

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM): a theological reflection on islamic and evangelical christianity practises in Ethiopia

by Mohammed Worku Hailemariam*

khafd or *khifad* (Arabic): reduce
gizrat or *girzat* (Amharic): cutting. [1]

Abstract

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is an ongoing problem here in Ethiopia and elsewhere. There are plans, projects, and initiatives implemented here and there to stop FGM which is harmful traditional practises in limited time frames 1-5 years down the road. A great deal of results has been achieved over the years among Muslims and Evangelical Christians. However, efforts towards the planned goal remained challenged and at times discouraged, and seeing the slow process is common in reaching the targeted goals. In this brief reflection, the author of this piece will focus on the theological bases and religious practises of Islam and Evangelical Christians. On the one hand, Islam is promoting FGM traditionally as part of obligatory religious practises. In the early days of Islam, FGM was practised with the knowledge of the leaders of Islam including Prophet Muhammed himself as traditional and religious purification order which seemed obligatory action. On the other hand, Evangelical Christianity also practises FGM as part of culturally accepted traditions considered as part and parcel of spiritual purification. Though both sides have observed significant progress over the past two decades or so, formulating theological direction and condemning FGM again in a louder voice must be promoted and remembered now and then. The issue of FGM is highly interwoven and justified with traditional and religious practises. Some practical actions will be recommended to revisit the prevalence of FGM and protection of women from FGM will-be offered at the end of this brief article considering Islamic and Evangelical Christian theology. Ethiopians are a religious community, eager to listen and follow their religious leaders and orders. The purpose of this piece is to offer a call to revisit the FGM practise in Ethiopia amongst the religious circles in general and within Islam and Evangelical Christianity in particular.

Keywords

Female Genital Mutilation, Ethiopia, Religion, Anthropology, Traditional Practices.

* Mohammed Worku Hailemariam, Ethiopian Graduate School of Theology (EGST) and Evangelical Theological College (ETC), Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

1. Introduction

Ethiopia is a country located in Eastern Africa and placed at the Horn of Africa with a population size of over 120 million and 88+ people and language groups with long history of practicing Christianity and Islam as well as indigenous traditions, with estimated percentages of Christians in general 63%, Muslims 35%, others 2%. 28 people and language groups are excepted, including the Hamar, Bunna, Mursi, and the Me'en from FGM. FGM has been an issue and might continue to be an issue with the rest of 60+ people and language groups in Ethiopia. FGM, due to the nature of the problem which is highly interwoven with both traditional and religious practises, it won't be easy to eradicate as quickly as possible. This traditional and religious practise is generally performed to control female sexuality and has lifelong consequences for both the woman and also for men or partner. Female Genital Mutilation, Cutting, Circumcision is practised in many cultures around the world and cause untold medical harm and unnecessary pain to women. It is a procedure that is usually performed as traditional and

religious practise to control a woman's sexuality. Once done, it is permanent and has life-long consequences for a woman and her husband.

Traditional and religious practises are interconnected in the Ethiopians beliefs and practises. So, the religious part should be addressed accordingly using their authoritative scriptures like the Quran, Hadith, and Bible considering their science of interpretation (*tafsir, exegesis*). The author of this piece will do his best to tackle few scriptural passages from Islam and Evangelical Christianity.

Let me begin by a quote from Ayaan Hirsi Ali's speech [2]:

I was born in Somalia, I spent my formative years there, in Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia, and Kenya [...] I was part of a clan culture, where the blood line matter about everything else. [...] No escape from a clan.. I was raised as a Muslim girl, I attended Quran school, in according to my clan and my village. [...] I, like the majority of other Somali girls underwent through female genital mutilation, [FGM] purification as it was described.

It is not a surprise to see that Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is considered as religious purification and practises in both Islam and Evangelical Christianity, at least in Ethiopia. It has been there for centuries and might continue for sometimes in the years ahead.

2. Islamic theology on FGM

Historical records confirmed that FGM was practiced before Islam introduced it as a religion in Africa or elsewhere. In Islamic theology, there is not a clear theological reflection about FGM. However, some practised it, mainly those who inclined with the Shafi'a school of thought and by others like Hanafi, Malik, and Hanbali are less practised though not forbidden. Views on FGM in the authoritative books of Islam and practises including the Quran, Hadith, and Ijma/Qiyas.

2.1. Quran

The Quran is void of any reference to FGM. FGM is praised in a few hadith (sayings attributed to Muhammad) as noble but not required. Though the authenticity of these hadith has been questioned, practicing

FGM amongst Muslim communities is continued with a significant decrease. So, no base for FGM from the main authoritative text, which is the Quran, but a few Hadith excepted.

2.2. *Hadith or Sunna (traditions according to prophet Muhammed)*

FGM is neither discouraged nor encouraged in the reliable (*sahih*) Hadith/Sunna. However, Muhammad said to a woman used to perform circumcision in Medina: “Do not cut severely as that is better for a woman and more desirable for a husband”. It is worth noting that, in Islam, Muhammad is considered as uninspired Prophet with inspired sayings. So, from this hadith, we can draw a conclusion of that FGM is permitted in a way of practising with less severity in order to full fill the desire of the husbands. Practising FGM in any of the forms is dangerous, although the level of pain and consequences differ from person to person. The Islamic communities practising FGM in a massive way, but the dilemma in interpreting the authoritative passages like the Hadith/Sunna of Muhammad is always tricky. One of the arguments could be: stop FGM,

because there no evidence that Muhammad gave strong blessing or there is no evidence that Muhammad practised FGM towards his daughters. I argue that making an interpretation (*tafsir*) to Muhammad’s saying, better to stop it in order to full fill the desire of the husbands which in Islam have a great deal of making your husbands happy.

2.3. *Ijma’ or Qiyas (consensus or analogy)*

Dr Kermani writes at a symposium in Arusha Tanzania, in August 2000: “We understand that female circumcision is not an Islamic tradition or a religious obligation. Moreover, in its most severe form it is considered as an anti-Islamic act. In fact, performing or not performing such an action should depend on medical instructions that in the case of necessity and being of interest and not as a tradition Practised by all individuals. Therefore, performing this action in Islam is not prohibited, and neither is it emphasised; however, it is left to circumstances and necessities” (Inter-African Committee – AIC, 2000, p. 82).

According to most forms of Islam and fatwas have been

issued the decision to parents but advising against it. However, FGM was introduced in Ethiopia through the spread of Shafi’a School of thought which is one of the Sunni Islamic Jurisprudence which considers the practise as obligatory.

On the contrary, FGM is a distortion of God’s creation by cutting and inflicting pain on a woman. The Prophet banned such alteration and is said to have cursed those who introduce any change in the creation of Allah. It is the most famous Hadith in which it is related that a woman called Om Atteya performed circumcision in Medina and that the Prophet told her: “Do not cut severely as that is better for a woman and more desirable for a husband” (Sunna Abu Dawd 5271-43 General Behaviour [Kitab Al-Adab] 180 Chapter: Regarding circumcision) [3].

Based on this tradition, it is difficult to conclude that Islam is allowed FGM or even strictly prohibited such practise as it is mentioned as the weak parts of saying of the Prophet Muhammed. Muhammed himself admitted the causing pain on a woman due to such unhealthy practise of the Muslim society.

3. Evangelical theology

3.1. *Bible*

The Old Testament in Psalm Chapter 139 verses 13-15: David, the Psalmist writes “You created me in my inmost being: You knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depth of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body”. Reading this passage will inform us to preserve all parts of our body whether that are little or hidden; outside or inside of our bodies, all parts of our body need proper respect and admiration and of course a very great reason to praise the creator God.

The New Testament in 1 *Corinthians* 6:19, it is stated, “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own”. This means that our bodies are not our own but of God, and that is why it should be clear and pure of unnecessary impurities. Based on this verse, I can argue

that FGM is one of the unnecessary impurities which deny God given pleasure and brings pain instead. So it should be stopped in order to bring honour to human beings and glory to God.

3.2. *Evangelical theologians/ scholars in the field of FGM*

Scholars suggest that FGM is supported by people who are more inclined to traditional and cultural than practises biblical rather than biblical basis. FGM is not mentioned anywhere in the Bible, and it goes against many of the Christian beliefs around protecting, respecting and not altering the body God built for you. So, this is the popular view supported by the majority of evangelical scholars if not all.

3.3. *Current trends, practises, and ground realities*

Current Trends and Practises suggest biblically unfounded and unhealthy misconceptions with regard FGM. Some of the misconceptions are: i) FGM preserve the girl’s virginity and keep her for her husband. ii) It will keep the girl ‘cool’ and make her sex drive less. iii) The women must be passive so

that she will be well behaved and listen to her husband and fight. iv) if the girl is not circumcised, she will not get a good bride price. Her father will suffer economically. These practises are still going around among Muslims and Evangelical Christians with baseless religious scriptures. FGM practises is decreasing significantly in urban areas but slow in the rural setup. FGM is taking place underground or in a hidden form due to the consideration of criminal law. Since 2004, FGM is a violation of human rights and has been prohibited in the Ethiopian criminal law.

4. Conclusion and recommendations

FGM is Practised in most parts of Ethiopia in general, hugely in the eastern parts of the country in particular, mainly in the Somali Region. That’s why I started my introduction by mentioning a Somali born Ayaan Hirsi Ali who is one of the leading activists in criticising Islamic Extremism and harmful traditional practise in this piece of writing. The ongoing research on FGM in Ethiopia [4] shows that 82.2% of Muslim women aged 15-49 have undergone FGM/C,

compared to 65.8% of protestant women. The interesting part of these data is both religions are trying and explaining the practise as bad and dangerous, but they found themselves doing it hugely, particularly Muslims.

FGM is now firmly on the global development agenda, most prominently through its inclusion in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target which aims to eliminate the practice by 2030. Ethiopia should not be out of this plan. As indicated in the UNICEF FGM Country Profile on Ethiopia (2020) [5], the country is “home to 25 million girls and women who have experienced FGM” (Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting), the largest absolute number in Eastern and Southern Africa.

Though there are initiatives and programmes by UNFPA-UNICEF and the like within Ethiopia to stop the FGM in the coming 5 years or so, the practise is continued as religious obligations. The United Nations General Assembly passed The Girl Child Resolution (A/RES/51/76), Recognising female genital mutilation as a form of “discrimination against the girl child and the violation of the rights of the

girl child”. It is also prohibited in the Ethiopian law: “FGM is a violation of human rights and has been prohibited in Ethiopia’s criminal code since 2004”.

Female Genital Mutilation, Cutting, Circumcision is practised in many cultures in the world and cause untold medical harm and unnecessary pain to women. It is a procedure that is usually performed as traditional and religious practise to control a woman’s sexuality. Once done, it is permanent and has lifelong consequences for a woman and her husband.

According to the DHS 2005, the prevalence of FGM among women aged 15-49 in Ethiopia is 74.3%. Prevalence has decreased from 79.9% in 2000, a statistically significant decrease of 5.6 percentage points over five years. The EGLDAM data shows a decrease from 73% in 1997 to 57% in 2007, a decrease of 16 percentage points over 10 years. The DHS data shows a general trend towards a lower prevalence in younger women, also suggesting that the practise is declining. UNICEF calculates that 23.8 million women and girls in Ethiopia have undergone FGM. In terms of absolute numbers, this is one of the highest numbers

of girls and women who have undergone FGM in Africa, second only to Egypt 37.7% of women with at least one living daughter have a daughter who has undergone FGM.

UNFPA-UNICEF Joint Programme on the elimination of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in Ethiopia contributes to the national commitment to end FGM and child marriage by 2025, and to achieve SDG target 5.3 by 2030. The programme is led by the Ministry of Women and Social Affairs. It also plays catalytic role via the National Alliance to End FGM and Child Marriage, which engages over 60 memberships from other ministries, civil society, non-governmental organizations and UN entities. The programme envisions to implement the national cost-ed roadmap and accelerate institutional, individual and community level efforts as to end FGM by 2030, the country requires to progress eight times faster than what has been observed in the past 15 years.

I the author of this piece highly recommend to scholars of Islam and Evangelical Christianity should work very closely in order to tackle FGM practises in Ethiopia with a huge voice which bring impact to

not only minimise significantly but to stop forever. Violations of God's command is strictly forbidden by both religious circles. On the Friday's preaching (*khutbah*) in the mosques, 'stop FGM' must be part and parcel of the talk and the teachings for those days. The same should be done on Sundays preaching in the churches, 'stop FGM' must be on the top of the preaching agenda to bring honour to humans and glory to the almighty God. FGM MUST BE CURSED not only as unhealthy and harmful practises but as a great sin which hinder the believers to enter to the kingdom of God which both sides are longing too.

Appendix I: stories and type of FGM

Story 1

"Some time ago I went to visit a friend who gave birth to a baby girl. We praised the Lord for His provision. Accidentally [Unintentionally], we raised the issue of female 'circumcision'. I asked my friend what her plan was regarding her baby. She immediately responded that she would get her circumcised after 80 days. I was shocked.

The discussion grew wild. There was division in the house.

The mother insisted that if girls are not circumcised, the clitoris, (which in fact dose not grow more than a pea-head), would grow big in size and would cover the vaginal entrance. With surprise, I asked if she was serious. She again affirmed it to be true. I was indeed upset by the belief of these ladies. Why did God create the clitoris if it was to grow and cover the entrance to the vagina? God does not play games with our bodies. In fact, it was a sad to hear such false information from an 'educated' mother. The mother also thought she should make some type of circumcision covenant relationship with God. But God does not mention anything regarding Female Genital Mutilation or Female 'Circumcision'. I felt sad for the innocent girls who are made victims for nothing but wrong beliefs".

Story 2

A 15 year-old Oromo girl cam into a clinic in agony because she had been unable to urinate for more than 24 hours. The health worker drained her bladder and sent her home. She was soon back with a full bladder. This time the nurse noticed that her pelvic (perineal) area was swollen. Suspecting

that the woman had undergone FGM, the nurse asked if the patient had started her monthly bleeding [menstruation]. The answer was 'no'. A physical examination revealed that the vaginal opening was completely closed as a result of FGM. Once the vagina was re-opened, foul-smelling, dried blood pored out. Swelling caused by menstrual blood that could not escape, had squeezed against the urinary passage, preventing the flow of urine.

Story 3

A group of church elders [leaders] met and decided that FGM was wrong and that Christians should not do this to their children. After this group decision every one of the elders who had a daughter officiated over his daughter's 'circumcision'.

A group of women at a Bible school received teaching on the subject of FGM and acknowledged that it is not a biblical practise and that it should be stopped. They were asked to spend thirty minutes in groups coming up with a strategy to bring about change in their home areas. Their response was that if they were not circumcised or if they did not have

their daughters circumcised then they would have no hope of getting married and having children.

Appendix II: types of FGM (taken from *Cut Flowers: Female Genital Mutilation and a Biblical Response*, by Sandy Willcox with Arina Short, pp. 6-7)

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has categorized of Female Genitals into four types. It is worth noting that one type being done by different people and language groups. Larger people groups, for instance, the Oromo, or Amhara, or Somali have a variety of traditions relating to FGM within their people groups.

Type 1

Excision of the prepuce (hood) with or without excision of the entire clitoris or part of it.

Removal of the clitoral hood. Practised in many parts of Africa and called it Sunna, according to Islamic tradition.

Removal of all or part of the clitoris. Done in West, East, North, and Central Africa. In Ethiopia it is done by Jeberti, Tigrayans and others.

Removal of part of the labia minora (small lips) without touching the clitoris. Amhara and Agew [Awi] of Ethiopia (NCTPE survey, p. 56).

Type 2

Excision of the prepuce and clitoris together with partial or total excision of the labia minora (small lips). Practised in Ethiopia by the Gurage, Tigri-gna of Tigris, and the Amhara of Gondar and Oromo.

Type 3

Excision of all or part of the external genitalia and stitching/narrowing of the

vaginal opening (infibulation). Practised by some groups in Djibouti, Mali, Nigeria, Mauritania, Egypt, Chad, Kenya, and Somalia. In Ethiopia [and Eritrea] it is practised among the [Somali people], Kotu, Benja, Erboore, Affar, Bellen, Tigre, Rashaida, and Saho.

Type 4

- Unclassified:
- Introcision. A very extreme form of mutilation involving the external and internal genital organs is practised by the Pitta-Patta of Australia.
 - Pricking, piercing, and incision of the clitoris and labia.
 - Stretching of the clitoris or labia, e.g. in Ruanda.
 - Cauterisation by burning. The insertion of substances to the vagina to cause bleeding and subsequent narrowing of the vagina.

Notes and References

1. Circumcision is valid for both men and women, though it is said only for men. If a girl is not circumcised, her breast will not be mature, famous, and the greatest. Circumcision is the reason why the of the book of philosophers has said, the main reason to see bigger, swelling, and blowing breast, is circumcision (FGM). *Amharic Dictionary*, p. 320.

2. Ayaan Hirsi Ali's speech, entitled *The Escape from Islamic Extremism* she is also known by Women's rights advocacy, criticism of female genital mutilation, criticism of religion, criticism of Islam, criticism of Islamism, honour killing, opposing forced marriage, and opposing child marriage.

3. Narrated Umm Atiyyah al-Ansariyyah: A woman used to perform circumcision in Medina. The Prophet (ﷺ) said to her: Do not cut severely as that is better for a woman and more desirable for a husband. Abu Dawud said: It has been transmitted by 'Ubaid Allah b. 'Amr from 'Abd al-Malik to the same effect through a different chain. Abu Dawud said: It is not a strong tradition. It has been transmitted in mursal form (missing the link of the Companions) Abu Dawud said: Muhammad b. Hasan is obscure, and this tradition is weak.

4. FGM/C is practised across all regions, religions and ethnic groups in Ethiopia. FGM/C among women aged 15-49 is more prevalent in the east of the country, and the region with

the highest prevalence is Somali, at 98.5%. The lowest prevalence is in Tigray, at 24.2%. It should be noted that small sample sizes were used in many of the regions, and figures therefore may not be accurate. Women who live in rural areas are more likely to be cut (68.4% of women aged 15-49) than women who live in urban areas (53.9%). The Somali are the ethnic group with the highest prevalence of FGM/C among women aged 15-49, at 98.5%, followed by the Affar at 98.4% (however, once again, the small sample size makes this figure potentially unreliable). The ethnic group with the lowest prevalence is the Tigray, at 23%. <https://www.fgmcri.org/country/ethiopia/>.

5. <https://www.unicef.org/ethiopia/reports/profile-female-genital-mutilation>, February 2020.

For further reading and Appendices

1. EGLDAM. Works with local people, community leaders, and government officials/agencies to protect women and children by bringing an end to harmful traditional practices, such as female genital mutilation, milk-tooth extraction, and early marriage.

2. Fransen S., Kuschminder K. (2009), *History of migration in Ethiopia: History, Current Trends and Future Prospects*, Paper Series: «Migration and Development Country Profiles», Maastricht Graduate School of Governance. Available at: http://mgsog.merit.unu.edu/ISacademie/docs/CR_ethiopia.pdf.

3. US Department of State (2012), *Human Rights Report 2012*. Available at: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2012humanrightsreport//index.htm#wrapper>.

4. International Centre for Not-for Profit Law, cited in Rogers K. (2013), *Kenyan CSOs, NGOs to fight proposed foreign funding restrictions*, devex, 14 November. Available at: <https://www.devex.com/news/kenyan-csosngos-to-fight-proposed-foreign-funding-restrictions-82297> (accessed 25/02/2021).

5. OECD (2012a), *Social Institutions and Gender Index: 2012 SIGI: Understanding the Drivers of Gender Inequality*, p. 13. Available at: <https://www.oecd.org/dev/50288699.pdf>.

6. World Health Organization/London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (2010), *Preventing intimate partner and sexual violence against women: taking action and generating evidence*, World Health Organization, Geneva. Available at: https://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/publications/violence/9789241564007_eng.pdf.

7. UNICEF (2006), *Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting: A Statistical Exploration*, p. 24. Available at: https://www.unicef.org/gender/files/FGM-C_Statistics.pdf.

8. World Health Organization (2015), *Female Genital Mutilation*. Available at: http://www.who.int/topics/female_genital_mutilation/en/.

9. The New Humanitarian (formerly IRIN) (2010), *Empowering Women to Fight FGM/C*, 19 August. Available at: <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/report/90218/ethiopia-empowering-women-fight-fgmc>.

10. UNJP (2013), *Joint Project on Female Mutilation/Cutting: Annual Report 2012*. Available at: <https://www.unfpa.org/publications/unfpa-unicef-joint-programme-female-genital-mutilationcutting-annual-report-2012>.

11. DHS 2005, p. 253.

12. DHS 2000, p. 33.

13. UNICEF (2013), *Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting. A statistical overview and exploration of the dynamics of change*. Available at: http://data.unicef.org/corecode/uploads/document6/uploaded_pdfs/corecode/FGMC_Lores_Final_26.pdf.

14. Berggrav M., Talle A., Tefferi H. (2009), *Prevention and Eradication of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and other Harmful Traditional Practices (HTPs) in Ethiopia. Save the Children Norway-Ethiopia and Partners Mid-Term Review (MTR) 25th November – 5th December 2008 – Final Report 02.02.09*. Available at: <https://www.scribd.com/document/46239901/DOCS-138374-V1-Projects-Against-Female-Genital-MutilationFMG-and-HTPs-in-Ethiopia-Final>.

15. Boyden J., Pankhurst A., Tafere Y. (2013), *Harmful Traditional Practices and Child Protection: Contested Understandings and Practices of Female Child Marriage and Circumcision in Ethiopia*, Young Lives, Oxford. Available at:

<https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:e760844d-c7ce-46b8-9150-df9205e37633>.

16. Reporters Without Borders (2012), *Ethiopia World Report*. Available at: <http://en.rsf.org/report-ethiopia,16.html>.

17. DHS 2011, pp. 42-43.

18. Boyden J., Pankhurst A., Tafere Y. (2013), *op. cit.*

19. One (2011), *Ethiopia's Progress in Education*. Available at: <https://www.one.org/international/>.

20. Ministry of Finance and Economic Development (2010), *Ethiopia: 2010 MDGs Report – Trends and Prospects for Meeting MDGs by 2015*. Available at: <https://www.et.un->

dp.org/content/dam/ethiopia/docs/2010%20Ethiopia%20MDG%20Report.pdf.

21. ኪዳነ ወልድ ክፍሌ-መዝገበ ቃላት ሐዲስ-1948, *Amharic Dictionary*, p. 320.

22. Willcox S., Short A. (2005), *Cut Flowers: Female Genital Mutilation and a Biblical Response*, Bible Based Books, 135 pages.

23. Inter-African Committee (AIC) (2000), *On Traditional Practises Affecting the Health of Women and Children. Report on Follow up symposium for religious and traditional leaders on violence against women with emphasis on FGM*, 20-22 August 2000, Arusha, Tanzania.