

Case study: Female Genital Mutilation in the Philippines

Story and Photo by Atom Araullo

Embong Ballaho, as she is fondly called by neighbors, identifies as a member of the Yakan tribe, an indigenous Muslim group from this southern island of the Philippines. She is sometimes called a *kah dayang* or “teacher” as well. At 57, her eyes still have a youthful spark in them. She laughs easily, especially when she cannot understand what is being said, being slightly hard of hearing.

As a *panday*, Nanay Embong has formed an intimate relationship with the women of her community over the three decades that she’s been doing this. She looks after pregnant women, assists in childbirth, gives post-natal consultations, and even leads the washing of the dead. Fittingly, Nanay Embong’s house is also her clinic. Her visitors for the day are two girls, 4 and 7 years of age, accompanied by their mother. Female circumcision is a source of bitter international controversy. It is officially known as Female Genital Mutilation or FGM, and is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as the partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons. While the practice is found mostly in western, eastern, and northeastern Africa, there are also documented cases in Asia and immigrant communities in Europe, North America, and Australia.

FGM is a public health concern in many countries because of its harmful effects on women. The United Nations General Assembly included the practice in its Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women. There have been many international efforts to persuade practitioners to abandon FGM or to outlaw it altogether. In the Philippines, few academic studies have been done on the subject of FGM. The terminology itself might be a source of debate given the way it is practiced here. Experts note that female circumcision occurs in at least several communities in Zamboanga, Basilan, and Sulu. Locals call the practice *pag-islam* or *tuli* which directly translates to “circumcision.” However, it differs significantly from documented FGM practices in other parts of the world.

The tools for the job are quite simple. Nanay Embong prepares a bottle of alcohol, cotton swabs, a candle, and a small, ornate knife. The blade, while newly polished, shows years of abuse, with a patina of rust and scratches crisscrossing the surface. The point of the blade has noticeably broken off and was reattached with a spot weld. Inspecting it by hand, it is not particularly sharp, but could still injure. As the ritual begins, one of the girls is led outside the house to be bathed, a process called *pagpandih*. Crouching on the ground, shirtless, water is poured over her head while the panday recites a prayer or *tawal*.

The belief that this rite of passage has basis in religion has justified its continued practice among the Yakan and other indigenous peoples in the region. In her study, Amilasan notes that some religious leaders view female circumcision as part of the legal body of Islam, and is mentioned in the Qur-an or hadith (a collection of the sayings and acts of prophet Mohammad), making it obligatory.

Al-Azhar Supreme Council of Islamic Research, the highest religious authority in Egypt, issued a statement in 2007 saying FGM has “no basis in core Islamic law or any of its partial provisions” and that it should not be done. Indeed, some studies note that FGM’s origins in northeastern Africa, where it is prevalent, are pre-Islamic. American anthropologist Ellen Gruenbaum has argued that practitioners may not be able to distinguish between religion, tradition, and chastity, all of which become interwoven as a community maintains its way of life.





LEARNING ACTIVITY

Names: Gaton, Robert James
Guardian, Jaypee D.
Chavaria, Regine G.
Jetajobe, Marjorie F.

Year and Block: BSIT 2-A

Schedule: _____

Date Submitted: September 14, 2021

Concern and opposition has been raised over the practice of FGM for decades. Women's rights advocates in particular think that the tradition is rooted in gender inequality and attempts to control a woman's sexuality. Answer the following questions based on your perception on the issue. Your answers should be clear and comprehensive and will not be less than 2 paragraphs for each question. Each paragraph should contain 4-5 sentences. 10 points for each question. ONLY the leader of the group will upload the finished worksheet.

1. Since Female Genital Mutilation is part of a cultural tradition, can it still be condemned?

Yes, this cultural traditions don't reflect respect, dignity and individual freedom. They control the pleasure or having self determination as a woman. I think they should change it. We should try to respect other people's culture but we shouldn't deny that their tradition is a kind of slavery. This cultural tradition can be also a torture to every children and women.

2. Does anyone have the right to interfere in age-old cultural traditions such as FGM?

Every child has the right to be protected from harm at all times. Ending FGM is needed to protect girls from profound, permanent and completely unnecessary harm. Because FGM is usually performed without permission and against will, it violates girls' right to make important decisions about their sexual and reproductive health. It will take intensive and sustained collaboration from all parts of society, including families and communities, religious and other leaders, the media, governments and the international community.

3. Which international and regional instruments can be referenced for the elimination of FGM?

Most governments in countries where FGM is practiced have ratified international conventions and declarations that make provisions for the promotion and protection of the health of women and girls. not only in the Philippines but in other countries. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaims the right of all human beings to live in conditions that enable them to enjoy good health and health care that emphasizes the certain cultural or traditional practices, such as FGM, carry a high risk of death and disability.

4. How does FGM violate the human rights of children and women?

Female genital mutation violates the human rights of children and women, in a way that, if the process cause death, it already violates Article 2 of the Human Rights Act protects your right to life. FGM brings a harmful impact on our health because the procedures can cause bleeding, pain, and even danger. FGM gives disadvantages and harmful effects on children and women in many different ways because it entails removing and destroying female vaginal tissue, as well as damaging women's bodies' natural functioning. It also offends the human right which is, According to the law, No one shall be subjected to torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment.