



“MALE CIRCUMCISION AND FGM ARE COMPLETELY DIFFERENT / TOTALLY THE SAME”

When raising the issue of FGM, it is not unusual to also hear male circumcision being brought up. On one hand, some use circumcision to deny the existence of FGM as a form of gender-based violence. Others think the two practices are completely unrelated. This paper wishes to demonstrate that neither of these positions are correct.

Male circumcision, which involves cutting the foreskin, is mainly practised for religious reasons (in Judaism, Islam and Christian Orthodox Churches) or supposedly for hygienic reasons.

As in the case of FGM, circumcision is most often carried out without the consent of the child. In both cases, it is a violation of a child's bodily integrity. Most types of FGM, such as infibulation, removal of the clitoris and the labia, cannot be compared to circumcision in terms of the tissues cut and the health consequences. However, other practices such as the removal of the clitoral hood can be considered as being quite similar to circumcision.

Another parallel which can be drawn between male circumcision and FGM is that in certain communities where the two practices are common, they are part of a rite of passage into adulthood both for men and women. In many languages, especially African ones, the two practices have the same name. It is nevertheless vital to underline that in patriarchal societies, these practices construct hierarchical sexual identities; if FGM aims to make women more “docile” and to control their bodies and sexuality, circumcision builds men up to be “dominant” and “strong”.

“The danger with comparing circumcision and FGM is that we start to think of them as similar practices being as bad as each other. If we do this, we challenge the basis of FGM: male domination over women. It is vital to recall that even though both are bodily mutilations which can potentially be fatal, the systematic nature of the destructive consequences of FGM (both psychologically and physically) as well as its true function, even if rarely explicit, as the guarantor of society’s patriarchal organisation makes it impossible and, most importantly, dangerous to compare the two practices”

Lucie Goderniaux,
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More and more people know that excision is not obligatory under Islam; yet some people use the religious argument to differentiate between FGM and male circumcision. Circumcision is often considered obligatory in both Jewish and Muslim religions. However, much like FGM, male circumcision is an ancient cultural practice which began before the arrival of monotheistic religions.

In some countries, it is also practised outside of a religious context for medical reasons. The potential benefits of circumcision on health are also used to justify the practice. Although some studies quote positive effects on the rate of HIV transmission and other sexually transmitted infections, others contradict this and highlight that only condoms effectively protect against sexually transmitted diseases. In addition, male circumcision is mostly carried out on children and babies who do not have sexual intercourse. The treatment of phimosis (when a narrow foreskin does not allow for it to be removed), is also used as an indicator for circumcision, even though some health professionals think that this condition is rare if the penis is not touched and that other solutions can be used to treat these rare cases. Circumcision can have health consequences, including haemorrhaging or even lead to death (CIRP, 2013).

Some NGOs, including “Droit au Corps” (Right to the Body), which brings together men who have had negative experiences with circumcision, condemns these practices on minors, who are not able to consent to the intervention. Their members believe that the lack of knowledge of anatomy and of the foreskin’s function in men’s sexuality and that of their partners is underestimated.

“We believe that all forms of sexual mutilation on infants should end, whatever their gender and sex. Both excision and circumcision do not have any medical basis for intersex children. Cultural incoherence should be avoided for those who see the practice as a significant ritual, in particular as a rite of passage from child to adult”

Member of the NGO Droit au Corps

The men in the NGO speak of painful and traumatising experiences of circumcision, whether it was carried for “medical” or religious reasons. Not opposing circumcisions carried out on adult men, could signal clear consent. Members of Droit au Corps testify to negative consequences on their sexuality and of less sensitivity of the penis following circumcision.

