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Ministry for Religious Endowments

**FEMALE GENITAL CIRCUMCISION
IS NOT AN ISLAMIC RITUAL**

2nd edition

Cairo

2007 (1428 Hidjra)

In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy

PREFACE

Prof. Mahmoud Hamdi Zakzouk

Minister of Religious Endowments

Glory be to Allah, peace and blessings be upon his Prophet

God granted human beings – men and women – dignity and gave them advantages over many other creatures. Then he ordered the angels to prostrate themselves before him. He also named man vicegerent on earth with the task of developing it and exploring it with his special abilities in all areas of science and reason.

All people – men and women – were created from a single soul as Allah says: “O people, fear your Lord who created you from a single soul and made its mate from within it and from that pair spread many men and women.” (Sura: Nisa, verse: 1). Every individual human being is part of this one soul and **all are brothers and sisters in this world independent of sex, skin colour, language and religion**. There is no difference between people regardless of time and place since they emerged from one single core.

Islam has guaranteed the equality of men and women with respect to dignity, rights and humanity. Islam preserves the human soul and its protection is the highest priority under the tenets of Islam. It may not be harmed or attacked under any circumstances. The human being is a work of Allah and anyone who destroys this work is damned as it stands in the hadith of the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace.

Islam includes teachings that lead mankind to happiness here and in the afterlife if they are compulsorily respected. These teachings include detailed information about what is allowed and forbidden by Islam, for there are acceptable and unacceptable actions.

Harming a person – man or woman – in any form is indisputably forbidden by Islam. Causing insult to a person with words or deeds is also prohibited. The Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, always took care not to hurt people's feelings. This is why he said: "When three persons are together, two of them must not whisper to each other without letting the third hear because it would hurt him." He would think that the other two were finding fault with him or sharing a secret that he was not permitted to know because they found him not trustworthy. All of this would hurt him, which is why this form of behaviour is expressly forbidden.

This is why one must always consider the feelings of others when a bodily organ is touched. Here of course the pain and damage are twice as strong, since the damage is both physical and psychological.

In areas that affect the human body, Islam is particularly concerned with its welfare and what clearly benefits human beings.

This is why Islam only recommends circumcision for men. This ritual has been established since the time of Abraham, the father of the Prophet. Scientific research has proven that circumcision is medically healthy for men and can prevent disease. In contrast there is no clear textual basis that makes the circumcision of women obligatory. It is has not been scientifically proven that this custom has any advantages for women. The opposite is in fact true, since the circumcision of woman has been shown to cause a great deal of physical and psychological harm. One may therefore not claim that the mutilation of the female body is an Islamic ritual.

It is widely known that female circumcision is not practiced in most countries in the Islamic world. It is generally only still practiced in a few African countries, in those along the River Nile in particular.

We may not hold Islam responsible for the spread of this tradition into this country or another. We must clearly differentiate between the teachings of Islam and all **abhorrent practices** that are strongly rooted in some Islamic countries. Our approach to this topic must be twofold: Firstly, the level of awareness must be raised to show that female circumcision has nothing to do with the teachings of Islam. Secondly it must be understood that this **tradition is a physical attack against a woman which causes her harm**. Additionally this circumcision offers women absolutely no advantages whatsoever and is neither spiritually nor religiously justifiable under Islam.

This short letter is intended to serve as a guide for activists and Imams seeking to raise awareness among their citizens so that this terrible tradition with its devastating consequences can be eliminated.

FATWA REGARDING FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION

from Sheik Al-Azhar

Prof. Mohammad Tantawi

The basic tenets of Islamic law state that an action which causes harm to another human being must by necessity be eliminated. This is to prevent damage, for that is contrary to the dignity of human beings – men or women.

Many scholars consider female circumcision to be an action with no basis in law and for which there are no written sources to support it.

Abu Taib Mohammad Shams Al Haq numbers among these scholars and wrote the following in his book “*Aun Al-Ma’bud fi Scharhi Sunani Abi Dawud*” volume 14, p. 122:

“The Hadith regarding female circumcision has been passed on through so many different chains of transmission all of which must be evaluated as weak, ineffective and implausible. It is therefore unacceptable as substantiation.”

Imam Ibn Al-Moundir wrote: “With respect to female circumcision, there is neither a source that one could look to for confirmation, nor a tradition that one could follow as an example.”

Imam Ibn Abd Al-Bar says in his book “*Al-Tamhid*”: “The jurists have unanimously declared that circumcision is only intended for men.”

Many scholars and a large percentage of medical doctors familiar with this topic support the idea that female circumcision causes physical and psychological harm to women.

This led the health minister to issue a mandate in which he ordered physicians to stop the practice of female circumcision.

The decision by Minister of Health Dr. Hatim Al-Jabali followed after consultation with his colleagues and the assessment of the wide range of harm caused by circumcision.

The reason for our support and avocation of this ban on female circumcision is founded on my personal impressions from visits to a number of Arabic and Islamic countries in which this tradition is unknown. We hope to garner the support of mothers and fathers for this cause. I have friends in Gulf States, in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the Emirates, Oman, Qatar and Bahrain for example. I have asked most of them if female circumcision is practiced in their countries. The answer was always “no”. I asked the same question during stays in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya and also received “no” as an answer.

These countries also have experienced scholars and medical professionals. If these experts had determined that this procedure provides any advantages, they would surely have explained them.

The jurists say: “If an explanation cannot be provided where it is most desperately needed, this is a clear declaration of the invalidity of the assertion.”

The renunciation of this tradition in neighbouring countries is clear proof that jurists and physicians see female circumcision as a practice that must be eliminated.

We have observed a decline in this terrible tradition in all areas of Egypt and this positive development can be attributed to the healthy awareness of fathers and mothers, good

orientation and advising, scientific progress and constant reminders of the damage caused by this tradition.

May Allah assist us in our continued efforts.

Prof. Mohammad Tantawi, Sheik Al-Azhar

July 19, 2007 (05 Rajab 1428)

FEMALE CIRCUMCISION IS NOT AN ISLAMIC RITUAL

Dr. Salem Abd Al-Jalil

Director of the Religious Edicts (fatwa) Authority

1. Circumcision:

An indisputably authentic hadith states: “Five practices are related to natural instinct: circumcision, shaving the pubic hair, removing the hair of the armpits, trimming the moustache and cutting the nails,” for instinct is both a facility and a sunna. Allah says: “So set thou thy face steadily and truly to the Faith: (establish) Allah's handiwork according to the pattern on which He has made mankind: **no change (let there be) in the work (wrought) by Allah.**” (Sura: Al-Rum, Verse: 30)

Imam Nawawi defines the Arabic concepts as follows: Male circumcision is called “I’ dar” (circumcision of the foreskin) and female “Khafd” (circumcision of part of the hood of the clitoris).

2. Male circumcision is allowed:

Scholars explain the term “instinct” as the natural manners, the sunna and with the religious teachings. This is why some are in favour of the circumcision of males in the period between the seventh day of life up to puberty based on medical advice. A man’s natural instinct is to undergo circumcision, since it has been determined to have absolutely no negative effects nor cause health problems. Research by physicians has shown that male circumcision has both

health and sexual benefits, which have been confirmed by the wisdom of Islam in its support of circumcision.

3. Female circumcision:

There is no authentic textual basis that indicates the need for female circumcision. It appears to be simply a social custom, an inherited tradition that has nothing to do with religion. It was established before the prophets received the revelations and before the world religions emerged, and has been spreading in some civilisations since then.

We must listen to the opinions of scientists with respect to circumcision. By this I mean we should defer to the opinions of scholars and physicians, and I shall begin with physicians since they have the ability to better understand and describe this phenomenon. **The fatwa itself is based on the conclusions of physicians.**

4. Medical opinion:

Dr. Jamal Abu Sorour, Director of the International Islamic Centre at Al-Azhar University, professor of gynaecology and obstetrics, explains that female circumcision creates multiple complications due to the pain associated with it and the unbearable suffering of the girls, even if the operation is undertaken with the assistance of highly developed technology.

Among the complications are:

- The shock a girl must suffer and carry with her for the rest of her life.
- The area circumcised or the wound is very susceptible to infection. This can have long-lasting effects on the ovarian tubes and endanger a girl's future fertility.
- Urinary fistula may occur, which have a negative effect on the girl's quality of life at all ages.
- Great difficulties may occur when the girl reaches marriageable age. Sexual intercourse may be difficult since a large part of the clitoris has been removed.
- During pregnancy, a women suffers from vaginal contractions which can have terrible consequences and make giving birth even more difficult. Circumcision is generally undertaken without the use of an anaesthetic and using primitive tools with no hygiene. This method causes the girl unbearable pain during a circumcision

performed without anaesthesia. Where a local anaesthetic is used, the procedure results in great pain after the anaesthetic has worn off. Many girls suffer from shock which can lead to the loss of consciousness, strong bleeding or death. (The death of the girl “Bodour” during circumcision in June 2007 is clear proof of this).

This is why the Egyptian minister of health issued an edict in 1959 banning circumcision in hospitals and health care centres. In 1968, the Egyptian organisation for family planning demanded an end to this form of circumcision. These facts show how the topic has been debated for half a century.

Books about Islamic theology equate female circumcision with “the cutting away of the hood of the clitoris” and **none of them has ever imagined how horribly this method is actually applied in some societies**. A saying goes: **“In order to evaluate something, you must understand it.”** I think that if jurists had been aware of how female **circumcision is practiced today they would have forbidden it, especially since it has no Islamic basis.**

All the evidence the jurists have called upon, primarily the “Umm Atiyya” hadith, is weak. The chain of transmission of the hadith “If two circumcised organs meet, ritual ablutions become obligatory” is strong. Scholars, however, do not consider the expression “two circumcised organs” as an obligatory command for circumcision, but rather a collective term for two different objects expressed through the dual. All hadiths presented in this context are therefore invalid evidence. We welcome the decision of these contemporary jurists which reads as follows:

1. The evidence presented with respect to the mandate for or desirableness of circumcision only refers to men and not to women.
2. There is no authentic hadith that holds this practice to be compulsory or advisable.
3. Hadith Umm Atiyya tells the story of a woman performing circumcisions on girls in Medina. In this hadith, the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, says to her: “Do not overdo it, because this is supposed to make a woman more favourable and it is more agreeable for the man.” This chain of transmission of this hadith is weak.

In this hadith, the instructions of the Prophet are neither an order nor a recommended course of action. On the contrary, it is simple advice that does not carry the weight of

instructions one must follow, for it is about earthly transitory things and their possible benefit to human beings.

But actions that were permitted can be banned, as Dr. Qaradawi says, if their harm is recognised. This is in keeping with a quote from the Prophet Mohammad, may Allah bless him and grant him peace: “Do not harm yourself or others.” Experts and independent studies have confirmed that female circumcision causes great harm, which is why it must be banned and eliminated. Should it be a necessity for some girls, than an exception can be granted with a medical certificate so that any possible beneficial advantages are not withheld.

- When some claim that: “Female circumcision must continue to prevent improper sexual behaviour by women.”

Then I say: “One may not use circumcision as a false pretence for protecting girls from the increased sexual urges that occur during puberty because this premise has been disproved by science.”

- When others claim that: “If circumcision is permitted for men, then this rule should also apply to women.”

I counter: “Simply applying this rule to women is completely wrong, for there are many differences that must be taken into account when making this analogy. The necessity of this procedure for men has been confirmed both medically and according to Islam. Its application to women in contract has been proven harmful and has no advantages whatsoever. I can see no other choice but to apply the rule that states: “Anything permitted must be forbidden if it results in damage and harm.”

“The Koran considers alterations of Allah’s creation to be the devil’s work, and I therefore agree with the conclusions reached by the Islamic Research Academy together with the Grand Mufti of Egypt.” (see appendices)

We categorically reject female circumcision and consider it an action that does not conform with Islam and the nature of mankind. We believe that the previous official decisions (fatwa) reached with respect to female circumcision were based on a lack of knowledge of the true methods of practice. Psychological and physical damage from this procedure cannot be ruled out.

5. **Incorrect approaches and convictions regarding circumcision**

- The claim that circumcision is useful, that it represents cleanliness and purity for girls, is incorrect. The probability that women are exposed to dangerous illnesses during the operation is very great.

Additionally, purity and cleanliness are private virtues.

- The claims that circumcision is necessary since the removal of an unnatural part of the clitoris improves a woman's appearance and is good for her husband, **and that a woman who has not been circumcised may have intercourse with another man in the absence of her husband have been proven false.**

Chastity is a personality trait that is connected to religion and fear of Allah and has nothing to do with circumcision.

- The claim that circumcision can block strong sexual desires before marriage is also incorrect. Physicians have proven in studies that every organ of the female body has a special function which it fulfils as a part of the organism in its entirety.

This part is not dispensable as some claim. Additionally, the desire for sexual intercourse takes place in the brain and not in the genitals.

6. **Female circumcision is not an Islamic ritual for the following reasons:**

- The Koran contains no textual basis that could be interpreted as support for female circumcision.
- There is no clear and credible hadith with a sound chain of transmission that can be produced as evidence in the pronouncement of such a verdict.
- There has been no unanimous decision on this topic and no acceptable analogy from jurists.

It is therefore clearly apparent that female circumcision is not based on religious sources and we request that anyone who practices or spreads it cease and desist in perpetuating this terrible tradition.

We refer to the following attachments for additional information:

- Communiqué from the Islamic Research Academy on Female Circumcision, appendix no. 1
- Communiqué from the Egyptian Religious Edicts (fatwa) Authority, appendix no. 2
- Recommendations from the International Conference to Ban the Abuse of the Female Body, appendix no. 3
- Resolution from the Minister for Health and Population no. 271 from 2007, appendix no. 4

May you enjoy success

Appendix No. 1

Al-Azhar University

Islamic Research Institute

**COMMUNIQUÉ FROM THE ISLAMIC RESEARCH INSTITUTE REGARDING
FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION**

Session from June 28, 2007

With the express purpose of debating female circumcision and the position of Islamic law, due to the death of a girl as a result of circumcision, which many countries erroneously consider an aspect of the teachings of Islam, the Academy discussed the health and legal ramifications of this topic. The members of the Academy are in agreement that there is no Islamic basis or partial decision which supports the necessity of this tradition. It is a destructive custom that has spread in different Islamic societies. The risks and dangers to the health of girls have been clearly proven by the most recent developments.

For this reason the Academy feels obligated to inform the population of these scientific and medical facts and to launch an information campaign to warn all citizens against the continued practice of this destructive tradition.

Appendix no. 2

Egyptian Religious Edicts (fatwa) Authority

COMMUNIQUÉ FROM THE EGYPTIAN RELIGIOUS EDICTS (FATWA) AUTHORITY

The Religious Edicts (fatwa) Authority hereby concludes that female circumcision is a tradition and not a teaching of Islam. The Islamic basis for male circumcision, in contrast, was unanimously confirmed.

Ibn Al-Haj said in “*Al-Madkhal*” 3/310: “Opinions differed with respect to female circumcision: Should all women be circumcised? Or should one differentiate between women in the Maghreb and those in the Orient?” (see “*Fath Al-Bari*” by Ibn Hajar 10/340).

Imam Shoukani said in “*Nil Al-Awtar*” 1/191: “Since the hadith (Circumcision is sunna for men and a sign of respect for women) cannot be used as evidence, it cannot be considered a reason in the required form.”

Abu Taib Mohammad Shams Al-Haq said in “*Aun Al-Ma’bud fi Scharhi Sunani Abi Dawud*” 14/126: “The Hadith regarding female circumcision has been passed on through so many different chains of transmission all of which must be evaluated as weak, ineffective and implausible. It is therefore unacceptable as substantiation.”

Ibn Al-Moundir said: “With respect to female circumcision, there is neither a source that one could look to for confirmation, nor a tradition that one could follow as an example.”

Imam Ibn Abd Al-Bar said in his book “*Al-Tamhid*”: “The jurists have unanimously declared that circumcision is only intended for men.”

This means that female circumcision is not based in religion. It is an inherited tradition.

Research and investigation have revealed that this tradition is practiced in a damaging and unhealthy manner, so that we declare it must be legally banned.

After extensive research often lasting years, many scholars have expressed their opinions on this issue. Mohammad Arafa, for example, a member of the community of great scholars, said in his article in “Al-Azhar Magazine” no. 24/1952, p. 1242:

“If all of this applies, then it is not bad for women to not have been circumcised.” He continues: “If circumcision is banned in Egypt as it is in Turkey and Morocco, that would be fine.”

Sheik Al-Azhar, Prof. Mohammad Tantawi, stated in a fatwa: “With respect to women, there is no credible textual basis that stands as proof of the necessity of female circumcision. I consider this procedure to be a tradition that was spread through Egypt over generations and is currently clearly declining, especially among the more educated classes of the population.”

We have observed that most Islamic countries with a great number of important scholars, such as Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, East Jordan, Palestine, Libya, Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, have banned female circumcision,” he continued.

Dr. Youssef Qaradawi stated in his research paper about the judgments (fatwa) regarding female circumcision: “Based on the unanimously resolved foundation (altering Allah’s creation is forbidden), the removal of part of the clitoris without a good reason is contrary to law and thus not permissible.”

Dr. Salim Al-Ouwa considers the fatwa regarding female circumcision neither obligatory, nor a statement or action by the Prophet, and not a sign of respect for women, since all sources of evidence are weak. It is however a custom and damaging tradition that must be considered an illegal act from the standpoint of scholars and must be punished if it has a negative effect on a woman’s pleasure during sexual intercourse.

One can ask: “Why has this tradition lasted so long?”

Our answer: It has lasted because the consequences were invisible. Now that its effects have been made clearly visible by medical studies, it must be banned.

The fact that female circumcision indisputably causes damage can be attributed to the fast spread of the modern lifestyle, environmental pollution, changes in nutrition and the air, tight clothing and medical developments. Medicine has discovered many disadvantages.

The human body copes with the operation and similar procedures differently.

If one reads past books legally justifying this procedure, one discovers the truth behind this tradition – even in those that claim that female circumcision is simply a ritual as it is for men where solely the foreskin above the vulva is harmed and the entire clitoral hood or foreskin is not removed.

Al-Mawardi said in *Al-Fath Al-Bari* 10/340: “It is the cutting of the foreskin of the clitoris above the vulva, the splitting and not the removal of the hood of the clitoris.”

Nawawi said in *Al-Majmoua* 3/148: “The circumcision of a small part of the foreskin above the vulva.”

This is a clear statement that the procedure involves a cut to the organ and not its complete removal. This is also contained in the weak hadith: “Cut off only the foreskin but do not cut off deeply.” The operation should only be performed by a plastic surgeon for it can cause great damage to the human body because of its complexity today.

Most people have entrusted this question to the medical experts who are responsible for making a medical recommendation. **Now that the disadvantages and damage have been assessed, circumcision should be banned.** To this end Dr. Youssef Qaradawi has said: “Actions that were permitted can be banned when they result in harm in practice in keeping with the rule: “Do not harm yourself or others’.” An action that was permissible is banned to close the path to evil.

The persistent would do better fearing the Lord and accepting that **the fatwa is based in reality and that female circumcision today causes physical and psychological harm. This is why it must be expressly forbidden and there must be unified agreement and no baseless differences of opinion. Any one who is well informed and knows about this procedure has no other option than to ban it.**

The Egyptian Religious Edicts (fatwa) Authority

Appendix no. 3

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE TO BAN
THE ABUSE OF THE FEMALE BODY

The international conference of scholars to address banning the abuse of the female body took place on the 1st and 2nd of Dhul-Qi'da 1427 after the Hijra which corresponds to the 22nd and 23rd of November, 2006 in the conference rooms of Al-Azhar University. A number of research projects were presented. After scientists and Islamic scholars along with experts and activists from civil organisations from Egypt, Europe and Africa were heard, the following recommendations were announced:

1. Allah created human beings with dignity. In the Koran Allah says “We have honoured the children of Adam.” For this reason, Allah has forbidden harming any person regardless of social standing and sex.
2. Female circumcision is an inherited deplorable custom that is practiced in some societies and has been adopted by some Moslems in different countries. This practice has no textual basis in the Koran with respect to authentic transmission from the Prophet.
3. Female circumcision as it is practiced today causes physical and psychological harm to women. It must therefore be banned based on one of the highest tenets of Islam, namely that no person should be harmed in keeping with the saying of the Prophet Mohammad, may Allah bless him and grant him peace: “Do not harm yourself or others”. In fact it must be considered an act of illegal aggression.
4. The conference appeals to Moslems to stop this deplorable custom in keeping with the teachings of Islam that forbid any one from causing harm to another person in any form.
5. The participants at this conference also call on international and religious institutions to focus their efforts on teaching and raising awareness. This applies in particular to the hygienic and medical basic tenets that must be upheld with respect to women so that this despicable custom can be eliminated.
6. The conference would seek to remind educational institutions and the media that they have the immediate responsibility of raising awareness in society of the damage caused by this custom and its terrible consequences and in so doing to contribute to the elimination of this despicable custom.
7. The conference calls upon the legislative bodies to pass a law that forbids the practice of this harmful custom of female circumcision and declares it a crime for both the initiator and the actual doer.

8. Furthermore the conference calls on international institutions and organisations to provide assistance in all regions in which this despicable custom is practiced and as such contribute to its elimination.

Appendix no. 4

RESOLUTION FROM THE MINISTER FOR HEALTH AND POPULATION WITH RESPECT TO THE BAN ON FEMALE CIRCUMCISION NO. 271/2007

Minister for Health and Population

After reviewing

- law no. 415 from 1954 regarding the practice of the medical profession;
- law no. 51 from 1981 regarding the organisation of health care facilities;
- the president's resolution no. 242 from 1996 regarding the organisation of the Ministry for Health and Population;
- the minister's resolution no. 361 from 1996 regarding the ban on female circumcision

the minister has come to the following conclusions:

Article I

Doctors, members of the medical profession and others are expressly prohibited from carrying out the circumcision of, alterations or adjustments to the natural female sex organs regardless of whether these take place in a state or private hospital or in other places.

If a person does perform female circumcision they are breaking the laws and ordinances that govern the practice of medicine.

Article II

This ruling is to be made public throughout Egypt and its application comes into force one day after the date of publication. Additionally all opposing rulings are herewith annulled.

June 28, 2007

Minister of Health and Population

Prof. Hatim Al-Jabali

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