child amongst the Ibo of mid-Western Nigeria.²⁹

Some tribes perform FGM in groups when the girls are between the ages of seven during the warm weather in August as in Kenya³⁰; when girls are between ten and twelve with the Mossi of Upper Volta³¹; and at the ages of 14 or 15 just before they are married among the Sambura tribe in Kenya.³² However, other tribes perform mutilation when the female is in the advanced stages of her first pregnancy as among the Urhobo and Isoko of the Bendel³³; or as a premarital ritual amongst the Esan, Etsake and Ijaw groups of the Bendel state. In Kenya and Tanzania, mutilation is performed on a woman's wedding night.³⁴

Conclusion

Although, one or more forms of FGM are reported to be practiced in more than twenty nine countries in Africa and the Middle East,³⁵ countries national borders are not as significant as ethnic groups practicing mutilation straddle boundaries.³⁶ In many settings, FGM derives much of its meaning and tenacity from its intimate association with ethnic identity.³⁷ It is therefore more accurate to view FGM as practiced by specific ethnic groups in Africa³⁸. In Kenya, the Kikuyu practice mutilation³⁹ but the Luo do not; in Nigeria, the Yoruba⁴⁰, the Ibo and the Hausa do⁴¹, but the Nupes and the Fulanis do not and in Senegal, the Wolof do not practice mutilation.

²⁷ UNICEF 2005 p 6

²⁸ Office of the Senior Coordinator for International Women's Issues Office of the Under Secretary for Global Affairs, U.S. Department of State, June 2001 Mali: Report on Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) or Female Genital Cutting (FGC)

²⁹ The Global Library of Women's Medicine (www.glowm.com) Sapiens Publishing, Chapter 22 Female Genital Mutilation Hassan Azadeh and Moustapha Touré p 276

³⁰ Wambui, Grace. "The Silent Scream" Womennewsnetwork.net. Women News Network, 1 Jan. 2013. <http://womennewsnetwork.net/2013/09/06/fgm-maasai-girl-child-kenya>

³¹ Lapena, Michael, John Turner, and Susie Watkins. "International Criminology." Comparative Criminology. Web. <http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/faculty/rwinslow/africa/burkina_faso.html>.

³² Sarro, Sidi. "Female Circumcision in Samburu, Kenya: Where Culture Is above the Law." Female Circumcision Forced Marriage in Samburu, Kenya. Web.

³³ Canada: Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 30 Oct. 2008. Web. <http://www.refworld.org/docid/45f147861b.html>

³⁴ Sexual Matters in Africa: The Cry of the Adolescent Girl." Sexual Matters in Africa: The Cry of the Adolescent Girl. Ed. Vernellia Randall. Web. <<http://academic.udayton.edu/race/06hrights/georegions/africa/Africa02.htm>>

³⁵ UNICEF 2013 p30

³⁶ ID pp 30- 41

³⁷ ID

³⁸ End FGM: European Network. (2009, January 1). <http://www.endfgm.eu/en/female-genital-mutilation/what-is-fgm/where-is-it-practised/>

³⁹ Kenya: Prevalence of Female Genital Mutilation. (2000, August) <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6ad5e76.html>

⁴⁰ Nigeria: Female Genital Mutilation. (2003, February 17). <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3f7d4de3e.html>

⁴¹ http://www.ecoi.net/local_link/144821/259833_de.html

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