

Female Circumcision in Islam

 Asiff Hussein



How Misogynists and Feminists are feeding upon each other to denigrate an Islamic practice that brings untold benefits to women

Female Circumcision is an Islamic tradition, and involve only the removal of the clitoral prepuce and no more.

All the early scholars of Islam were agreed that all that is needed to be removed in the circumcision of the female was the **prepuce of the clitoris**, the fold of skin covering the clitoris. This is the female equivalent of the foreskin in males which is taken off during circumcision.



The inspiration for writing on this touchy topic arose at a recent week-long workshop held by an international Muslim women's rights organization in Kandy (in Sri Lanka) which I had the fortune of attending thanks to its local organizers.

This group had a lot of nice things to say about women's rights in Islam and I must say I agreed with much of it, like the rights of Muslim women to enter into marriage with their free consent and even contract marriages on their own accord or their rights to divorce or pre-nuptial agreements to safeguard their freedoms, all well and good, because Islam concedes all these rights to women, on which topics I too have written extensively.

But there was one topic I begged to differ when they brought up the matter, and that was female circumcision. They asked us to discuss a recent [Fatwa issued by Malaysia's National Council for Islamic Religious Affairs in 2009](#) (*) that declared that the practice was mandatory for Muslim women. They expected us to rip it to pieces, but I differed. Why, because I could not find anything objectionable in it. Reading it carefully, I noticed that those who had drafted it were not at all motivated by a negative attitude towards women's rights. Rather it clearly stated that **all forms of FGM (Female Genital Mutilation) found by the WHO to be harmful to women such as clitoridectomy (removal of the clitoris) and infibulation (a still more barbaric practice where the female's external genitalia including the labia minora and clitoris are removed and stitched) were against the Shariah**. But it made an exception, stating that all that was necessary in the case of women was **to remove the skin covering the clitoris**, which it declared to be **obligatory**, pointing out that a majority of the classical scholars of Islam including **Imam Shafi** and **Imam Hanbali** thought it to be so.

I plainly told the sister who was moderating the show, I could see nothing wrong with it, since all they said that was required was to remove the prepuce or the skin covering the clitoris, a relatively minor and harmless procedure very much like male circumcision which like it might confer some health benefits as well. That raised a few eyebrows, probably because none of them had heard such a novel idea before.

Female Circumcision in Islam involve the removing of part of the prepuce or the skin covering the clitoris, a

relatively minor and harmless procedure and very much like male circumcision

Of course there's really nothing so novel about it. Much has been written about it even by Western Doctors but these studies have been conveniently overlooked to conform to Islamophobic sentiments expressed by a largely Jewish controlled media. This media machine works in different ways. For one thing, it will say that Islam advocates genitally mutilating women to curb their sexuality, citing examples of barbaric forms of FGM practiced in sub-Saharan Africa, thereby associating Islam with a misogynistic attitude. But of late, we see another trend, one that seeks to disassociate female circumcision altogether from Islam without differentiating the proper Islamic form from the rest. Why, you may ask? It's very simple really. There is a strong body of evidence emerging to support the view that the proper Islamic procedure involving the removal of the clitoral prepuce is beneficial to women and not detrimental to them.

Islam doesn't advocates genitally mutilating women to curb their sexuality, in fact all forms of FGM (Female Genital Mutilation) found by the WHO to be harmful to women such as clitoridectomy (removal of the clitoris) and infibulation (a still more barbaric practice where the female's external genitalia including the labia minora and clitoris are removed and stitched) were against the Shariah.

So there you are. It is in the interests of the Jews to criticize female circumcision while promoting male circumcision. Why, because male circumcision is a Jewish practice and female circumcision is not. The medical benefits of male circumcision was established as a fact when the Americans adopted it for hygienic reasons in the early part of the 20th century so that even to this day the majority of male infants born in the US are circumcised.

Islam is innocent from the barbaric forms of FGM practiced in sub-Saharan Africa

The practice was shown to confer significant health benefits as borne out by numerous studies that showed a reduction in urinary tract infections, penile cancer, HIV and other STDs as well as a reduction in Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) infections in female partners of circumcised men which could lead to cervical cancer when passed on to women (In favour of circumcision. Brian Morris.1999). The US due to its strong Judeo-Christian background thus came to see male circumcision in a favorable light, but altogether neglected its **female equivalent** as they did not have such a tradition. Moreover it was an Islamic tradition, not a Judeo-Christian one. It was not until about the early part of the twentieth century that some daring US doctors, reasoned that since women too had a prepuce (the equivalent of the foreskin in males) some of the health benefits conferred on males through circumcision could be enjoyed by women. Moreover they discovered another interesting fact, that the procedure could in fact increase sexual gratification in women since it exposed the surface area of the clitoris to greater stimulation during the sex act as well as in oral sex. Shire Hite's groundbreaking study on the importance of the clitoris in the arousal and satisfaction of the female led to further interest in this until then rather insignificant part of the female anatomy. To keep a long story short, it is in the interests of the Jews to hide the facts about the benefits of female circumcision, because if it is shown that it is indeed an Islamic practice, and that what Islam advocates is only the removal of the clitoral prepuce and no more, it will be another feather in the cap of Islam. Islamic tradition then becomes a double-edged sword, where both the male and female circumcision it upholds are shown to be beneficial, in contrast to the single-edged sword of the Judaic tradition. My aim in this essay is to prove exactly that!

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But before doing so let me disarm its detractors a bit to show that it is indeed an Islamic practice.

Islamic Basis for Female Circumcision

True there is nothing in the Qur'an about female circumcision (an argument often put forward by the detractors), but there's no mention of male circumcision in it either. Rather the evidence for circumcision, both male and female, come from the ahadith (Sayings of Prophet Muhammad, Peace Be Upon Him) like the following:

1)

Circumcision is my way for men and ennobling in women (Baihaqi).

This hadith suggests that both male and female circumcision was recognized by the Prophet. The term he used for both was khitan. In the original Arabic: Al-khitānu sunnatun li ar-rijāli makrumatun li an-nisā. This hadith does not necessarily affect the obligatory character of circumcision in the case of females for the simple reason that it would have been quite inappropriate to apply the term sunnat '(Prophet's) way' for the female operation. Similarly, the term makrumah or ennobling used in the case of women need not affect the obligatory character of the operation since it is merely indicative of the fact that women are ennobled by it

2)

Five are the acts of fitra: circumcision, removing the pubes, clipping the moustache, cutting the nails, plucking the hair under the armpits (Sahih Bukhari & Muslim)

This statement is a very strong one, classing circumcision (khitān) as one of the acts characteristic of the fitra or God-given nature (or in other words, Divinely-inspired natural inclinations of humans) such as the shaving of pubic hair, removing the hair of the armpits and the paring of nails, which again shows its strongly emphasized if not obligatory character in the case of both males and females. Muslim scholars are of the view that acts constituting fitra which the Prophet expected Muslims to follow are to be included in the category of wājib or obligatory.

Circumcision, like the other fitra acts involving the removal of redundant outgrowths that contribute to uncleanliness, takes the human body to a more perfect state desired by God, which is why in the first place it is called an act that is in accord with the fitra. That it should apply equally to females as much as males goes without saying as both sexes have a prepuce, a fold of unclean skin covering the erectile tissue of their genitals.

Besides, it is a well established principle of Islam that males and females are to be treated equally in all respects where they are similar and there can be no doubt that in this respect they are indeed similar.

3)

When the (male) circumcised part meets the (female) circumcised part, bath becomes obligatory (Ahmad, Tirmidhi)

Here we have the Prophet declaring that *ghusl* (the bath following sexual intercourse without which no prayer is valid) becomes obligatory (*wajib*) when both the circumcised parts meet. The fact that the Prophet defined sexual intercourse as the meeting of the male and female circumcised parts when stressing on the need for the obligatory post-coital bath could be taken as pre-supposing or indicative of the obligatory nature of circumcision in the case of both males and females. There are two forms of this hadith, one in which the prophet used the term *khitainain* (the two circumcised parts) and the other *khitānul khitān* (the male and female circumcised parts), leaving us with no doubt as to what the Prophet meant by it.

Besides these very obviously conclusive traditions, we have two more which are not well known, but have been recorded for us by the scholars:

4)

The hadith related by Abdullah Ibn Umar who states that the Prophet instructed some Ansar (Medinan) women visiting him to 'be circumcised' (Mukhtassar zawaid musnad al bazzar, Ibn Hajar).

5)

The hadith where the Prophet told Umm Atiyah Al Ansariyyah, a lady who circumcised girls in Medina: "When you circumcise, cut plainly and do not cut severely, for it is beauty for the face and desirable for the husband" (Abu Dawud, Al Awsat of Tabarani and Tarikh Baghdad of Al Baghdadi).

But that's not all. We have a few more traditions concerning the Prophet's closest companions who believed it to be necessary for women:

1)

Umm Al Muhajir said: "I was captured with some girls from Byzantium. (Caliph) Uthman offered us Islam, but only myself and one other girl accepted Islam. Uthman said: 'Go and circumcise them and purify them'" (Adab al Mufrad of Bukhari)

2)

Umm Alqamah says that when the nieces of Ayisha's brother were circumcised, 'A'isha was asked: "Shall we call someone to amuse them?" "Yes" she replied (Adab Al Mufrad)

So here we have Uthman, one of the closest companions of the Prophet and the third Caliph of Islam ordering that some women who had converted to Islam be circumcised. The other tradition tells us that the Prophet's wife Ayisha had her nieces circumcised, suggesting that she believed it to be obligatory or at any rate prescribed.

All the early scholars of Islam were unanimous in holding that both male and female circumcision are Islamic practices. They only differed as to whether it was obligatory or recommended. Imam Nawawī in his commentary on Muslim, Tahāra (ed.Cairo 1283) states that according to Imam Shāfi circumcision is **obligatory** (*wājib*) and is equally

obligatory for males and females. The other schools of Sunni law differ as to the obligatory nature of circumcision. According to the Hanafis, circumcision, whether of males or females, is **recommended**, but not obligatory, though in the case of males it is thought of more as a sunnah mu'akkadah or 'close to being mandatory' while in the case of females it is regarded as 'a noble thing (to do)'. The position of the Malikis is similar though some regard both male and female circumcision to be on the same level. Thus we have the 9th century Maliki scholar Ibn Al-Jallab declaring circumcision to be **sunnah** for both men and women (Al-Tafri). The Hanbalis like the Shāfis lay greater stress on circumcision, some as Imam Ahmed regarding it as being more strictly applicable to males while others such as Shaykh Mansur Ibn Yunis Al-Bahuti regarding the circumcision of both males and females as **obligatory** (Kashshaf Al-Qina An matn Al-Iqtina).

Those favoring a more revivalistic approach with greater stress on the Prophetic tradition than the opinions of individual schools of law have also placed great emphasis on circumcision. This includes the Hanafi scholar Shaykh Jaddul Haqq, the head of Al-Azhar and a leading authority of Sunni Islam who declared both male and female circumcision to be obligatory religious duties in Islam (Khitān Al-banāt in Fatawa Al-Islamiyya. 1983). By the way the fatwa issued by his successor at Al Azhar, Muhammad Tantawi declaring that female circumcision has nothing to do with Islam is based on very faulty grounds and was even rejected by Al Azhar's other leading scholars. Besides Tantawi is not taken seriously by Islamic scholars. After all he was the guy who declared that women could discard their Islamic attire including headscarves and also spoke in favor of bank interest. Not a man you can go to learn your religion from!

The Islamic Procedure of Female Circumcision

All the early scholars of Islam were agreed that all that is needed to be removed in the circumcision of the female was the prepuce of the clitoris, the fold of skin covering the clitoris. This is the female equivalent of the foreskin in males which is taken off during circumcision.

1. Imam Nawawi states in his Sharhul Muhazzab that the part that has to be removed is "the skin of the structure which is like the cock's comb above the urethral opening". He further says in his commentary Sharh Muslim that it constitutes the removal of "a little bit of skin in the upper private parts".
2. Ibn Hajar Asqalani states in Fathul Bari that it constitutes the removal of "the skin covering the cock's comb-like structure, and not the flesh".
3. Abu al-Hasan Al Mawardi says of the female's circumcision: "It is to be limited to cutting off the skin in the shape of a kernel located above the genitalia. One must cut the protruding skin without removing the whole fold"
4. Ibn Taymiyya says in Majmoo Al fatawa: "Her circumcision consists of cutting the prepuce which is like the cock's comb (ka urf al dik)". He further adds that it is the prepuce (qalfa) of the clitoris that is removed in the procedure
5. Abu Nasr Ibn al-Sabbaagh says in Kitab Ash-Shaamil: "In the case of a woman, it means cutting the skin that looks like the comb of a rooster at the top of the vagina, between the two labia"
6. Ibn Nujaim says in Bahr Al Raiq Sharh Kanz Daqaiq Fi Furu Al Hanafiyyah that circumcision of the female is to remove the skin that looks like the red flapping skin on the head of the rooster, the skin that is located over the vagina and is located between the clitoris and the urethra.
7. Ibn Qudamah Al Maqdisi, the author of Al Mughni states: The circumcision of women is to remove the slim skin on the top of the vaginal opening.
8. Ibn Jawzi explains in his commentary on Sahih Al Bukhari that bazr (the clitoris) is 'the part left behind when the woman is circumcised', showing it is the prepuce that is removed, but not the clitoris.

These early scholars of Islam did not offhandedly decide how it should be done. They based it on a saying of the Prophet (PBUH) where he is reported to have told Umm Atiyya Al Ansariya, a lady who circumcised females in Medina:

When you circumcise, cut plainly (in a shallow manner) and do not cut deeply, for it is beauty for the face and desirable for the husband”

إذا خففت فأشمي ولا تنهكي ؛ فإنه أشرق للوجه ، وأحظى عند الزوج

(Sunan Abu Dāwud, Sunan Al Kubra of Baihaqi, Al Awsat of Tabarāni and Tārikh Baghdād of Al-Baghdādi)

This hadith clearly indicates the procedure to be followed in the circumcision of girls. The words “Cut plainly and do not cut deeply” (ashimmi wa-la-tanhaki) is to be understood in the sense of removing the skin covering the clitoris, and not the clitoris. The expression “It is beauty (more properly brightness or radiance) for the face” (ashraq li-l-wajh) is said to be further proof of this as it is to be understood to mean a face suffused with pleasure, in other words, the joyous countenance of a woman, arising out of her being sexually satisfied by her husband. Another version of the hadith puts it more directly, for instead of ashraq li'l wajah (radiance for the face) it gives ahwa li'l mar'a (more pleasure to the woman). When the Prophet said that it was more desirable for the husband, what he obviously meant was that he would be pleased that his wife too had attained orgasm at about the same time as him – perhaps even had multiple orgasms – and that he would not need to exert himself further to ensure she is fully satisfied. The idea here is that it is only with the removal of the clitoral prepuce that real sexual satisfaction could be realized. It is contended that the procedure enhances sexual feeling in women during the sex act since a circumcised clitoris is much more likely to be stimulated as a result of direct oral, penile or tactile contact than the uncircumcised organ whose prepuce serves as an obstacle to direct stimulation. This necessarily leads to a satisfactory sex life among women, thus ensuring their chastity. The classical jurists were not such parochial men after all. They deduced from this one statement of the prophet what it really meant. Another reason they concluded thus was the fact that the prophet used the term khitan to denote both male and female circumcision. This would suggest that the procedure in the case of the female had to be similar to that in the male, mandating the removal only of the prepuce of the clitoris.

Indeed, there is reason to believe that it is the proper procedure that is followed in many parts of the Muslim world including Egypt, despite statements to the contrary by media and feminist groups. Most Islamic scholars both old and new have clearly spoken in favour of the proper form and condemned unislamic forms, including the one time Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Shaykh Jadul Haqq who declared that the circumcision of females consists of the removal of the clitoral prepuce (Khitān Al-banāt in Fatawa Al- Islamiyya.1983). Carsten Niebuhr (Beschreibung von Arabien. 1772) who examined a circumcised Egyptian country girl was convinced that it was to render washing easier, implying that it was out of a motive of cleanliness, that the practice had been adopted. A drawing by Wilhelm Baurenfeind who accompanied Niehuhr on his voyage in fact depicts the girl with an intact clitoris ‘bare and deprived of its prepuce’ (The Anthropological Treatises of Johann Friedrich Blumenbach.1865). More recently, Evelyn Early in her study of Baladi (traditional) Egyptian women, was told by some women that female circumcision known there as tahara or ‘purification’ heightened sexual pleasure because it ‘exposes the clitoris’(Baladi women of Cairo.1993). And as if that were not enough, Malay women hold that female circumcision involving the partial removal of the clitoral hood increases the sexual satisfaction of the female partner during intercourse (Bewitching women, pious men. Gender

and body politics in Southeast Asia. Aihwa Ong & Michael Peletz.1995).

In certain Muslim countries, the practice has been medicalised to ensure that it is only the proper Islamic form that is carried out, as in Malaysia and Indonesia where a circular from the Ministry of Health issued recently states that the circumcision of females should be performed by qualified medical practitioners who are aware of the proper procedure, a directive that finds support from female practitioners like Dr.Nadiyah of the Mother and Child Hospital (RSIA) Annisa Jambi, according to whom the circumcision of females, being merely the removal of the prepuce of the clitoris is a very simple procedure that ensures the hygiene of the female genitals, though one has to be particularly careful in the case of infants upon whom it is very often performed as it is a very intricate procedure (Tak Paham Bisa Kebablasan. Tribun Jambi. 17th April 2011).

Note()**

Some of our scholars mention that female circumcision reduce the excessive sexual arousal in women. This gave the impression that circumcising girls involves cutting the clitoris itself, because sexual arousal is mainly due in the clitoris.

Of course our scholars did not mean that, instead they saw that cutting some of the clitoral prepuce reduces the excessive sexual arousal in women in the following way:

Muhammad Al-Mannawi (d. 1622) reported, in his book Fayd al-qadir sharh al-jami al-saghir, that imam Al-Razi said:

“The Glans (in the penis and in the clitoris) is very sensitive. If it remains hidden in the foreskin, it strengthens the pleasure during the mating. If the foreskin is cut, the glans hardens and the pleasure weakens. This is the best fit in our law: reducing pleasure without completely eliminating it, a balance between excess and deficiency.”

Some other scholars said that circumcision reduces excessive sensitivity of the clitoris which may cause it to increase in size to 3 centimeters when aroused, which is very annoying to the husband, especially at the time of intercourse.

For health benefits of female circumcision, please keep reading in the pdf file attached.

(*) The Decision of Malaysia's National Council for Islamic Religious Affairs in that 2009 Fatwa is: The 86th Muzakarah (Conference) of the Fatwa Committee National Council of Islamic Religious Affairs Malaysia held on 21st-23rd April 2009 has discussed on rulings on female genital mutilation. The Committee has decided that female circumcision is part of Islamic teachings and it should be observed by Muslims. However, as Islam also pays attention to the safety of its people, the circumcision can be exempted if the practice brings harm to the person. As far as the majority of the jurists' views are concerned, the Committee has decided that female circumcision is obligatory (wajib). However, if it is harmful, it must be avoided.

An archived version of the fatwa can be found here: <https://web.archive.org/web/20151210023501/http://www.e-fatwa.gov.my/fatwa-kebangsaan/hukum-pemotongan-genitalia-wanita-female-genital-mutilation>

(**) This note is not part of Asiff Hussein's article.

Clitoral Prepuce:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clitoral_hood

Circumcision: how it is done and the rulings on it

<https://islamqa.info/en/9412>

Medical benefits of female circumcision

Featured image is from: Eradicate HIV: How Male Circumcision and Female Circumcision has immense scientific and medical value

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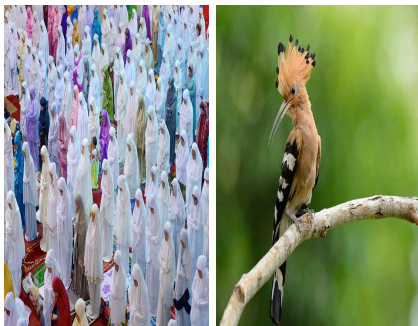


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