



INTERNATIONAL DAY

# Zero tolerance on FGM

*Almost half the females who undergo genital mutilation are under the age of 14*

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YESTERDAY, the world celebrated the International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation. About 200 million women and girls live with the consequences of female genital mutilation (FGM) worldwide, of which 44% are under the age of 14.

The initiative for the day of zero tolerance was taken by the UN and the EU and also forms part of their Spotlight Initiative. The UN views any form of genital alteration or injury for non-medical reasons a violation of women's human rights.

Africa is one of the continents with the highest incidence of FGM, with high prevalence in predominantly Muslim countries, with 98% in Somalia, 97% in Guinea, 89% in Mali, 87% in Sudan, 87% in Egypt, 76% in Burkina Faso, 75% in the Gambia and 74% in Ethiopia (2016 statistics). Southern Africa has a low incidence, but cases have been reported. In South Africa, cases have been reported in KwaZulu Natal and the Eastern Cape, often performed by or on immigrants from other African countries.

The perception of FGM in Western countries is that genital cutting is performed on girls who cannot consent, often coerced by their mothers. In these countries, FGM is considered a cultural practice. In many societies where FGM is practised, uncircumcised women will be unable to marry. This puts an economic burden on parents when they have to look after girls of marital age (often under the age of 15).

In an extreme case, all external genitals are removed and the vagina sewn shut, with only a small opening left for urination. This is called infibulation and leads to serious problems with menstruation and natural childbirth. In other cases some of the vulva is removed. Depending on the severity of the surgical intervention, it can have far-reaching implications for women's sexual pleasure.

In a multicultural world, the blanket condemnation of FGM is problematic when there is a limited under-



AN UNDATED handout picture shows Boko Mohammed, a former excisor – a practitioner who performs female genital mutilation – holding one of the tools of her trade at a community meeting in Kabele Village in Amibara District, Ethiopia. | UNICEF

standing of the practice through the eyes of those who live in societies that practise female circumcision without thinking of it as mutilation.

There is evidence in many societies that practise FGM that young women may want circumcision (not necessarily infibulation), and feel like outsiders to their own culture if they do not undergo this rite of passage. Women in these societies defend female circumcision.

Criticism that has its origins in the West portrays these women as powerless and as victims of patriarchal control over women's bodies and sexuality.

It also serves to reinforce the global North/South divide where those in the developed world create a narrative that those in the developing world are "backward and barbaric".

Emma Foster, in the book *Body/State*, makes the argument, for example, that we should also think about female cosmetic genital surgery (FCGS) by Western women who have tummies tucked, genital modification or breast augmentation for the sake of "beauty/desirability", to please male partners.

The discourse around FCGS is based on the idea that women have control over their bodies.

There is, therefore, a double-standard about surgical intervention to alter women's genitals in the West.

In FGM/FCGS societies, women's sexuality is shaped around chastity, fidelity and motherhood and, in the West, "deficient" genitalia are pathologised, so that genital enhancement is needed to rectify the "dysfunction" – to please men, but in both cases women's sexuality is circumscribed

or controlled by men. According to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons' Report (2016-2017), in the category girls between the ages 13-19 years, 66 000 cosmetic surgeries were performed and in the category 20-29 years, 260 000, many of them breast augmentation.

While forced female circumcision of young women against their wills in unhygienic conditions can not and should not be condoned, just as we cannot condone the death of many young boys in South Africa due to male circumcision every year, it would benefit us to think about how our own cultural practices control women's sexuality.

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