

In Egypt, female genital mutilation is still rampant

Hassan Abdel Zaher

Cairo

Large numbers of Egyptians show tolerance for female genital mutilation (FGM), while Egypt, which has legally banned the procedure, prepared to officially mark the international day of zero tolerance to the practice.

Egyptian girls tend to go under the knife because social misconceptions fan the practice and appear to be so difficult to change despite efforts by state institutions to reduce the number of such mutilations.

"There is a wrong perception that a girl whose genitals are mutilated is more chaste than another who has not come under the knife," said Azza Ashmawi, the secretary-general of the National Council for Childhood and Motherhood, the national agency that defends the rights of children. "This is totally wrong and must change."

National figures show how widespread FGM is. An estimated 92% of females aged 15-47 have been circumcised, a 2017 census indicated. The survey also found that in the 15-17 age range, 61% of girls had suffered FGM.

To some extent, the slight drop boils down to efforts by the government and the civil society to keep the lid on the practice.

Egypt banned FGM in 2008 and parliament criminalised the practice in 2016 with a law that stipulates prison terms of up to 15 years for doctors who carry out an FGM if the patient dies or suffers severe health complications. The law commits the Medical Association, the independent guild of the nation's doctors, to fire doctors who perform FGMs.

Nonetheless, more than 70% of operations are carried out by members of the Medical Association



Wrong perceptions. Residents walk by a kiosk (C) that is used as a clinic where girls are circumcised by a barber in the Imbaba area of Giza.

(AP)

who go unpunished, said the General Federations of Civil Society Organisation, a union of Egyptian NGOs. In parts of rural Egypt, the operation used to be carried out by local barbers.

"The fact that these operations are done secretly makes it hard for the authorities to track down doctors who carry them and to bring them to account," said Talaat Abdel Gawwy, the organisation's president. "The solution will be for parents to stop circumcising their daughters and this will only happen when there is a change of culture."

Female circumcision is rampant in the Egyptian countryside where

More than 70% of operations are carried out by members of the Medical Association who go unpunished.

families consider it a normal – and in some cases necessary – practice. Parents who would not circumcise their daughters in some rural areas, for fear of the health complications, would be considered revolutionary. Behind the proliferation of fe-

male genital mutilation for some in Egypt is the belief that the procedure is connected to religion. However, the religious establishment in recent years has become heavily involved in campaigning against FGM. Egypt's former Mufti Sheikh Ali Gomaa, who often appears on television to warn against FGM, has said the practice is a "sin."

Authorities, who marked the International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation on February 6, are pinning their hopes on the role of religious scholars, such as Gomaa, to dissuade parents from forcing their daughters to undergo FGM.

"Religion plays a very important role in the lives of people in this country, which is why action by men of religion will necessarily have an effect," said Tarek Tawfiq, the deputy health minister for population affairs. "We are also taking a series of other measures to eradicate this phenomenon."

Those steps include massive awareness campaigns against FGM, modification of the medical school curricula to show the dangers of the procedure and its effects on the physical and mental health of females in addition to the distribution of millions of leaflets containing information about the dangerous effects of FGM. The ministry offers training courses to health workers on the dangers of female circumcision.

Egypt's civil society organisations have branded female circumcision as a form of "violence" against women and called for turning its eradication into a national strategy.

"Female circumcision causes death, which is why parents need to understand that they might be causing untold harm to their daughters by subjecting them to it," Tawfiq said.

The National Council for Women, which operates a hotline to report on female genital mutilation, received 50 calls reporting instances of FGM last year.

"This is less about whether the person carrying out this abominable operation is a specialist or not and more about the destructive effects this operation has on the psychology of girls and their lives," Ashmawi said.

"Although the physical pain connected with the operation goes away after a short while, the psychological pain stays forever."

Hassan Abdel Zaher is a Cairo-based contributor to The Arab Weekly.

Controversy endures over interpretation of the Quran from a gender perspective

Myra Abdallah

Beirut

The status of women in the Quran has always been controversial. Many scholars considered that the Quran clearly stated that men and women were not equal but others have tried to progressively interpret Quranic verses to refute that theory.

Maria Dakake, an associate professor of religious studies at George Mason University in Virginia, has researched Islamic intellectual history, with a particular interest in the development of the interpretation of women-related Quranic verses, especially among female scholars in the West.

In the 1990s, she said, there was an increase in the number of female scholars in Muslim communities who tried to reshape the understanding of gender in Islam. These included Pakistani-American theologian Riffat Hassan, African-American Amina Wadud and Lebanese-American philosopher Azizah al-Hibri.

"The approach they took was to go back to the Quran itself and use it as a main source to find true messages of gender equality," said Dakake at a conference on "Gender in the Quran." It was organised by the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World at the Lebanese American University in Beirut.

"They published interesting interpretations [that confirm gender equality in the Quran] such as general widespread concern

for issues of justice, fairness and kindness, in addition to statements of gender equality from a spiritual and moral point of view that highlight the quality of men and women respectively."

Women scholars, such as Hassan and Wadud, based their interpretations of Quranic verses on the idea of justice to invoke the bigger principles, taking into consideration that Quranic verses are ambiguous, controversial and mainly open-ended.

In Arab countries, women scholars are less popular due to the historical prevalence of men as religious authorities and references.

To refute the theory that the Quran explicitly states that women are to be on a subordinate level, Dakake cited Hibri's interpretation of the most controversial verses.

"Hibri confirms that, from a bigger logical context, these verses especially the verse stating that 'men are the upholders and maintainers of women' come from a financial perspective, following the section that regulates the division of inheritance. In her opinion, the Quran allows men to inherit more than women on condition that they spend on their women. If they don't, all their privileges fall," Dakake said.

Muslim cleric Sheikh Mohamad Kojok, a researcher in education,

anthropology and religious studies at the Lebanese University and doctoral student in jurisprudence and fundamentals at Qom Hawza in Iran, contends that controversial verses in the Quran can't be understood if read in a superficial way.

"[Controversial verses] are linked to many others that explicitly confirm equality between men and women in their existential identity and public responsibilities; however the Quran differentiates between men and women taking into consideration their natural characteristics," Kojok said.

"The equality [in the Quran] resides in the fact that women should obtain their full rights to reach God and serve God's creation and the fact that men should obtain their full rights for the same reasons," he said.

Interpreting the Quran from a gender perspective in Western countries has been mainly initiated by Muslim women who wanted to question traditional interpretations to confirm that equality is preserved by the Quran without abandoning their faith and religious traditions.

"Women scholars argue that the Quran does not necessarily support patriarchy, it only reflects the society at the times when it was written. For example, the Quran gives many reasons to abolish slavery. Why don't we think of patriarchy the same way?" said Dakake.

In Arab countries, due to the strong patriarchal system still in place, women scholars have less influence and are less popular due to the historic prevalence of men



Different perspective. Maria Dakake, associate professor of religious studies at George Mason University in Virginia, speaks at the conference on "Gender in the Quran" at the Lebanese American University in Beirut.

(AUB)

as religious authorities and references.

"Interpreting the Quran is available to men and women equally," said Kojok. "Since the '90s [in the Arab World], a new group of interpreters from both genders has been trying to establish a modern interpretation of Quran verses. However, this group based their interpretation on humane experience instead of divine revelation, and this had practical results that introduced principles that are uncommon to Muslim audience."

In recent years, Muslim extremist groups misused the Quran to justify violence, especially against

women, despite the opposition of most Muslim scholars, who promote Islam as a religion of peace.

"The use of religious texts to suppress women and insult them is against the sharia itself," Kojok said. "This has been incited by the political reintroduction of the takfiri fanaticism to Islam. To counter these practices, we should work to limit the influence of these groups and raise awareness in Muslim communities about the important role of women in the society."

Myra Abdallah is an activist on gender issues.