

# WHAT IS BEHIND THE TRADITION OF FGM?

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AFRICAN WOMEN'S ORGANIZATION



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against female genital mutilation

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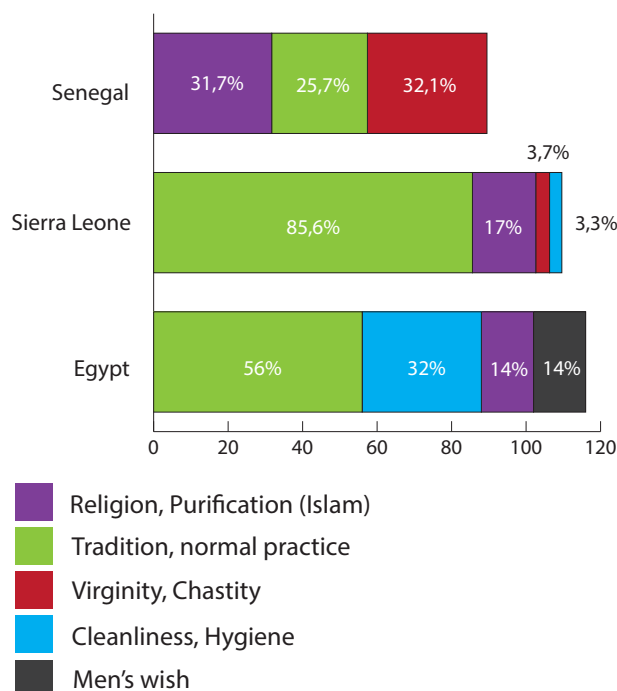
Through out history, culture /tradition has been invoked to justify abhorrent and inhuman practices. Tradition covers the most enduring enemies of a woman's dignity and security and aims at preserving male dominance and female subjugation. In industrialized societies, it may express itself in music ridiculing women, sexual harassment, societal pressure. In developing countries, violent practices such as wife beating, honour killing, widow burning, female genital mutilation, preference of male children are recognized and strongly defended as tradition.

FGM is one of the harmful traditional practices that is widely practiced in at least 28 African countries, parts of the Middle East, pockets of some communities in Australia, the Far East and the immigrant population in Europe and the Americas originating from FGM practising countries. The FGM operation which is painful by itself has immediate and long-term consequences on the health and psychology of women and girl-children. Despite all the negative consequences of FGM, at least 2 million infants, girl-children and women under go the operation every year (that is about 6,000 per day or one in every 15 seconds).

The question we have to ask ourselves is why is FGM persistently practised? Why is it strongly defended in areas where it is practiced and even expanding into new territories? What motivates parents to force infants as young as 7 or 8 days old, under-ones, girl-children mostly under 10 under go the FGM operation? In other words, does this tradition have a hidden objective?

Many studies have been carried out by NGOs and national committees to determine the reasons why the practice of FGM is persistent. I will cite 3 country cases to show the main justifications forwarded by FGM practitoners and supporters.





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The frequently cited reasons are religion and tradition, advantages for women in terms of health, beauty, virginity, etc. The supporters, promoters, guardians and practitioners of FGM broaden their defence by claiming that FGM enhances fertility; controls and prevents waywardness of girls; makes a woman faithful wife; excessive growth of clitoris (hypertrophy); clitoris is dangerous and hinders intercourse, creates impotency and kills baby at delivery; the normal genitalia of a woman are ugly and disgusting and must be removed (*Tahara*). Socially, an uncircumcised woman cannot be accepted as a serious and responsible adult unless she is operated. Their list is much longer.

These justifications, even if each one can be refuted and demystified, in societies where **illiteracy and poverty prevail, where women believe that FGM is universal, where the social pressure is tight**, are the reality of life for the women in FGM practising countries. These justifications are also strengthened by cultural relativists who assert that "the practices within any specific culture are unique to the values, systems and practices within that culture. For them, there are no universal standards and the morality and values of one national culture cannot be compared to that of another." They deny the fact that tradition is dynamic. They refuse to accept the reality that old harmful traditions have been done away in many parts of the world.



As cited earlier in regards to case studies of the three African countries, religion and tradition appear to be the main justifications. I will not concentrate on the religious aspect of the justifications. I just want to remark that FGM predates both Islam and Christianity and is cross-religions and practiced by the followers of Islam, Christianity, animists and other traditional religions. FGM is not practiced by all Muslims and has been wrongly associated with Islam. The main teachings of Islam and Christianity, as expressed in the Holy Koran and Holy Bible respectively, do not prescribe or enforce the practice of FGM. It is unfortunate that religious leaders have not taken a firm stand to denounce its practice, even though they believe that it is not sanctioned by their founders.

Tradition is the cover for most of the justifications endorsing the practice of FGM. Traditions cover all norms of our life and are not static and adapt to changes as the result of interaction with external influence. I will try to point out the main justifications of FGM which have not been able to be influenced or changed with time.

The first justification of FGM is the sociological aspect which presents the operation as a transition in life stages. FGM is taken to be an **initiation rite**, coming of age rite or passage rite. It was performed at puberty on girls 12 to 14 years old, or just before the onset of menstruation and just before marriage. FGM as an initiation rite emphasises the transition in age status from girlhood to womanhood and to marriageable age. As an uncircumcised girl has no chance of having a suitor, the operation is a signal for her readiness for marriage and availability. Before the initiation through mutilation, the girls are kept in seclusion for a period of time (at least 2 weeks) and given instructions on morality, tribal law, social codes, being a good wife, behaviours around elders and other age groups. Group initiation rites create a sort of club to which uncircumcised ones are not accepted. In some communities, like in Sierra Leone, it is a secret society that one joins only through going the initiation rite.

Recent studies indicate that the initiation part of FGM is declining and that the age of operation is also declining. In many parts of Africa this justification does not hold grounds as the operation takes place on infants 7 or 8 days old as in Ethiopia and parts of Nigeria, and girl-children most under 5 years of age. The victims are too young even to understand the word marriage itself.

To give a better picture of the importance of FGM in tradition, I would like to quote the late President of Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta, a strong supporter of the tradition of FGM, who used the practice as a rallying point in his war of liberation.



*"The operation is (still) regarded as the very essence of an institution which has enormous educational, social, moral and religious implications, quite apart from the operation itself. For the present it is impossible for a member of the tribe to imagine an initiation without clitordectomy (FGM). Therefore, the abolition of the surgical element in this custom means to the Gikuyu the abolition of the whole institution."*

He goes on to show the close relation between marriage and FGM. He shows us that uncircumcised tribe members cannot marry and is ostracized by the community and tribe.

*"In the matrimonial relation, the rite of passage is the deciding factor. **No proper Gikuyu would dream of marrying a girl who has not been circumcised, and vice versa. It is a taboo for a Gikuyu man or woman to have sexual relations with someone who has not undergone this operation.** If it happens, a man or a woman must go through a ceremonial purification, - namely, ritual vomiting of the evil deeds. A few detribalised Gikuyu, while they are away from home for some years, have thought fit to denounce the custom and to marry uncircumcised girls, especially from coastal tribes, thinking that they could bring them back to their father's home without offending the parents. But to their surprise they found that their fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters, following the tribal custom, are not prepared to welcome as a relative-in-law anyone who has not fulfilled the ritual qualifications for matrimony. Therefore, a problem has faced these semi-detribalised Gikuyu when they wanted to return to their homeland. Their parents have demanded that if their sons wished to settle down and have the blessings of the family and the clan, **they must divorce the wife married outside the rigid tribal custom and then marry a girl with the approved tribal qualifications.** Failing this, they have been turned out and disinherited."*

**Marriage and FGM:** In most of African and Middle Eastern communities practising FGM, the main justifications concentrate on **morality, virginity, honour and marriage, and sexual control**, FGM is expected to fulfil and maintain these virtues. For most African women as well as other Third World women **marriage is not an option but a must for survival**. Marriage and reproduction are the only guarantee for a woman to gain economic security and social status. Infertility is one of the worst fates that a woman can face in her life in these communities. Marriage ensures a woman with old age pension or security as well as respect in the society. A woman without children or an unmarried woman will have a very difficult life and a devastated old age, especially ones without any support from their relatives or community. The whole practice of FGM is the base for marriage. Without undergoing FGM, a woman is denied the right of marriage, in most cases also the denial of receiving bride price. An unmarried woman is an outcast in the society.



In Africa marriage does not come easily without its sacrifices. **Virginity** must be maintained at the time of marriage and the lack of it has damaging social consequences to the individual as well as to the parents. Virginity is the base for marriageability and it also enforces the prohibitions of sexual relationships outside marriage. Virginity is also considered as a base for a family's honour. A girl is expected to bring honour to her family through the preservation of her virginity. This is where FGM comes as a means of ensuring virginity. It is also believed that virginity of a woman ensures the fatherhood of the husband.

Another misconception is that women are presumed to be weak in areas of emotion and, therefore, must be controlled. In other words, women are unable to control their sexuality. That is why it is believed that uncircumcised girls are assumed to run wild, or are considered of loose moral, bringing shame to their parents. FGM is expected to play that role by reducing the girl's sexual desire and prevent sexual experience before marriage. The reduced desire even during the marriage is expected to ensure faithfulness of the woman to her husband.

It is believed that FGM controls women's sexuality effectively. FGM may reduce the feelings but it cannot reduce the desire and, in addition, it does not guarantee chastity. It does not guarantee the morality of women, as shown by the fact that FGM practising countries have relatively high numbers of prostitutes. In addition, FGM has nothing to do with moral behaviour which comes basically from proper moral education and the individual's intended behaviour.

**Gender identity** is also given as a reason for the practice of FGM. It is practiced to clearly distinguish the sex of an individual based on the belief that the foreskin of a boy makes him female and the clitoris of the female makes her a male. So in FGM practising countries the removal of the clitoris, which is believed to be male parts, makes a woman feminine. In addition, clitoris is considered to be ugly on a girl and must be removed to eliminate any indications of maleness. Some go even to the extreme by priding themselves on the degree of mutilation. According to one Sudanese woman, "In some countries they only cut out the clitoris, but here we do it properly. *We scrape our girls clean*. If it is properly done, nothing is left, other than a scar. Everything has to be cut away."

The clitoris and labia, considered to be the masculine parts, are seen as dangerous and poisonous organs and must be removed for health reasons. It is believed that they will kill a baby during birth and will also cause trouble to the man during intercourse. Similar attitudes and misconceptions include that leaving a girl uncircumcised endangers both her husband and her baby; if the baby's head touches the uncut clitoris during birth, the baby will be born hydrocephalic (excess cranial fluid). The milk of the mother will become poisonous.



If a man's penis touches a woman's clitoris, he will become impotent. The misconceptions are listless, but one can easily see that all these justifications are scientifically refutable. Ignorance and the cover of tradition ensure its survival.

It is further believed that the removal of the clitoris and labia contribute to the **cleanliness and beauty** of women because an un mutilated woman is considered dirty and polluted. This is one reason why uncircumcised women are ostracized within their own families and communities. The absence or removal of the clitoris keeps the vagina clean and makes vaginal intercourse more desirable than clitoral stimulation. These misconceptions are based on the fact that secretions produced by the glands in the clitoris, labia minora and majora are bad smelling and unhygienic and so makes the female body unclean.

Under normal conditions secretions are odourless and if the secretions are bad smelling, excessive and coloured, then this is an indication of infection or other serious problems, probably requiring medication. In reality FGM can create uncleanliness by closing the vulva and preventing the natural flow of urine and menstrual flow and consequently leading to the retention of urine and menstrual blood causing offensive smell.

The practitioners of FGM also stress that **FGM enhances fertility and prevents maternal and infant mortality**. They claim that the secretions produced by the glands of the genitalia (external female organ) kills the sperm deposited in the vagina by the male. In reality the genitalia's role is to create excitement, facilitate smooth child delivery and enjoyable sexual intercourse and has nothing to do with egg cells produced in the ovaries. On the other hand, FGM can lead to infertility, for example, chronic pelvic inflammatory diseases caused by infection can block the fallopian tube leading to infertility. Infant and maternal mortality tend to be higher in areas where FGM is practiced in Africa.

These are some of the main misconceptions on which the practice of FGM is based. At this point I would like to point out how these misconceptions are strengthened and have become the reality for most in the FGM practising countries.

- As religion is one main reason, the conflict of FGM with the main teachings of the religions has not been clarified. FGM practitioners still believe at the grass-root level that it is a religious obligation. The absence of clarification on this issue by the concerned religious leaders has strengthened the notion that FGM is part of religious duty.
- Social pressures are imposed on individuals through family and community members. Those who do not take part are ostracized and excluded from community life





- and activities. They become outcasts, forced to leave their community or are forced sometimes physically to undergo the operation.
- In countries where the practice of FGM is deeply-rooted, it is the conditions for marriage. Marriage is the only option for most women for a normal life. An uncircumcised girl is not eligible for marriage and may be a burden on her parents as no one member of the community will dare to marry her. There is no future for a woman in the community without meeting its set values, in this case the operation.
- The payment of bride price contributes to maintain and promote FGM as well as child marriage. Potential husbands will pay the bride price only for a circumcised and virgin girl, thereby, making the operation a necessity and the only option for marriage. Bride price holds the key to marriage by enforcing circumcision and virginity, as well as promoting polygamy in many communities.

Finally, the issue of FGM is no longer a taboo. The issue of rights of women to life, health, education, employment without bias is globally recognized. The elimination of FGM requires changes of values, attitudes and norms through education, information, communication and empowerment of women. These changes require the involvement of women themselves, men, religious leaders, community leaders, the youth. We also have to accept the reality that change will not come without the full and committed participation of men, be they politicians, religious and community leaders or future husbands.



# What is behind the tradition of FGM?

We are today trying to address an issue that affects women and children directly. Each society has established norms of behaviour and values developed over generations and passed from generation to generation. Some of these are good/beneficial and help the society to progress and develop, whereas some are harmful affecting health and well-being of the society. Due to poverty, ignorance and other social causes such as the patriarchal society some of the harmful traditions become deeply embedded in the society. The victims are primarily women and girl-children, for example, footbinding in China, honor killing in the Middle East, female genital mutilation in Africa.

Today in this workshop we are focusing on the latter –FGM. My subject is to look into the justifications that are forwarded by the practicing communities.

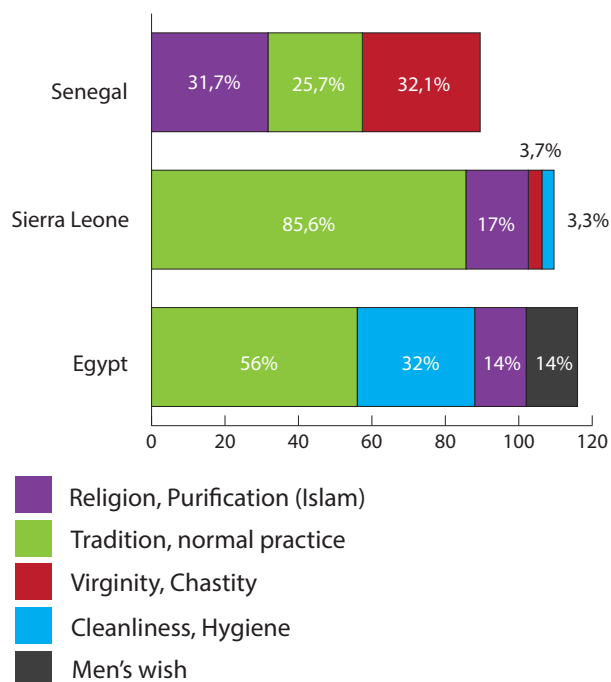
FGM is a tradition that predates both Christianity and Islam and is practised by Muslims, Christians and followers of other religions. FGM, known also female circumcision pre 1990, is the altering of the external female genital organ by operation for non-medical reasons.

FGM is closely associated to Africa and Africans especially in the Sahara belt extending from Ethiopia and Djibouti in the east to Nigeria and Ghana in the west. It is widely practiced in at least 28 African countries, parts of the Middle East, pockets of some communities in Australia, the Far East and among the immigrant population in Europe and the Americas. The FGM operation which is painful by itself has immediate and long-term consequences on the health and psychology of women and girl-children. Despite all the negative consequences of FGM, at least 2 million infants, girl-children and women undergo the operation every year (that is about 6,000 per day or one in every 15 seconds).

The question we have to ask ourselves is why is FGM persistently practised? What motivates parents to force infants as young as 7 or 8 days old, under-ones, girl-children mostly under 10 undergo the FGM operation? In other words, does this tradition have a hidden objective?

Many sectoral studies have been carried out by NGOs and national committees of the Inter-African Committee to determine the reasons why the practice of FGM is persistent. I will cite 3 country cases to show the main justifications forwarded by FGM practitioners and supporters.





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The frequently cited reasons are religion and tradition, advantages for women in terms of health, beauty, virginity, etc. The supporters, promoters, guardians and practitioners of FGM broaden their defence by claiming that FGM enhances fertility; controls and prevents waywardness of girls; makes a woman faithful wife; excessive growth of clitoris (hypertrophy); clitoris is dangerous and hinders intercourse, creates impotency and kills baby at delivery; the normal genitalia of a woman are ugly and disgusting and must be removed (Tahara). Socially, an uncircumcised woman cannot be accepted as a serious and responsible adult unless she is operated. The list is much longer and varies from area to area.

These justifications, even if each one can be refuted and demystified, in societies where **illiteracy and poverty prevail, where women believe that FGM is universal, where the social pressure is tight**, are the reality of life for the women in FGM practising countries. These justifications are also strengthened by cultural relativists who assert that "the practices within any specific culture are unique to the values, systems and practices within that culture. For them, there are no universal standards and the morality and values of one national culture cannot be compared to that of another." They deny the fact that tradition is dynamic. They refuse to accept the reality that old harmful traditions have been done away in many parts of the world.



As the example of the three sectoral studies show the two important justifications are religion and tradition. Under tradition all sorts of justifications are forwarded in reference to gender, health, beauty, moral values. We shall try to see some of them here.

## 1. Religion

One of the biggest misperception about FGM is that it is sanctioned by religion be it Christianity or Islam. There is no possible connection between FGM and religion as it predates both of them. There is nothing specific in the Bible or the Koran which allows the mutilation of women. The Koran does not refer to FGM but there is a *Hadith* (saying of the Prophet) which says „*reduce but do not destroy*“. There has been some controversy on this Hadith. The practice seems to be very extensive among the Muslim population in the FGM practicing countries and as such has acquired a religious dimension. However not all Muslims practice FGM, ex. Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Iran, etc. In countries with Christian population like Ethiopia, Kenya, Egypt it is also practised by the Christians.

Practitioners stick to their belief because they are not in the position to interpret the Holy scriptures by themselves and have to depend on the religious leaders who are very reserved to raise the issue. The religious leaders tend to link the moral benefits attributed to FGM, such as purity, virginity, morality etc. with religion. **FGM is neither Islamic nor Christian.**



# FGM – MYTHS AND JUSTIFICATIONS

Dr. Ashenafi Moges

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Each society has its own generally accepted conventions or norms that regulate social life. These norms and values affect the attitude and behaviour of individuals within the given community. All forms of justifications are invoked to justify and maintain these norms including traditional and cultural practices, religious and ethnic beliefs. Traditional and cultural practices have their good and bad parts. Harmful traditional practices (HTPs) affect the health, psychology and physical well-being of individuals. They become deep-rooted due to poverty, ignorance and other social causes such as the patriarchal society, in most cases, in rural, poor, under-privileged communities with no or poor access to education, information and the outside world. In most cases the victims of HTPs are women children and men from underprivileged groups.

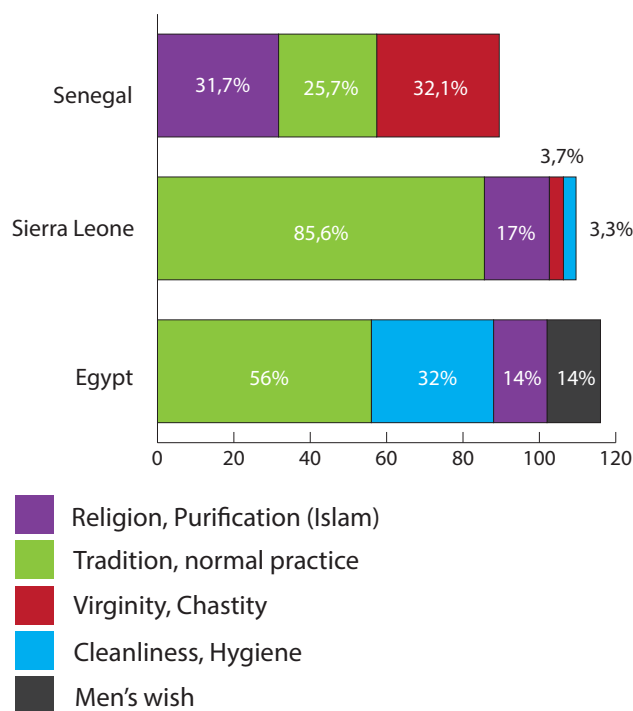
In this paper we shall look at one particular cultural practice which violates the bodily integrity of women and girl-children. This is the traditional practice of female genital mutilation.

One of the worst forms of violence against babies, little girls and women practised in the name of tradition and culture, religion and social relationships is the widespread practice of female genital mutilation (FGM), also known as female circumcision, excision, and genital cutting. FGM is the removal, partially, or completely, of the sensitive external parts of female genitalia with irreversible consequences.

The victims of this harmful tradition are infants, little girls and women ranging between the ages of 7 and 8 days after birth and 10-14 years old, living mostly in 28 African countries across the Sahara Belt, the Middle East, pocket areas in Asia and among immigrants in the Americas, Europe and Australia. It is estimated (by Hosken 1997) that there are more than 150 million mutilated babies, little girls and women in Africa. It is also estimated that at least 2 million babies and little girls are mutilated every year. In the European context it is estimated that there are more than 270,000 at risk (EU Daphne).



Various justifications are put forward by its adherents. Among these are to preserve virginity of women, prevents promiscuity, as well as a form of cleanliness, controls waywardness. In societies where illiteracy and poverty prevail, where women believe the practice is universal, where social pressure is tight, the justifications are the realities for the women. The sad part is that they are accused of doing and maintaining it. Here we can see the example of three countries sectoral surveys to show which reasons are the important ones.



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The basic question we have to ask is what are the reasons and justifications for its persistence regardless of its psychological and physiological irreversible damages. The reasons forwarded by the practitioners can be divided into two: religious sanctions and traditional factors. The later covers a wide variety of factors. We shall try to see the main ones next.



# 1. Religion

One of the biggest misconception about FGM is that it is sanctioned by religion be it Christianity or Islam. There is no possible connection between FGM and religion as it precedes both of them. In the FGM risk countries it is practised by followers of all denominations: Christians, Moslems, animists and non-believers and followers of indigenous (traditional) religion.

The practice seems to be very extensive among the Muslim population in the FGM practicing countries and as such has acquired a religious dimension. In Ethiopia and Egypt, for example, both the Coptic Christians and the Muslims practise FGM. However, not all Muslims practise FGM, for example, it is not practised in Saudi Arabia, Libya, Jordan, Turkey, Syria, the Maghreb countries of northwest Africa, Morocco, Iran and Iraq. All the Muslims in FGM practicing countries do not practice it, for example, in the case of Senegal where 94% of the population are Muslims only 20% practice FGM (Mottin-Sylla 1990).

None of the two major religions, Islam and Christianity, impose the practice of FGM. There is nothing specific in the Bible or the Koran which allows the mutilation of women (Toubia 1993). The Koran does not refer to FGM but a few sayings of the Prophet (Hadith) quote His dialogue with a circumcisor where He is quoted to have said „*reduce but do not destroy*” (Al 1998). It is also claimed that the Prophet said, „...*if you cut, do not over do it, because it brings more radiance to the face and it is more pleasant for the husband.*” There are controversies surrounding this Hadith.

Religious leaders, except some missionaries, have not until recently recognized it as a harmful practice and/or discouraged its practice. In a 1998 symposium of religious leaders they agreed that FGM has no religious basis and has nothing to do with Islam (IAC Report). However, they tend to link the moral benefits attributed to FGM (such as purity, virginity, morality, etc) with religion.

# 2. Sociological reasons

One justification of FGM is the sociological aspect which presents the operation as a transition in life stages as an initiation rite or passage rite. It was performed at puberty on girls 12 to 14 years old, or just before the onset of menstruation and just before marriage. FGM as an initiation rite emphasises the transition in age status from girlhood to womanhood and to marriageable age. As an uncircumcised girl has no chance of having a suitor, the operation is a signal for her readiness for marriage and availability.



Before initiation through mutilation individually or in group, the girls are kept in seclusion for a period of time (at least 2 weeks) and given instructions on morality, tribal law, social codes, being a good wife, etc.

Jomo Kenyatta, the first president of Kenya and a strong supporter of the tradition of FGM, gives a better picture of the importance of FGM in tradition.

*"The operation is (still) regarded as the very essence of an institution which has enormous educational, social, moral and religious implications, quite apart from the operation itself. For the present it is impossible for a member of the tribe to imagine an initiation without clitoridectomy (FGM). Therefore, the abolition of the surgical element in this custom means to the Gikuyu the abolition of the whole institution."*

He goes on to show the close relation between marriage and FGM. He shows us that uncircumcised tribe members cannot marry and is ostracized by the community and tribe.

*"In the matrimonial relation, the rite of passage is the deciding factor. No proper Gikuyu would dream of marrying a girl who has not been circumcised, and vice versa. It is a taboo for a Gikuyu man or woman to have sexual relations with someone who has not undergone this operation".*

Recent studies indicate that the initiation part of FGM is declining and that the age of operation is also declining. In many parts of Africa this justification does not hold grounds as the operation takes place on infants 7 or 8 days old as in Ethiopia, in parts of the Gambia and Nigeria, and girl-children most under 5 years of age. The victims are too young even to understand the word marriage itself.

### 3. Sexual and marriage factors

A frequently cited reason for FGM is its assumed ability to diminish women's desire for sex. This in reality is the truth. Cutting away of the sensitive part of the genitalia kills the emotion associated with the organ. There is a generally held belief that uncircumcised women and girls are difficult to satisfy sexually, and this implies that women cannot control their sexual emotions. Uncircumcised women are assumed to be over sexy.

*"Excision is believed to protect a woman against her over sexed nature, saving her from temptation, suspicion and disgrace while preserving her chastity" (MRG 1992/3).*





This is one of the core reasons for the existence of FGM. It is believed that FGM serves as a means to discourage premarital sex and reducing sexual desire of a girl thereby preserving her virginity. The reduced desire even during the marriage is expected to ensure faithfulness of a woman to her husband. This is why it is believed that uncircumcised girls are assumed to run wild, or are considered of loose moral bringing shame and disgrace to her parents.

For most African women as well as other Third World women **marriage is not an option but a must for survival**. Marriage and reproduction are the only guarantee for a women to gain economic security and social status. Marriage ensures a woman with old age pension or security as well as respect in the society. Infertility is one of the worst fates that a woman can face in her life in these communities and can lead to divorce. In some African communities a woman without children or an unmarried woman will have a very difficult life and a devastated old age, especially ones without any support from their relatives or community. **Marriage is the base for the whole practice of FGM. Without undergoing FGM, a woman is denied the right of marriage, in most cases also the denial of receiving bride price.**

In Africa marriage does not come easily without its sacrifices. Virginity must be maintained at the time of wedding and the lack of it has damaging social consequences to the individual as well as to the parents. Virginity is the base for marriageability and it also enforces the prohibitions of sexual relationships outside marriage. Virginity is also considered as a base for a family's honour. A girl is expected to bring honour to her family through the preservation of her virginity. Even though honour killing is not a norm in Africa, a woman not a virgin on her wedding day will suffer a lot in her life. This is where FGM comes as a means of ensuring virginity.

## 4. Psychological reasons

**Gender identity:** In some societies the clitoris is seen as a “dangerous” organ, hence, requiring its removal. It must be removed as in Mali, Burkina Faso, and all over West Africa because it represents maleness. FGM is practiced to clearly distinguish the sex of an individual based on the belief that the clitoris of the female makes her a male. So in FGM practising countries the removal of the clitoris is believed to make a woman feminine. In addition, clitoris is considered to be ugly on a girl and must be removed to eliminate any indications of maleness. Some go even to the extreme by priding themselves on the degree of mutilation. According to one Sudanese woman, “In some countries they only cut out the clitoris, but here we do it properly. *We scrape our girls clean*. If it is properly done, nothing is left, other than a scar. Everything has to be cut away.”



Since the clitoris represents masculinity in young girls and hence the need to identify their sex clearly becomes of prime importance (Hosken 1993; MRG, 1992/3). This point is best explained by an Egyptian women defending FGM.

*"We are circumcised and insist on circumcising our daughters so that there is no mixing between male and female.... An uncircumcised woman is put to shame by her husband, who calls her 'you with the clitoris'. People say she is like a man. Her organ would prick the man".*

In Ethiopia an uncircumcised women is called *kintram* (the one with clitoris) and is used in a derogatory way. It is a disgrace for a woman to be called *kintram*.

## 5. Health Factors

The upholders of FGM argue that the removal of the female genitalia contributes to the cleanliness and purity of women. In some communities popular terms for mutilation are synonymous with purification, for example *tahara* in Egypt and *tahur* in Sudan (Al 1998).

It is believed that the removal of the clitoris and labia contribute to the cleanliness and beauty of women. In such societies an un mutilated woman is considered dirty and polluted. This is one reason why uncircumcised women are ostracized within their own families and communities. They are not part of the social life such as communal feasts. The absence or removal of the clitoris keeps the vagina clean and makes vaginal intercourse more desirable than clitoral stimulation. These misconceptions are based on the fact that secretions produced by the glands in the clitoris, labia minora and majora are bad smelling and unhygienic and so makes the female body unclean.

It is believed that the absence of the clitoris keeps the vagina clean. On the other hand, its presence is believed to damage the baby at delivery and affects the husband's genitalia during intercourse. It is also believed to enhance fertility (Leye 1998). Other myths include that FGM enhances the husband's sexual desire; prevents maternal and infant mortality. As one can easily deduct this deep-rooted beliefs are incompatible with reality.

Under normal conditions secretions are odourless and if the secretions are bad smelling, excessive and coloured, then this is an indication of infection or other serious problems, probably requiring medication. In reality FGM can create uncleanliness by closing the vulva and preventing the natural flow of urine and menstrual flow and consequently leading to the retention of urine and menstrual blood causing offensive smell.



## 6. Economic Reasons

### Bride Price

Economic reasons are important factors that perpetuate the practice of FGM particularly in the rural as well as urban areas. Multilation is a prerequisite for marriage and payment of the bride price to the parents of the girl. In communities where the practice of FGM is deeply-rooted an uncircumcised girl is not eligible for marriage and maybe a burden on her parents as no one member of the community will dare to marry her. This enforces parents to have their daughters undergo the FGM operation. Along this line one can always refer to President Kenyatta on this issue of circumcision and marriage – *“No proper Kikuyu would dream of marrying a girl who has not been circumcised.”* The payment of bride price is part of the marriage institution and can be relative to the degree of the operation (Smith 1995). Bride price holds the key to marriage by enforcing FGM and virginity.

### The circumcisor

The circumcisors, also known as traditional birth attendants or excisors, also play a big role in promoting and prolonging the practice of FGM particularly in the rural areas. Their trade provides them with a regular income and a social status in the community.

## Factors that maintain FGM

To conclude there are several factors that help to maintain FGM of which the main ones are:

1. FGM is a primary condition for marriage in some communities practising it and hardly does a man marry an uncircumcised woman in fear of breaking the local social norms.
2. The payment of the bride price to a girl's parents depends on a woman fulfilling the traditional norms of the community – FGM being the important one.
3. Invocation of tradition to insist on the continuity of the practice, especially among immigrants as a form of identity.
4. Misperception of FGM as a religious requirement.
5. Ignorance of sexual and reproductive health.

