

Female Genital Mutilation

FGM is not limited to any one religion and is not required by any religion. Yet, each year some 2 million girls are so mutilated by cultural, tribal and family traditions to preserve virginity, ensure marriage ability, and suppress female sexuality. The World Health Organization has calculated over 130 million females who have been inflicted with FGM in the world today.

The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) reports that there are three types of FGM practiced among varying cultures:

[FGM is] ... practiced on girls sometime between infancy and womanhood. The most moderate, called sunna, is the cutting off of the clitoris hood. Excision is the removal of the clitoris and all or part of the labia. The most extreme form, infibulation, involves the removal of all external genital parts, and stitching together the sides of the vulva with thread or thorns, leaving a tiny hole for urine and menstrual blood. On the wedding night the opening must be widened.

Serious health implications plague many females following FGM operations:

The painful procedure is often performed without anaesthetic. It is not uncommon for a girl to haemorrhage to death or to develop tetanus or septicaemia because of the crude and unsterilized tools used [such as razors, knives or metal objects]. Such circumcisions can result in difficulty in urination, pain or trauma during menstruation and intercourse, and eventually, severe obstruction or tearing while giving birth. Some reports estimate 20 per cent will die in childbirth.

In North America, this practice has become more profiled owing to the increase in immigrants from countries where female genital mutilation is common. Some advocacy organizations, such as the African Resource Centre in Ottawa, are involved in opposing FGM by these immigrant communities. "People think this is an African issue, or a Black issue. It's a woman's issue," says Kowser Omer-Hashi, who immigrated to Toronto from Somalia. Omer-Hashi, herself infibulated, explains that eliminating FGM begins with women, as this practice is arranged for girls by their mothers and grandmothers.

The FGM procedure had been thought to be banned in Canada and the United States under Criminal Code provisions against assault causing bodily harm. Further, the Canadian federal government has passed legislation (1997) to specifically outlaw FGM. However, Ontario's Human Rights Commission not only has anecdotal evidence that FGM is practiced here, but that families are sending their daughters overseas in order to have the procedure done.

Further information and help is available from the National Organization of Immigrant and Visible Minority Women of Canada 613-232-0689.

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Prevalence by country: Nigeria, Ethiopia, Egypt, Sudan, Kenya, Somalia, Ivory Coast, Mali, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Chad, Guinea, Eritrea, Tanzania, Benin, Togo, Zaire, Central African Republic, Liberia, Niger, Senegal, Uganda, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Mauritania and Djibouti.