

*Part 4: Islamic Law and Medical Ethics – Recent Applications*

pp. 403-418.

**ISLAM AND “FEMALE CIRCUMCISION”:  
THE DISPUTE OVER FGM IN THE EGYPTIAN PRESS, SEPTEMBER 1994**

**Mordechai Kedar\***

**Abstract:** In September 1994, during the United Nations Population Conference in Cairo, CNN broadcast a report about the custom of clitoridectomy in Egypt. The televised report included footage of such a ceremony performed on a ten-year-old Egyptian girl in Cairo a few days earlier. This broadcast revived the public polemics on clitoridectomy in Egypt. Secular newspapers such as al-Wafd and al-Ahali opposed this practice while religious circles used the al-Sha'b newspaper to justify it. The religious argument is based on Islamic tradition although the origin of the practice is admittedly pre-Islamic. This position maintains that the type of clitoridectomy performed involves minimal excision, but in practice it is much more radical.

There are voices from within the Islamic camp, mainly those of women, that call for the abolition of this practice, basing this demand on the fact that this act is a minor rather than major principle of Islamic Law. Although the secular educated classes in Egypt tend to avoid this practice, they are a minority.

The public argument continues in a low key while in reality thousands of young girls daily undergo this traumatic experience which maims them in body and in soul. Unless there is a sustained public outcry against it, this mutilation is destined to remain part of the Egyptian reality for a long time.

This paper discusses the positions of the two sides to the dispute, concentrating mainly on the opinions of the Islamic faction which upholds the continuation of genital mutilation. These opinions are expressed by male Islamic elders while opposing arguments are presented by women who decry this practice.

**Keywords:** FGM (Female Genital Mutilation), female circumcision; clitoridectomy; reduction; Khitan, Islam; tradition, media, CNN.

---

\* Department of Arabic, Bar-Ilan University, Israel

Female circumcision<sup>1</sup> is a reality for most of the adult female population in Egypt, as more than 90%<sup>2</sup> of the women in the country have undergone this procedure at some point during early adolescence. Although the procedure is performed on females, it affects most males because they — consciously or subconsciously — suffer from the permanent frigidity that is the result of their wives' clitoridectomy,<sup>3</sup> and from the ramifications of this sexual frigidity on family stability and on the atmosphere in society. Nevertheless, media coverage of female circumcision is very limited, far less than coverage of problems affecting much smaller sectors of Egyptian society than those damaged by female genital mutilation. The conspiracy of silence surrounding the subject stems from a general feeling of discomfort related to public discussion of sexual matters; from a lack of desire by men to deal with one of the most far-reaching problems afflicting women — their wives, daughters, mothers, and sisters; and from the shame that prevents women from speaking freely about their inability to enjoy sexual relations. Yet, the reality is that on a daily basis approximately 1,500 girls in Egypt undergo a surgical procedure which leaves them maimed in body and spirit, and condemns them to a life of misery and suffering until their dying day. Only rarely does the subject receive public exposure and media attention, as journalists apparently also find it difficult to discuss the issue openly.

In September 1994 this wall of silence was broken. At that time the United Nations Population Conference, which meets biennially to discuss world population and ways to improve standards of living, convened in Cairo. This conference, which brings together representatives from most of the world's countries, examines birth control methods — abortions, use of contraception, family planning, etc. — and additional topics related to human rights, such as encouraging awareness of health issues, homosexuality and lesbianism, equal rights for women in health, law, family, and society, violence against women, and the like. On 7 September 1994, during the conference, CNN broadcast a report which showed the circumcision of a ten-year-old Egyptian girl. The procedure was performed by two men — a plumber and a barber by profession — in a private house, without anesthesia or proper hygiene, and with family members holding her down.<sup>4</sup> Her distinctly audible

---

<sup>1</sup> Female Genital Mutilation in Arabic is customarily called *Khitan al-Inath*. Though the term *Khitan* is not correct in the female context, it is used in reference to women in order to avoid 'calling a spade a spade'; the Arabic term which means 'cutting the external female genitalia' is *Khafd* (also *Khifad*) which means 'excision' (See Sheikh Muhammad Mutawalli al-Sha'rawi, *al-Sha'b*, 30 September 1994). But since this precise terminology apparently creates discomfort among those who speak out and write on the subject, the more 'legitimate' term is used, that which refers to men. Another euphemistic term used in relation to both genders is *Tuhur*. Dr. Khawla abu Bakr pointed out to me that many organizations in Egypt have recently begun to coordinate their efforts in advocating against male and female circumcision, and they call the procedure *al-Nakht fi al-Jasad* ("body sculpting").

<sup>2</sup> This figure is based on estimates derived from different sources utilizing various research methods. The rate differs in urban and rural areas, and among the educated and those not. Statistics can be found in many Internet sites dealing with FGM, which are being set up and maintained by organizations struggling against female circumcision, human rights organizations, and groups affiliated with the World Health Organization and the United Nations. Sherifa Zuhur reports that "Estimates indicated that 50 to 60% of Egyptian women have been circumcised" while "New data has suggested that the practice is much more pervasive than was previously admitted. A 1995 EDHS (Egypt Demographic Health Survey) showed that 97% of Egyptian women who have been married ("ever-married women")<sup>2</sup> Female Genital Mutilation in Arabic is customarily called *Khitan al-Inath*. Though the term *Khitan* is not correct in the female context, it is used in reference to women in order to avoid 'calling a spade a spade'; the Arabic term which means 'cutting the external female genitalia' is *Khafd* (also *Khifad*) which means 'excision' (See Sheikh Muhammad Mutawalli al-Sha'rawi, *al-Sha'b*, 30 September 1994). But since this precise terminology apparently creates discomfort among those who speak out and write on the subject, the more 'legitimate' term is used, that which refers to men. Another euphemistic term used in relation to both genders is *Tuhur*. Dr. Khawla abu Bakr pointed out to me that many organizations in Egypt have recently begun to coordinate their efforts in advocating against male and female circumcision, and they call the procedure *al-Nakht fi al-Jasad* ("body sculpting").

<sup>2</sup> This figure is based on estimates derived from different sources utilizing various research methods. The rate differs in urban and rural areas, and among the educated and those not. Statistics can be found in many Internet sites dealing with FGM, which are being set up and maintained by organizations struggling against female circumcision, human rights organizations, and groups affiliated with the World Health Organization including divorcees and widows) are circumcised." Sherifa Zuhur, "The Mixed Impact of Feminist Struggles in Egypt during the 1990s", *Middle East Review of International Affairs (MERIA)*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (March 2001).

<sup>3</sup> See Yassir Ayoub, *Behind every door — The Sexual Explosion in Egypt* (in Arabic), Cairo 1995 (Hereinafter: Ayoub).

<sup>4</sup> Nawal El-Saadawi opens one of her books with a description of the procedure and details of family members' participation in it. See Nawal El-Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve - Women in the Arab World* (hereinafter: El-Saadawi). An extensive description of the ceremony is given by Dr. Muhammad 'Awd Khamis, *The Woman and the Advance Backwards — a Psychological Study of Customs and Traditions* (in Arabic), Cairo, n.d. (hereinafter: Khamis), pp. 118-121.

screams and her clearly visible struggles gave millions of viewers a good idea of the horrible suffering the girl experienced.

The broadcast greatly embarrassed the Egyptian authorities because it portrayed their country in the world media as a primitive one that cruelly violates its daughters' bodies and abuses their rights. Furthermore, the Egyptian penal code prohibits injuring or causing bodily harm to anyone, and the film demonstrated to the world the Egyptian government's helplessness in enforcing the law. One can assume that the majority of Egyptians were deeply humiliated not because of the act itself, but because of its public airing by an international network with high viewership. Although the police arrested those involved, the investigation did not focus on the crime committed against the girl, but on the circumstances of the filming and the money that was allegedly exchanged in order to allow its telecast, whose intent was to “disgrace Egypt's good name.”<sup>5</sup> There are even those who called the broadcast a “public crime”.<sup>6</sup>

The televised report sparked a debate in the press, not widespread in ordinary terms, but quite extensive given the topic of female genital mutilation. Almost every newspaper devoted several articles, which quoted professionals from various disciplines such as religion, medicine, psychology and sociology, on the subject. This generally exposed both sides of the argument, with the clergy justifying the practice and the other professionals, on the whole, condemning it. The debate, however, revealed differences of opinion among professionals of the same discipline, with some supporting clitoridectomy and others opposing it. Both sides agreed, it must be noted, that CNN's publicizing the subject on international television was designed to tarnish the good name of the Egyptian nation. That this view was common to both camps likely stemmed from their shared sense of humiliation at the exposure of the fact that this practice is still going on in Egypt, and at the public discussion about a sexual topic, an issue that is embarrassing in its own right.

### Arguments of the Anti-Circumcision Camp

The newspaper *al-Wafd* is a forum widely used by opponents of female genital mutilation. Their main claim is that clitoridectomy deprives women of the ability to derive pleasure from sexual relations and leads to permanent frigidity. As a result, women are revolted by sex and by their husbands because the men fail to satisfy them sexually.<sup>7</sup> The procedure prevents girls from maturing responsibly and developing self-taught ethical behavior patterns. This reality seriously undermines the stability of the Egyptian family,<sup>8</sup> causing men to constantly seek out women who are interested in them, to rape women and girls who do not want them, or to turn to the services of prostitutes.<sup>9</sup> The doctors among the opponents emphasize the injuries caused by clitoridectomy: potentially life-threatening hemorrhages, contamination, infections of the genitalia, urinary tract, and liver, abscesses, blood poisoning, and recently even AIDS because of the practice of performing the operation on several girls in succession without sterilizing the instruments.<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting the position taken by Dr. Subhi al-Fil, Pediatric Specialist at al-Azhar University, who called the procedure “barbaric, serving no religious or social purpose.”<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, a front-page headline of *al-Wafd*, 11 September 1994: “Serious Crime Against Morality in an Attempt to Defame Egypt / Filming of a Girl Undergoing Clitoridectomy and its Broadcast on World Television”.

<sup>6</sup> *Aqidati*, 20 September 1994, p. 17.

<sup>7</sup> The exposure to television and Western movies, even those that are not pornographic, in which women are seen and heard while engaging in intercourse, helps make women aware of the concepts of sexual desire and pleasure, even if clitoridectomy makes them unable to experience these sensations.

<sup>8</sup> According to Dr. ‘Adil Sadiq, Psychologist, *al-Wafd*, 15 September 1994, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> See Ayoub, p. 136.

<sup>10</sup> According to Dr. Ashraf Fuda, Specialist in Nephrology and Urology, Faculty of Medicine, University of Cairo, “These procedures are performed using one instrument on more than one girl at holidays and special occasions,” *al-Wafd*, *ibid*.

<sup>11</sup> *Al-Wafd*, *Ibid*.

A theory among the opponents maintains that female genital mutilation is a fact of life which is difficult to eradicate from Egyptian society, as it is deeply rooted in Egypt's geographic setting in Africa. This view is based on the fact that female circumcision is not an Islamic practice; indeed, it is rarely performed in the Arab peninsula or many other Islamic states, and in Egypt is carried out by Moslems and Christians (Copts) alike.<sup>12</sup> It originated during the Pharaonic period, or migrated to Egypt via Sudan from Africa,<sup>13</sup> where it is widely practiced by many Moslem and non-Moslem communities.<sup>14</sup> *Al-Ahram*<sup>15</sup> elaborates in an article entitled: "Female Circumcision is not an Arab problem — Religions Do Not Support It and the Minister of Health Demands that it be Classified a Crime". In that article, the newspaper reports that the matter of female circumcision was not mentioned at all in the summary statement of Arab non-governmental organizations (NGO's). Nonetheless, the newspaper upholds the Egyptian government's stand by recounting the Minister of Health's remarks at the conference, where he said that female circumcision is very harmful to women and should be outlawed since it is performed mostly by unqualified people and in very unsanitary conditions. The paper quotes Dr. Abd al-Ghaffar Mansour, Sheikh Mahmoud Shaltout, and Sheikh Isma'il al-Daftar — three Islamic religious scholars — who claim that female genital mutilation is not an obligation under the Koran and the Customs of the Prophet, and therefore is forbidden (*makruh*) according to Islamic Law because of the damage it inflicts on women's bodies.

### Arguments of the Pro-Circumcision Camp

Support for female circumcision comes primarily from two newspapers: *'Aqidati*, a newspaper with a religious orientation published in the name of the government, and *al-Sha'b*, the official organ of the *al-'Amal* party, affiliated with Moslem Brotherhood circles. Muna 'Abd al-Na'im<sup>16</sup> writes that "female circumcision is performed in all Arab states to varying degrees". This assertion is puzzling because there are no sources indicating that this custom exists in Lebanon, Syria or Jordan. *Al-Sha'b* quotes several '*ulama*' (religious scholars) who use two types of justification for the practice, one functional-physiological and the other religious.

The functional-physiological arguments highlight the importance of female circumcision in those cases where a woman's external genitalia are too large and "can bring on chronic infections as a result of friction, cause abundant discharges and bacterial growth, especially in warm, moist weather . . . it is incumbent upon the Egyptian authorities to train doctors to perform this as plastic surgery in a hospital, and under anesthesia". This view is expressed by Dr. Munir Muhammad Fawzi,<sup>17</sup> a gynecologist at the University of Cairo. Islamic Law experts amplify these arguments. Sheikh Muhammad Mutawalli al-Sha'rawi believes that "the part of the woman that is removed is useless, protrudes from the adjacent area, rubs against clothing, causing constant stimulation and resulting in sexual aggressiveness, which reduces the man's respect for her".<sup>18</sup> Sheikh al-Sha'rawi is thereby offering a social argument for female circumcision, i.e. it helps the woman maintain man's high regard for her and is therefore for her benefit. According to Dr. 'Abd al-Jalil Shalabi, a member of the Islamic Ruling Committee at al-Azhar, "Female circumcision is not required . . . however, as published in one of the well-known medical journals,<sup>19</sup> contemporary experience shows that leaving a girl uncircumcised is

---

<sup>12</sup> See Dr. Madiha al-Safti, Lecturer in Sociology at 'Ayn Shams University, and Dr. Ahmad Shalbi, Lecturer in History at University of Cairo, *al-Wafd*, *ibid*.

<sup>13</sup> Where it is performed more radically than in Egypt, as in Sudan it is customary to excise major sections of girls' external genitalia. See El-Saadawi, 21-22.

<sup>14</sup> As recently as February 2001 FGM was banned in Yemen. However, this practice apparently still prevails among communities along the red sea, which emigrated from Africa. *Al-Hayat al-Jadida*, 12.1.2001.

<sup>15</sup> 13 September, 1994.

<sup>16</sup> *'Aqidati*, *ibid*.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>18</sup> *Al-Sha'b*, 30 September 1994.

<sup>19</sup> The name of the journal to which Shalabi referred was not mentioned in the interview.

liable to cause her problems during adolescence, because when she is stimulated, that particular part between the labia protrudes even more, rubs against her clothing, which heightens that very sensation!!”<sup>20</sup> According to Dr. ‘Abd al-Sabour Shahin, lecturer in Linguistics at the College of Sciences, University of Cairo, female circumcision “carried out in traditional Islamic fashion adds a certain beauty to that spot, which would disappear if that area remains larger than is reasonable and acceptable.”<sup>21</sup> Sheikh Faid Mahmoud Faid points to another benefit of circumcision for the woman, i.e. that as a result the woman is not “stimulated by a mere touch”. He does not expand on this, but seems to mean that since a circumcised woman needs more time to become aroused, she can derive more pleasure from a longer session of intercourse.<sup>22</sup> Sheikh Faid overlooks the fact that it “takes two to tango”.

Dr. Yahya ‘Abd al-Salam Wafa’, assistant lecturer in Obstetrics and Gynecology at the Faculty of Medicine of al-Azhar University, supports the above analyses, that “leaving the protruding part of the labia minora intact intensifies the sex drive.” He adds, however: “It is possible to cut one-third of the labia and leave two-thirds, which is neither a crime nor complete removal. Drastically cutting out a larger section would make the woman frigid, which is clearly not to be done as this would destroy a couple's life together in the long run.”<sup>23</sup> It is worth noting that despite the doctor's concern for the woman and her body, he includes the labia minora in the area he recommends for removal, thereby advocating a method approaching that practiced in Sudan. Nevertheless, a very telling sentence is added to his statement: “I did not read in any medical text that the ‘reduction’ leads to infertility.” This sentence seems to be taken out of context because a connection between circumcision and fertility did not appear anywhere in the article. It is likely, therefore, that the doctor uses this sentence to address the claim or rumor, spread by opponents of female circumcision in order to frighten the public, that the practice leads to infertility.<sup>24</sup> Dr. Sa’id Ratib, a surgeon from Qasr al-‘Ayni Hospital, also thinks that “It is difficult to assume that circumcision causes infertility, unless the labia are sewn after the procedure.” With this, Dr. Ratib also alludes to the kind of circumcision practiced in Sudan, as described by al-Saadawi, and possibly also in certain regions of Egypt.

The other type of argument used to justify female genital mutilation is the religious one based on Islamic sources. Circumcision — male or female — is not a commandment of the Koran, and was established in Islam through the *Hadith* (Oral Tradition) and its connection to the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad. Most authorities on Islamic Law agree that circumcision holds greater status for males than for females. Male circumcision falls in the category of *wajib* (obligation) or *sunna* (accepted custom), whereas female circumcision is of lower status, considered *makruma* (a noble act) and therefore its status is *mustahabb* (desirable) or *Mashrou‘* (permissible). A minority of religious authorities considers female circumcision equal in status to that of males.<sup>25</sup>

As to the question of how much to remove in female circumcision, Dr. Sha‘ban Isma‘il, Head of the Department of Religious Law at the College of Arabic and Islamic Studies, says: “Circumcision for women is permissible. Although the authorities differ as to the nature of this permission,<sup>26</sup> they all agree that

---

<sup>20</sup> The two exclamation points appear in the source.

<sup>21</sup> Dr. Ayman Sa’d Zaghloul, a gynecologist from al-Jala’ Hospital, claims that no more than one in a thousand cases requires reducing the external genitalia due to their size. *‘Aqidati*, *ibid*.

<sup>22</sup> *Al-Sha‘b*, *ibid*.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*. Khamis claims that the *daya* who performed the procedure in his presence, “removed the clitoris entirely along with part of the labia.” Khamis, p. 120.

<sup>24</sup> This claim may be supported by the assumption that a woman who lacks the desire for sex, and even suffers — physically or emotionally — from it by having it forced upon her, is less likely to conceive and maintain a pregnancy than a woman who desires, and derives pleasure from, intercourse.

<sup>25</sup> The approach of the Shari‘a to male and female circumcision is discussed more extensively in M. J. Kister, “. . . And He Was Born Circumcised: Some Notes on Circumcision in Hadith”, *Le Mus’on* 34 (1994), pp. 10-30. This article was published in Hebrew as part of M. J. Kister, *Studies on the Emergence of Islam*, Jerusalem, 1999, pp. 201-214. See especially, pp. 209-210.

<sup>26</sup> i.e., if it is “desirable”, or “permissible”.

circumcision should be carried out logically and moderately, in accordance with the Islamic ‘middle road’.<sup>27</sup> Sheikhs Sha‘rawi and Faid, mentioned above, express similar views. In support of their opinions — both with respect to circumcision’s permissibility as well as its desired extent — they cite the *Hadith* which quotes the Prophet Muhammad, who told the midwife Umm ‘Atya, “Shorten but do not destroy, as this is more pleasant for the wife and more satisfying for the husband”.<sup>28</sup> There are two commands in the saying attributed to the Prophet: The first, “Shorten”, obliges us (or at least allows us) to reduce the size; the second, “Do not destroy”, prohibits causing extreme harm to the woman. The Islamic spokesmen who were quoted recognize the damage that a drastic cut does to the woman’s ability to enjoy sexual relations, and the ramifications of that damage on a family’s stability; in their statements, they emphasize the prohibition “Do not destroy”.

Yet their comments include two noteworthy points: The first involves Islam’s position on the very idea of circumcision for young girls. Dr. Shalabi claims that “Not every girl wants to be mutilated, therefore many prefer to abandon the reduction as well, and Islam does not view this as wrong.” This position is apparently meant to explain the contradiction between the recommendation (or the permission) in Islamic religious law for female circumcision, and the fact that it is not customary to circumcise girls in most Islamic states, including Saudi Arabia and Iran, although they strictly observe the *Shari‘a*. The second point appears in Dr. Shahin’s remarks: “This is connected to social convention, and documented evidence exists to show that it is part of tradition in society. Islam did not invent this custom, but merely refined it so that the woman’s femininity would not be spoiled.”<sup>29</sup>

These statements, which clearly have an apologetic tone, expose two problematic — if not contradictory — components which disturb the author in both cases. If female circumcision is important, correct and desirable, why is it not a positive commandment of the Koran; or, why is its status in Islamic law and the frequency of its practice in Islamic countries not higher than it is? And if it is not required by the Koran and has such a low religious status due to its being a pre-Islamic custom (*jahili*), why does Islam not abolish it, as it did, for example, the custom of burying daughters alive? In his response, Dr. Shahin attempts to overcome the contradiction and, in so doing, to sing Islam’s praises. On the one hand the custom was rooted in pre-Islamic social norms, so Islam should not be blamed for its existence. On the other hand, Islam refined the practice out of its great concern for women and their femininity.

It is also important to mention that the Islamic proponents made no reference to the fact that clitoridectomy is practiced as well among the Christians of Egypt and among the paganistic-animistic nations of Africa, in order not to establish a similarity between Islam and these other religions.

This weakness in the Islamic argument is exploited by Hiba Sa‘d al-Din, who writes in “The Women’s Voice” section of the same newspaper *al-Sha‘b*, which — as mentioned above — is associated with, and generally expresses the views of the Moslem Brotherhood. In her introduction, she writes of the CNN broadcast and reports that the barber who performed the circumcision was arrested on the charge of practicing medicine without training and a license. Hiba then continues:

“This is not the first chapter in the bloody tale of circumcision, nor will it be the last, as long as the religious establishment - al-Azhar and the Institute of Religious Law — and the nation’s scholars do not take a decisive position regarding [female] circumcision in Egypt. It is not a matter of “just a piece of skin that is cut or uncut, and over which it is not worth making such a commotion” as one of the al-Azhar scholars unfortunately said. It is an issue that involves a blood-filled operation that is performed without anesthesia on most girls in Egypt at the age of twelve, during which a sensitive part of their bodies is arbitrarily excised on the theory that its removal will guarantee her modesty and honor. Subsequently, it is of no interest that the girl experiences pain and bleeding as a result of the inferior medical care in most

---

<sup>27</sup> *Al-Sha‘b*, 27 September 1994.

<sup>28</sup> This version of the *Hadith* is quoted by Dr. Sha‘ban Isma‘il in his article “Girl Circumcision in the Islamic Law”, *al-Sha‘b*, 27 September 1994, p.3. Muna ‘Abd al-Na‘im introduces another version of the *Hadith* in her article in *Aqidati*, *ibid.*: “. . . because [circumcision] is nicer for the vulva and better for the face”

<sup>29</sup> *Al-Sha‘b*, 30 September 1994.

Egyptian towns and villages, or that she suffers emotionally and feels that she is nothing but an impure, seductive object.

I do not deny that female circumcision involves traditions passed on in the name of the Prophet, but these fall under the category of “permissible” and developed in order to contend with a strange, unnatural state of affairs. However, the way circumcision is conducted in Egypt, Sudan and several Islamic states qualifies as extreme harm which the Prophet expressly prohibited by “Do not destroy”. Furthermore, legitimizing the existing situation within the framework of religious law in no way grants a stamp of approval to the harm inflicted upon women by the current practice, even by [claiming that there is also a religious] benefit. Even if such a benefit exists, it is no more than something permissible, and is definitely not a requirement or a commandment.

Our problem has always been that since our scholars remain silent on the matter of our legitimate rights, those who seek to protect them (due to other motivations) are the enemies of the [Islamic] nation. The scholars generally have reservations, because the criticism comes from someone who does not believe in God and His Prophet. As a result, our enemies determine whether we ultimately win or lose, [despite the fact] that the scholars and the Islamic preachers should be the ones protecting us.

Abandon this vicious circle and defend the legitimate rights of women. View the woman as Islam intended, as a partner in the burden of responsibility for the faith and the building of the nation. If you raise the woman as did God's messenger — as a warrior, educated and responsible — you will ensure her modesty and purity. Do not destroy<sup>30</sup> her body in the name of Islam; the practice of circumcision in Egypt is not the will of God and his messenger, nor is it within the realm of legitimate religious discussion, for it has overstepped its bounds and become abhorrent. Beware of God in the matter of women, beware of God in the matter of women.”<sup>31</sup>

It is worth dwelling on several points in Hiba's article:

- a. The article appeared, as stated, in *al-Sha‘b*, a newspaper with an obvious Islamic bent. The fact that the paper has a section entitled “The Women's Voice” indicates that its management is aware of the growing strength of educated women who have their own views on Islamic issues and that it is important to provide them with a valid Islamic forum in which to voice their opinions.
- b. Assuming that female circumcision is no more than “something permissible” and is not an absolute requirement, the writer condemns the radical version carried out in Egypt and Sudan that severely maims the woman in both mind and body. She chooses to disregard the religious rulings which bestow a status on female circumcision that is higher than “permissible”, such as “required”, “accepted”, and “desirable”.
- c. It is evident that the author is well-versed in Islamic religious law, its juridical processes and its inner workings. Her writing reflects a devotion to Islam and to religious law and tradition, rather than hostility to the faith or criticism of its laws. She lends an Islamic quality to her words by using expressions drawn from Islamic sources, such as “Beware of God”, an expression which appears more than fifty times in the Koran.

An Egyptian's attitude towards clitoridectomy usually parallels his/her position on the issues of tradition vs. progress, religion vs. secularism, and a coercive society vs. the rights of the individual. Hiba's comments are important because they position the controversy over female circumcision squarely within the internal Islamic religious arena. Islamic scholars can no longer avoid confronting the problem by claiming that it is a product of an external, heretical-Western attack designed to “discredit Egypt's good name”. The issue is now put forward by someone who lives and writes from within Islam, for a readership with an Islamic awareness, and with the intent of advancing Islamic goals as she sees them. Hiba's voice may be only a “voice in the wilderness” or a “cry in the dark”. Nevertheless, her Islamic approach is conceivably the only way to reduce the extent of female circumcision in those sizeable segments of Egyptian society which identify strongly with religion and with traditional morés.

---

<sup>30</sup>The author uses the same verb as the Prophet in the *Hadith* cited above: “Do not destroy”.

<sup>31</sup>*Al-Sha‘b*, 23 September 1994. The author's words are quoted in their entirety.

## Epilogue

The film that CNN aired during the Population Conference in September 1994 revived the public debate over clitoridectomy in Egypt, conducted on both sides of the secular divide. Secular newspapers such as *al-Ahali* and *al-Wafd* oppose this practice while religious circles use *al-Sha‘b* to justify it. The religious argument is based on Islamic tradition although the origin of the practice is admittedly pre-Islamic. Proponents of this position maintain that the type of clitoridectomy performed involves minimal excision, but in practice it is apparently much more radical.

There are voices from within the Islamic camp, mainly those of women, which call for the abolishment of female genital mutilation, basing this demand on the fact that this act is a minor rather than major principle of Islamic Law. The secular, educated classes in Egypt tend to avoid this practice — and there are parents who allow the doctor to make the decision regarding their daughters' circumcision — but they are a minority.

More than one source has disclosed that it has recently become common among the educated, urban classes to transfer responsibility for their daughters' circumcision to doctors, both as to the decision for the necessity of circumcising the girl as well as for performing the operation under anesthesia and proper hygienic conditions. Until 1996 the Egyptian government appeared to be accepting — even encouraging — this trend and did not outlaw clitoridectomy, which as a hospital procedure posed fewer health risks for the girl, while declaring the procedure illegal would forever consign it to the likes of barbers, plumbers, or *dayas*. However, “the Minister of Health denounced FGM, issuing decree 261 in 1996 forbidding FGM in governmental medical hospitals and clinics. The decree was challenged in the courts and overturned, but was reinstated in 1997.”<sup>32</sup>

Thus, while the low key public argument continues, more than a thousand young girls daily undergo a traumatic experience which maims them, body and soul, without a sustained public outcry against it. This mutilation seems destined to remain part of Egyptian reality for a long time.

## Bibliography

Egyptian newspapers: *Al-Sha'b*, *'Aqidati*, *Al-Wafd*, *Al-Ahram*.

Ayoub, Y., *Behind every door — The Sexual Explosion in Egypt* (in Arabic), Cairo 1995.

Khamis, M. 'A., *The Woman and the Advance Backwards — a Psychological Study of Customs and Traditions* (in Arabic), Cairo n.d.

Morsy, Soheir A., "Islamic Clinics in Egypt: The Cultural Elaboration of Biomedical Hegemony", *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 2 (1988), pp. 355-369.

Morsy, Soheir A., *Gender, Sickness, and Healing in Rural Egypt: Ethnography in Historical Context*, Boulder 1993.

"Egypt: The End of FGM?" *Ms. Magazine*, Vol. 7 (Nov/Dec 1996), p. 22.

"Protest against Egypt's efforts to medicalise female genital mutilation", *Women's Health Project News*, February 1995, pp 19-20.

Andersson-Brolin, L., *How to eradicate circumcision of girls?: a study of efforts in Egypt, Kenya and Mali*, Stockholm 1990.

Assaad, M. B., "Female circumcision in Egypt: social implications, current research and prospects for change", *Studies in Family Planning*, Vol. 11, No 1 (1980), pp 3-16.

Cairo Family Planning Association, *Report of the seminar on bodily mutilation of young females, Cairo, Egypt, October 14-15, 1979*. Cairo: Family Planning Association, 1979.

Hussein, A., "Female genital mutilation: the road to success in Egypt", *Planned Parenthood Challenges*, No 2 (1993), pp 40-42.

Mostafa, H., "The unkindest cut of all", *Egypt Today*, Vol 17, No 12 (1996), pp. 102-107.

Sayed, Gh., Abd El-Aty, M. A. and Fadel, K. A., "The practice of female genital mutilation in Upper Egypt", *International Journal of Gynecology and Obstetrics*, Vol 55 (1996), pp. 285-291.

Seif El Dawla, A., "Women's rights in Egypt", *Women Against Fundamentalism Journal*, No 8 (1996), pp 25-28.

World Health Organization (WHO), Regional Office for South-East Asia, *Traditional practices affecting the health of women and children*. Elexandria, Egypt: WHO 1982.

El-Saadawi, N. and Hetata, S., *The hidden face of Eve: Women in the Arab world*. London 1980.

<sup>1</sup>M. J. Kister, "... And He Was Born Circumcised: Some Notes on Circumcision in Hadith", in *Le Mus'on* 34 (1994), pp. 10-30.

Sherifa Zuhur, "The Mixed Impact of Feminist Struggles in Egypt during the 1990s", *Middle East Review of International Affairs (MERIA)*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (March 2001).