

Fact sheet 01: Cultural, religious and social causes of FGM

The causes of female genital mutilation include a mix of cultural, religious and social factors within families and communities.

- Where FGM is a social convention, the social pressure to conform to what others do and have been doing is a strong motivation to perpetuate the practice.
- FGM is often considered a necessary part of raising a girl properly, and a way to prepare her for adulthood and marriage.
- FGM is often motivated by beliefs about what is considered proper sexual behaviour, linking procedures to premarital virginity and marital fidelity. FGM is in many communities believed to reduce a woman's libido and therefore believed to help her resist "illicit" sexual acts. When a vaginal opening is covered or narrowed (type 3 above), the fear of the pain of opening it, and the fear that this will be found out, is expected to further discourage "illicit" sexual intercourse among women with this type of FGM.
- FGM is associated with cultural ideals of femininity and modesty, which include the notion that girls are "clean" and "beautiful" after removal of body parts that are considered "male" or "unclean".
- Though no religious scripts prescribe the practice, practitioners often believe the practice has religious support.
- Religious leaders take varying positions with regard to FGM: some promote it, some consider it irrelevant to religion, and others contribute to its elimination.
- Local structures of power and authority, such as community leaders, religious leaders, circumcisers, and even some medical personnel can contribute to upholding the practice.
- In most societies, FGM is considered a cultural tradition, which is often used as an argument for its continuation.
- In some societies, recent adoption of the practice is linked to copying the traditions of neighbouring groups. Sometimes it has started as part of a wider religious or traditional revival movement.
- In some societies, FGM is practised by new groups when they move into areas where the local population practice FGM.