Muslim Women's League

MWL is a nonprofit American Muslim organization working to implement the values of Islam and thereby reclaim the status of women as free, equal and vital contributors to society.

Female Genital Mutilation

Until recently, the majority of the world's over one billion Muslims had scarcely heard of female genital cutting (also known as female circumcision and female genital mutilation (FGM)). When the subject began to receive international media attention, many Muslims responded with disgust, easily dismissing any possible connection between this practice and the religion of Islam.

Enhanced awareness of the cultural significance of FGM in some Muslim countries requires a more detailed look at the relationship of FGM to Islam. In July, 1997 the Egyptian government overturned a ban on the practice of FGM. This event was celebrated by some Muslim figures, particularly Sheikh Youssef al-Badri, an outspoken proponent of the circumcision of Muslim women. Later the ban was reinstated, an act celebrated now by feminists and under assault by a few Muslim activists, again, led by Sheikh al-Badri. For the general public, with only limited exposure to Muslims and Islam, the natural conclusion would be that the practice of FGM must somehow be part of the faith, since those who seem to be the most religious are the most ardent supporters. Unfortunately , this simply represents how the sexuality of women is used, under whatever philosophy or world-view, to perpetuate their subjugation.

Female genital cutting is practiced by Muslims and non-Muslims alike residing mainly in Sub-Saharan Africa in countries that include but are not limited to Egypt, Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, Kenya and Chad. A more minor form of the procedure is also performed in some parts of the Middle East and South Asia. Degrees of mutilation exist ranging from excision of the hood of the clitoris or clitoris itself to complete infibulation which involves removal of the clitoris, labia minora and labia majora, leaving a small opening for the passage of urine and menstrual blood. As expected, normal sexual intercourse is not possible without a corrective procedure and childbirth frequently involves severe trauma that can result in life-threatening hemorrhage. Other complications include chronic urinary tract and other infections, infertility, psychological trauma, sexual dysfunction, menstrual problems and several other negative medical and emotional outcomes. The procedure is performed on girls between the ages of infancy and pre-adolescence and is either carried out by a physician, midwife or designated woman from the community. Lack of sterile technique, use of the same instruments on more than one child, and lack of anesthesia all contribute to the complication rate which can even include infection with HIV. Medicalizing FGM by performing it in hospitals with appropriate surgical technique will not eliminate all of the complications associated with this practice and therefore cannot legitimately be considered as a solution that reduces the health risks. Current estimates by the World Health Organization state that over 100 million women and girls have been affected by some form of genital cutting.

This practice dates to the time of the pharoahs in Egypt and is perpetuated in a given community for a variety of reasons. When the majority of women have been circumcised, those who are not are considered abnormal by themselves or their families. This has tremendous significance in terms of the desirability of a young woman for marriage which provides a major means for achieving economic strength and independence; thus, being unsuitable for marriage further worsens a woman's ability to prosper. In addition, circumcision is believed to ensure cleanliness, chastity and to minimize the sexual appetite of women and

thus reduce the likelihood that they will bring shame on themselves or their families through sexual indiscretions. The guarantee of a young woman's purity further enhances her attractiveness to potential suitors. Religious leaders in many of the communities that practice FGM also support the custom, linking the moral benefits listed above to religion; therefore, a devoted believer who wants to carry out religious duties to her or his utmost is convinced that FGM is associated with righteousness and purity, both valued by all religions, including Islam.

The circumcision of girls, in any form, predated Islam by many centuries. It was practiced in some parts of Arabia at the time of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and was evidently a custom of the time that may have been a practice of some but not all of the local tribes. As a pre-established tradition, therefore, female circumcision was not introduced by the Prophet to the early Muslim community. Several sayings (hadith) of the Prophet indicate that it may have been the norm for women to be circumcised (see al-Muwatta of Imam Malik) but the extent of circumcision, excision or mutilation is not specified. In addition, the existence of female circumcision in the community does not necessarily mean that it was to be recommended or made obligatory. Indeed, it is possible to argue that any form of female genital cutting actually violates very basic precepts in Islam.

The Qur'an, as a text providing mainly general guidelines (with some injunctions or laws spelled out specifically) does not address the issue of circumcision of either males or females. The Qur'an does however refer to the sexual relationship in marriage as one of mutual satisfaction that is considered a mercy from Allah (swt):

It is lawful for you to go in unto your wives during the night preceding the (day's) fast: they are as a garment for you and you are as a garment for them (2:187)...and He has put love and mercy between you (30:21)

Several sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) highlight the importance of giving and deriving pleasure from intimacy between a husband and wife. This is clear from sayings that informed the community regarding the types of sexual behavior that were considered lawful and from others that addressed the sexual needs of men and women. Clearly, any act that interferes with a fulfilling sexual relationship contradicts the essence of Islam based both on Qur'an and hadith.

In addition, the argument for ensuring chastity with a physically debilitating procedure blatantly violates the premise of individual accountability exemplified in the Qur'an (17:15, see below). Sadly, the notion that honor and shame fall so heavily on the shoulders of the women of any given family is pervasive throughout the Muslim world, including those countries where FGM is not known. As a result of patriarchal influences, a woman's sexuality is something that does not belong to her, but rather is ultimately controlled by the dominant male of her family (father, elder brother, husband, etc.) Yet, again, the Qur'an explicitly tells Muslims that no one can bear the burden of another with respect to sin, dishonor, or shame:

Whoever chooses to follow the right path, follows it but for his own good; and whoever goes astray, goes but astray to his own hurt; and no bearer of burdens shall be made to bear another's burden (17:15)...and if one weighed down by his load calls upon (another) to help him carry it, nothing thereof may be carried (by that other), even if it be one's near of kin (35:18)

Those who advocate for FGM from an Islamic perspective commonly quote the following hadith to argue that it is required as part of the Sunnah or Tradition of the Prophet:

Um Atiyyat al-Ansariyyah said: A woman used to perform circumcision in Medina. The Prophet (pbuh) said to her: Do not cut too severely as that is better for a woman and more desirable for a husband.

This is known to be a "weak" hadith in that it does not meet the strict criteria to be considered unquestionable (classified as mursal, i.e. missing a link in the chain of transmitters in that none was among the original Companions of the Prophet.) In addtion, it is found in only one of the six undisputed, authentic hadith collections, that is in the Sunan of Abu Dawud (Chapter 1888). According to Sayyid Sabiq, renowned scholar and author of Fiqh-us-Sunnah, all hadiths concerning female circumcision are non-authentic.

Even if the words attributed to the Prophet were actually spoken by him, an analysis of the text itself reveals that he is making a statement that does not translate into an injunction for circumcision. Interestingly, many leading scholars of the four major Sunni schools of thought considered female circumcision to be at least recommended if not required. Yet we cannot ascertain from the hadith what type of circumcision was being performed or even which body part was being discussed. The scholars later specified in general terms that only a small piece of skin (the clitoris or its hood, presumably, or perhaps part of the labia minora) the size of a "cock's comb" (the small appendage that sits atop the head of a rooster) was to be removed. At the very least then, one can say that infibulation goes far beyond the description given here and so this hadith cannot be used to justify the more severe forms of mutilation. If a Muslim truly believes that female circumcision is part of the Sunnah, she or he wouldn't have enough detailed specifications to know how to carry out the procedure since the terms as mentioned above are so vague.

Despite the opinion of the scholars, female circumcision never became widespread among Muslims around the world and is essentially non-existent among the native inhabitants of Saudi Arabia and many other Muslim countries today. In contrast, male circumcision is universally practiced among Muslims; this is considered the continuation of a practice enjoined upon Abraham and his followers and is explicitly mentioned in several well-known sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh).

Some proponents of female circumcision argue that removing the clitoral hood (the anatomical equivalent of the foreskin of the penis) can enhance a woman's sexual experience which would not violate her rights to sexual fulfillment. Yet, it is practically impossible when examining the genitals of a young girl (and especially an infant), to distinguish between the hood and the clitoris itself. Also an exposed clitoris that is stimulated due to friction from clothing would result in discomfort and pain and would not necessarily enhance a woman's ability to achieve sexual fulfillment through orgasm.

Islam is a religion that guarantees the integrity of the human being- both in body and in spirit. Female genital cutting violates that integrity, insulting Allah the Creator Whose creation needs no improvement:

Such is He who knows all that is beyond the reach of a created being's perception as well as all that can be witnessed by a creature's senses or mind: the Almighty Dispenser of Grace, Who makes excellent everything He creates (32:6-7)

It is Allah Who has made for you the earth as a resting place and the sky as a canopy, and has given you shape- and made your shapes beautiful - (40:64)

Our Sustainer! Thou hast not created (any of) this in vain (3:191)

And spend in Allah's cause and let not your own hands contribute to your own destruction and persevere in doing good: behold, Allah loves the doers of good (2:195)

Muslims are called upon by Allah (swt) to enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid the doing of what is wrong. Clearly, mutilating a woman's genitalia in the name of Islam violates the most sacred tenets of our faith. Therefore, we must oppose this practice and join efforts with others who are working to educate women and men about its harmful effects. We applaud the work of Muslim leaders who challenge the view that female circumcision is required in Islam. These views have been expressed by Dr. Hassan Hathout, renowned Muslim gynecologist and scholar, and by Mohammed Sayyed Tantawi of Al-Azhar and Sheikh Abdel Ghaffer Mansour. Like many others, they urge the discontinuation of this harmful cultural tradition due to the numerous devastating consequences that result.

The Muslim Women's League strongly supports the work done by organizations and individuals who are from the countries and communities most affected by FGM. To find out more about ongoing efforts, we encourage those interested to begin by visiting the following website on the Internet: FGM Network and Message Board: http://www.fgm.org

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