

# **Survey on religious views on FGM**

Religious justification and awareness raising in Kermanshah province of Iran

**By: Osman Mahmoodi**

## **Abstract**

The Hamraz counseling center of Javanrood (Iran) conducted a research project “Study on Religious leaders’ (Mullahs) Attitudes and Views on FGM”. The objectives were considered to be best achieved through a survey approach using a self-completion questionnaire. The questionnaire was developed and comprised of 7 questions that explored mullah’s knowledge and attitudes towards FGM. A total of 81 questionnaires were completed. Analysis of the data was undertaken using SPSS Version 18.0 descriptive statistics including frequency, table and percentages were compiled. Content analysis for free response qualitative data was also undertaken using Microsoft Word software. The survey was undertaken during the period of May to July 2016. After inviting 300 Mullahs<sup>1</sup> to answer questions, a total of 81 religious leaders (mullah) participated in the questionnaire survey. All of the Mullahs were living in Kermanshah province. 21 mullahs were female and 60 were male. Mean age of female mullahs were 35 and mean age of male mullahs were 56. Results show

## **Introduction**

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines Female genital mutilation (FGM) as a cutting, or partial or total removal, of the external female genitalia for cultural, religious, or other non-medical reasons.

FGM results in the cutting or removal of the tissues around the vagina that give women pleasurable sexual feelings. This procedure is used for social and cultural control of women's sexuality. In its most extreme form, infibulation, where the girl's vagina is sewn shut, the procedure ensures virginity. In some cultures where female circumcision has been a tradition for hundreds of years, this procedure is considered a rite of passage for young girls. Families fear that if their daughters are left uncircumcised, they may not be marriageable. As in most cultures, there is also the fear that the girl might bring shame to the family by being sexually active and becoming pregnant before marriage.

FGM is found mostly within and adjacent to Muslim communities in Central-North Africa, but it is not required by Islam or practiced in most Muslim countries, and prevalence rates vary according to ethnicity, not religion. However, Muslim views are claimed to have permitted, justified, and even encouraged FGM, over human history.

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<sup>1</sup> Graduate of Islamic theology who has studied Islamic traditions (hadith), and Islamic law (fiqh)

There is no reference to FGM in the Qur'an. In other Islamic texts the practice is referred to as khafd (Arabic: إخْفاض) or khifaḍ (Arabic: إخْفَاض). Khitan usually refers to male circumcision, but in some regions or dialects also encompasses FGM.

There is no consensus whether the hadiths support or forbid FGM. Different schools of Islamic jurisprudence have expressed different views on FGM.

In addition to Sharia, Ijtihad (sometimes spelled igtihad) has been one of the four sources of Muslim law through the centuries. Ijtihad include fatwas (opinions of Muslim religious scholars), which are often widely distributed, orally or in writing, in simple language, to the masses, and describe behavior that conforms to religious requirements. Fatwas are considered by most believers to be morally obligatory.

There are dichotomous differences of opinion among Sunni scholars in regard to female genital cutting. These differences of opinion range from obligatory to acceptable. The Shafi'i and Hanbali schools of Islamic jurisprudence consider circumcision to be obligatory for both males and females, while the Hanafi and Maliki schools of Islamic jurisprudence consider circumcision to be Sunnah (preferred) for both males and females.

During the last year, Kurdish mullahs have given out various fatwas about FGM. Most mullahs indicated agreement with FGM, some of them called FGM a bad practice and some preferred to stay silent and don't say anything about FGM.

This may be seen as a reaction to a number of awareness raising activities in Iran as a whole and especially in the province of Kermanshah. The issue of FGM in Iran has been raised by a number of activists through media (radio and internet) and a conference in Teheran. In the city of Kermanshah regular lectures for parents and couples have been held, further information material in the form of flyers has been given out to parents and a booklet for health workers has been distributed. Furthermore, educational programs through Iraqi Kurdish media (TV and radio) about negative effects of FGM also reach an audience in the Kurdish speaking communities in Iran.

This research shows new religious views about FGM among Mullahs and tries to challenge Mullahs' beliefs by asking them critical questions.

## **Design and Method**

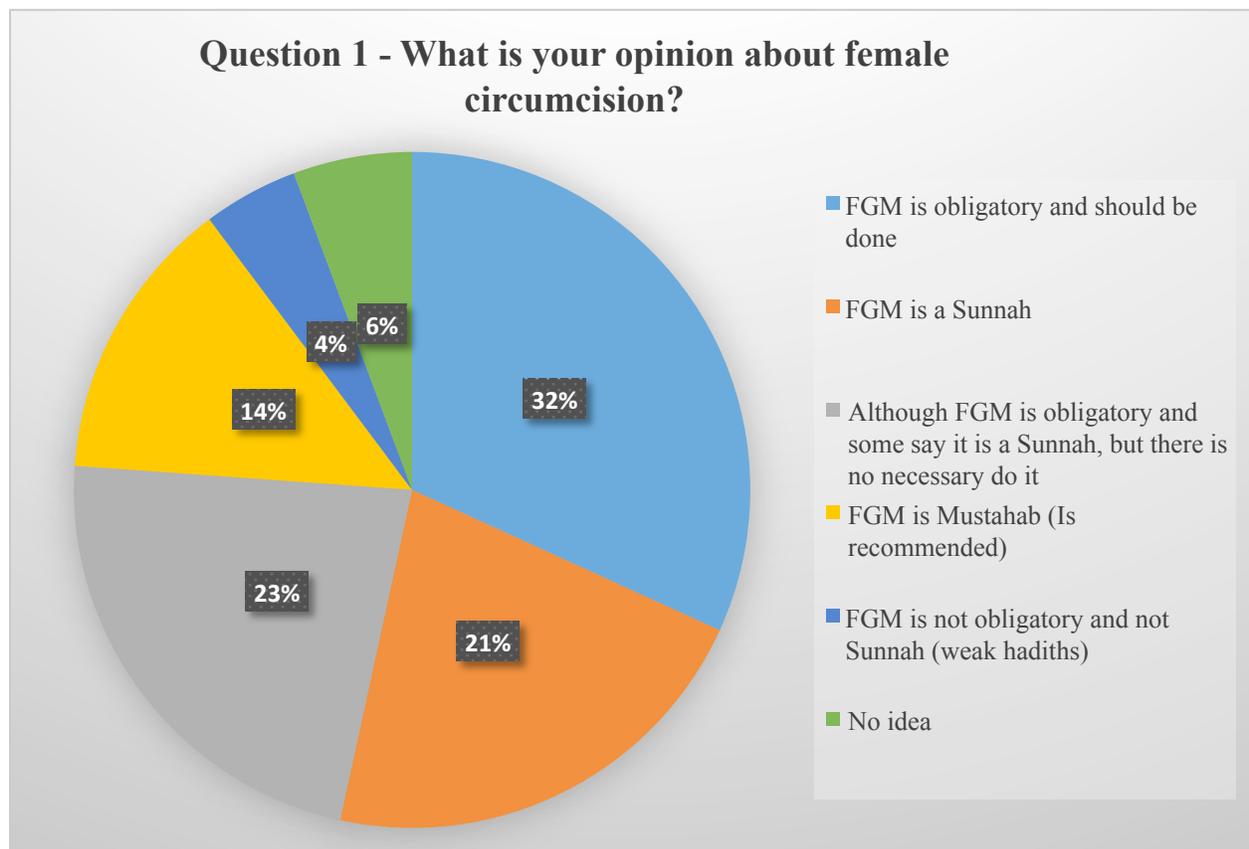
The study design was exploratory and descriptive. The objectives were considered to be best achieved through a survey approach using a self-completion questionnaire. The questionnaire was developed and comprised of 8 questions that explored mullah's knowledge and attitudes towards FGM. The questionnaire was posted during first half of 2016. A total of 81 questionnaires were completed. Analysis of the data was undertaken using SPSS Version 18.0

descriptive statistics including frequency, table and percentages were compiled. Content analysis for free response qualitative data was also undertaken using Microsoft Word software.

## Results

### Question 1: What is your opinion about female circumcision?

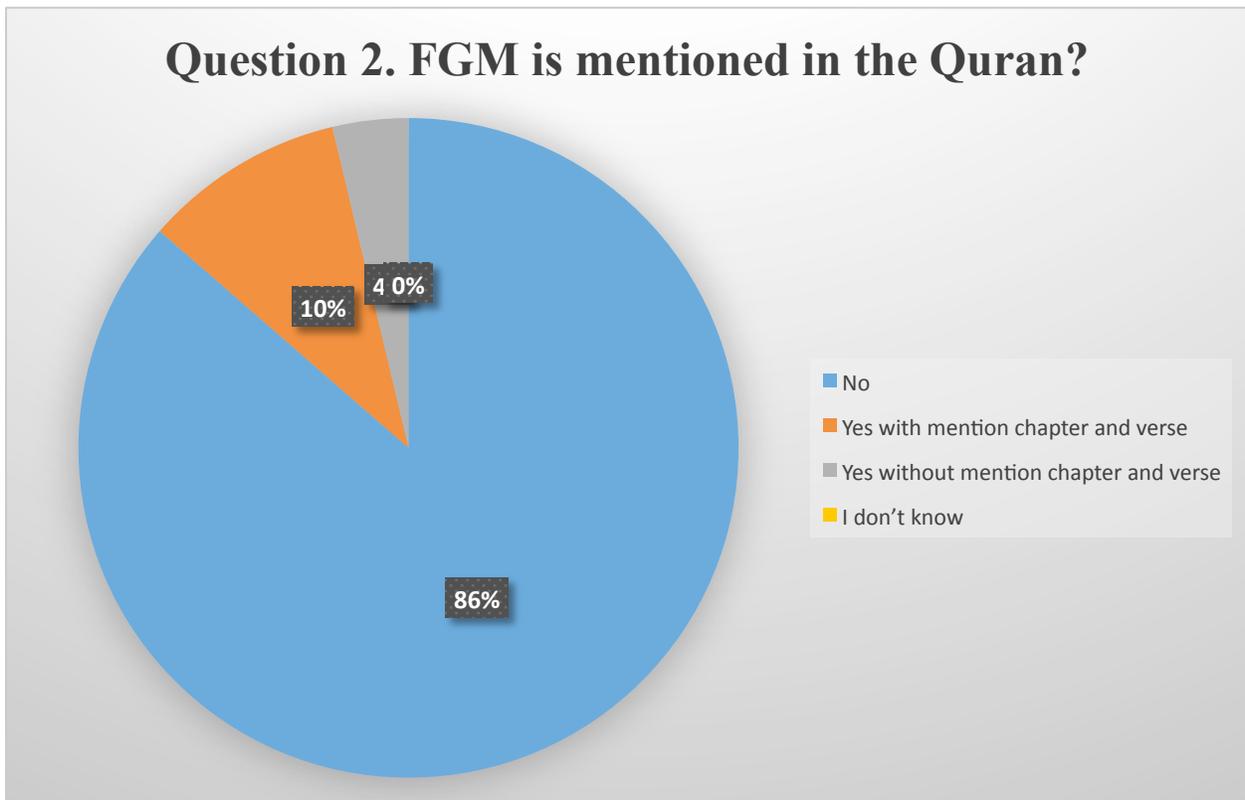
Question 1 - What is your opinion about female circumcision?		Frequency	Percent
1	FGM is obligatory and should be done	28	32%
2	FGM is a Sunnah	19	21%
3	Although FGM is obligatory and some say it is a Sunnah, in my opinion there is no necessity to do it	20	23%
4	FGM is Mustahab (Is recommended)	12	14%
5	FGM is not obligatory and not Sunnah (weak hadiths)	4	4%
6	No idea	5	6%



32% of the mullahs believe that FGM is obligatory and should be done. 21% of the mullahs believe that FGM is Sunnah and 14% of them say FGM is Mustahab (recommended). Only 6% of mullahs say FGM is not obligatory and not Sunnah (weak hadiths) and 23% of mullahs express that although FGM is considered obligatory and some say it is Sunnah, they see no necessity to do it.

## Question 2. Is FGM mentioned in the Quran?

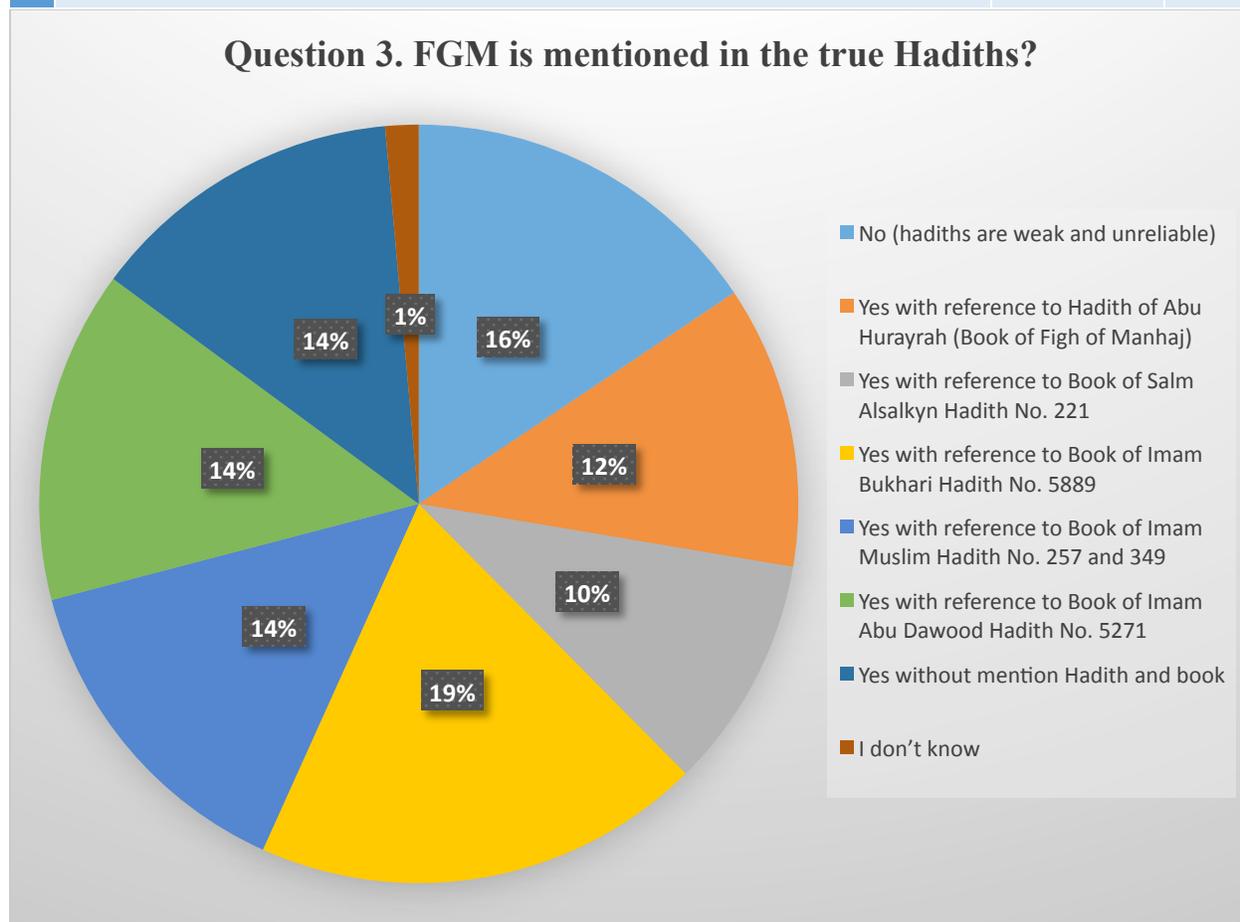
	Question 2. FGM is mentioned in the Quran?	Frequency	Percent
1	No	70	86%
2	Yes with mention chapter and verse	8	10%
3	Yes without mention chapter and verse	3	4%
4	I don't know	0	0%



A majority of the mullahs (86%) expressed that FGM is not mentioned in the Quran. 10% of them say FGM is mentioned in the Quran and referred to different chapters and verses, apparently falsely, because none of the verses mentioned anything related (female genital cutting is in fact not mentioned in the Quran). 4% of them say FGM is mentioned in the Quran without referring to chapter and verse.

### Question 3. Is FGM mentioned in the true Hadiths?

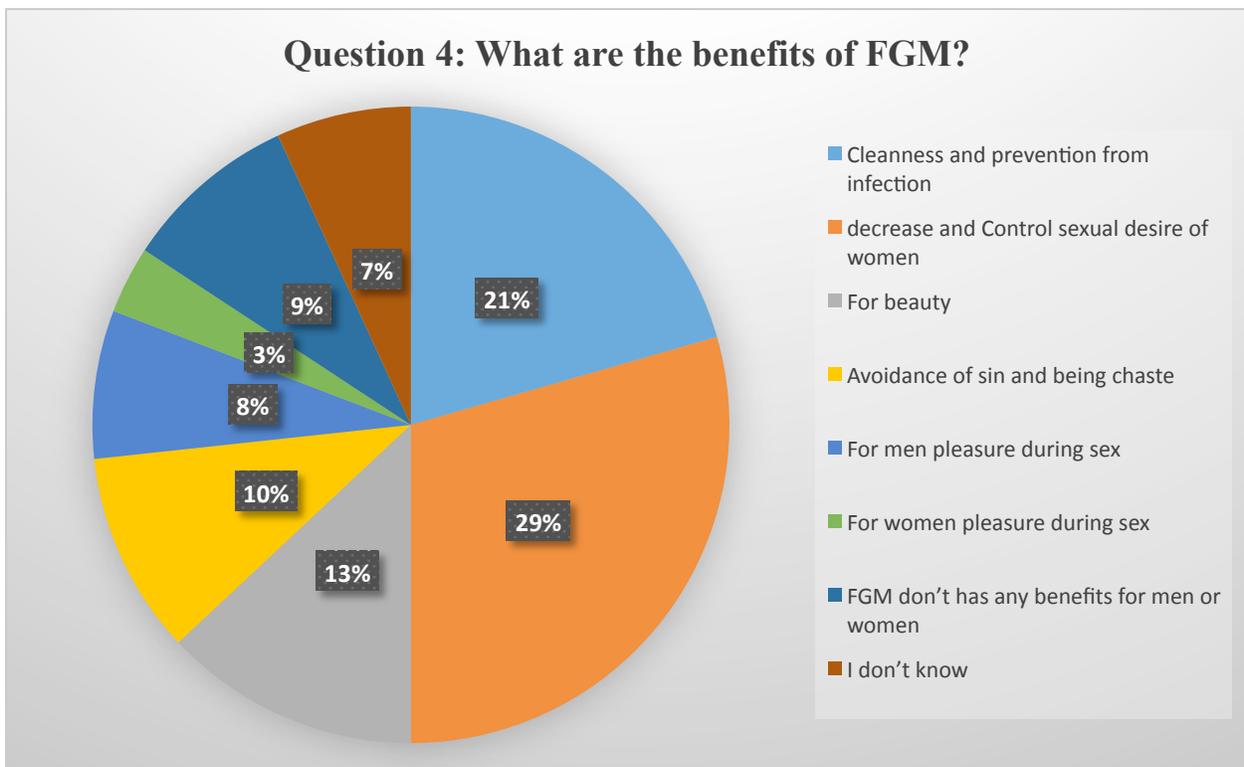
Question 3. FGM is mentioned in the true Hadiths?		Frequency	Percent
1	No (hadiths are weak and unreliable)	22	16%
2	Yes with reference to Hadith of Abu Hurayrah (Book of Figh of Manhaj)	17	12%
3	Yes with reference to Book of Salm Alsalkyn Hadith No. 221	14	10%
4	Yes with reference to Book of Imam Bukhari Hadith No. 5889	27	19%
5	Yes with reference to Book of Imam Muslim Hadith No. 257 and 349	20	14%
6	Yes with reference to Book of Imam Abu Dawood Hadith No. 5271	20	14%
7	Yes without mention Hadith and book	19	14%
8	I don't know	2	1%



16% of the mullahs believes that FGM is not in the hadiths while 83% believe it is mentioned in the hadiths. The vast majority (69%) is able to quote the exact hadith. 12% refer to Hadith of Abu Hurayrah (Book of Figh of Manhaj), 10% of mullahs refer to Book of Salm Alsalkyn Hadith No. 221, 19% of them refer to Book of Imam Bukhari Hadith No. 5889, refer to Book of Imam Muslim Hadith No. 257 and 349, 14% of mullahs refer to Book of Imam Abu Dawood Hadith No. 5271 and 14% of mullahs believes that FGM is on hadiths but don't refer to any book or hadith.

#### Question 4: What are the benefits of FGM?

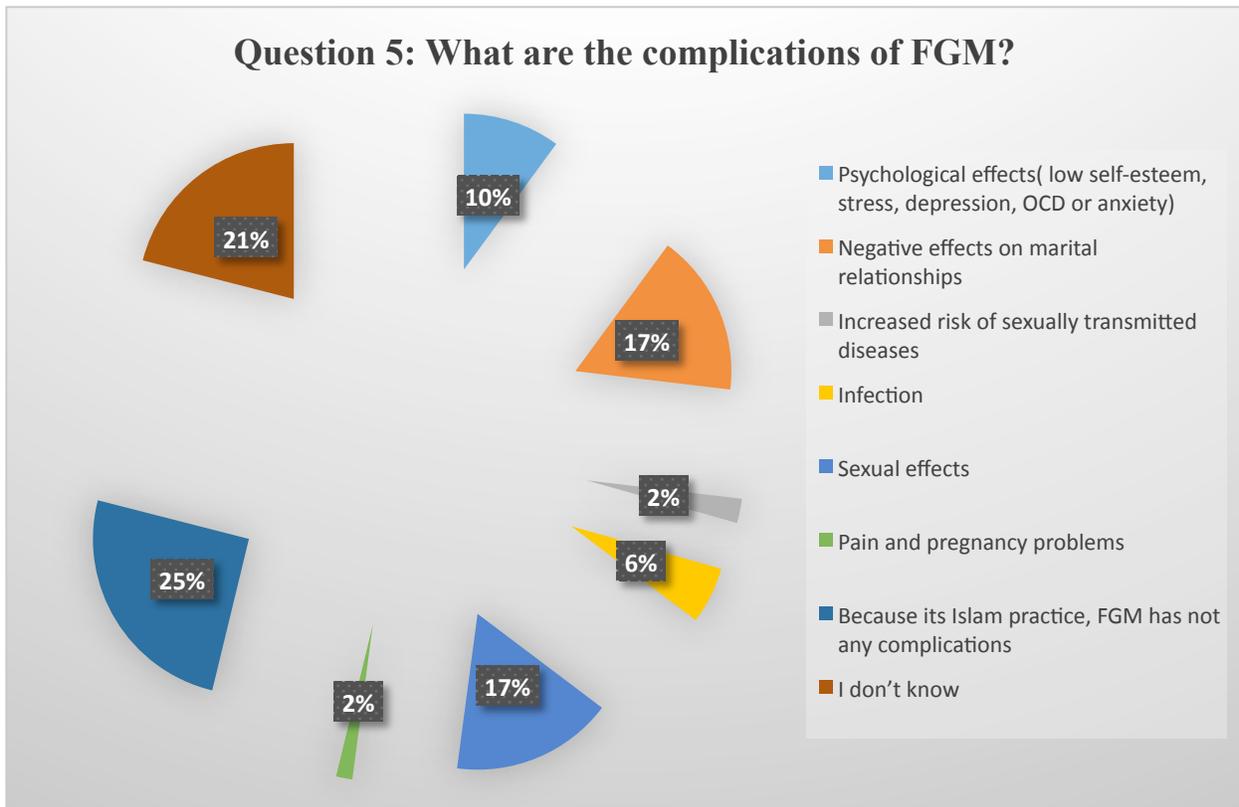
	<b>Question 4: What are the benefits of FGM?</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>1</b>	<u>Cleanness and prevention from infection</u>	<u>30</u>	<u>21%</u>
<b>2</b>	<u>decrease and Control sexual desire of women</u>	<u>43</u>	<u>29%</u>
<b>3</b>	<u>For beauty</u>	<u>19</u>	<u>13%</u>
<b>4</b>	<u>Avoidance of sin and being chaste</u>	<u>15</u>	<u>10%</u>
<b>5</b>	<u>For men pleasure during sex</u>	<u>11</u>	<u>8%</u>
<b>6</b>	<u>For women pleasure during sex</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>3%</u>
<b>7</b>	<u>FGM doesn't have any benefits for men or women</u>	<u>13</u>	<u>9%</u>
<b>8</b>	<u>I don't know</u>	<u>10</u>	<u>7%</u>



In answer to this question “what are the benefits of FGM?” 29% believe FGM is for decrease and control sexual desire of women. 21% believe FGM is for cleanness and prevention of infection. 13% believe FGM is for beauty. 10% believe FGM is for avoidance of sin and being chaste. 8% believe FGM is for men’s pleasure during sex. 3% believe FGM is for women’s pleasure during sex. 9% believe FGM doesn’t have any benefits for men or women and 7% of mullahs say they don’t know of any benefits.

**Question 5: What are the complications of FGM?**

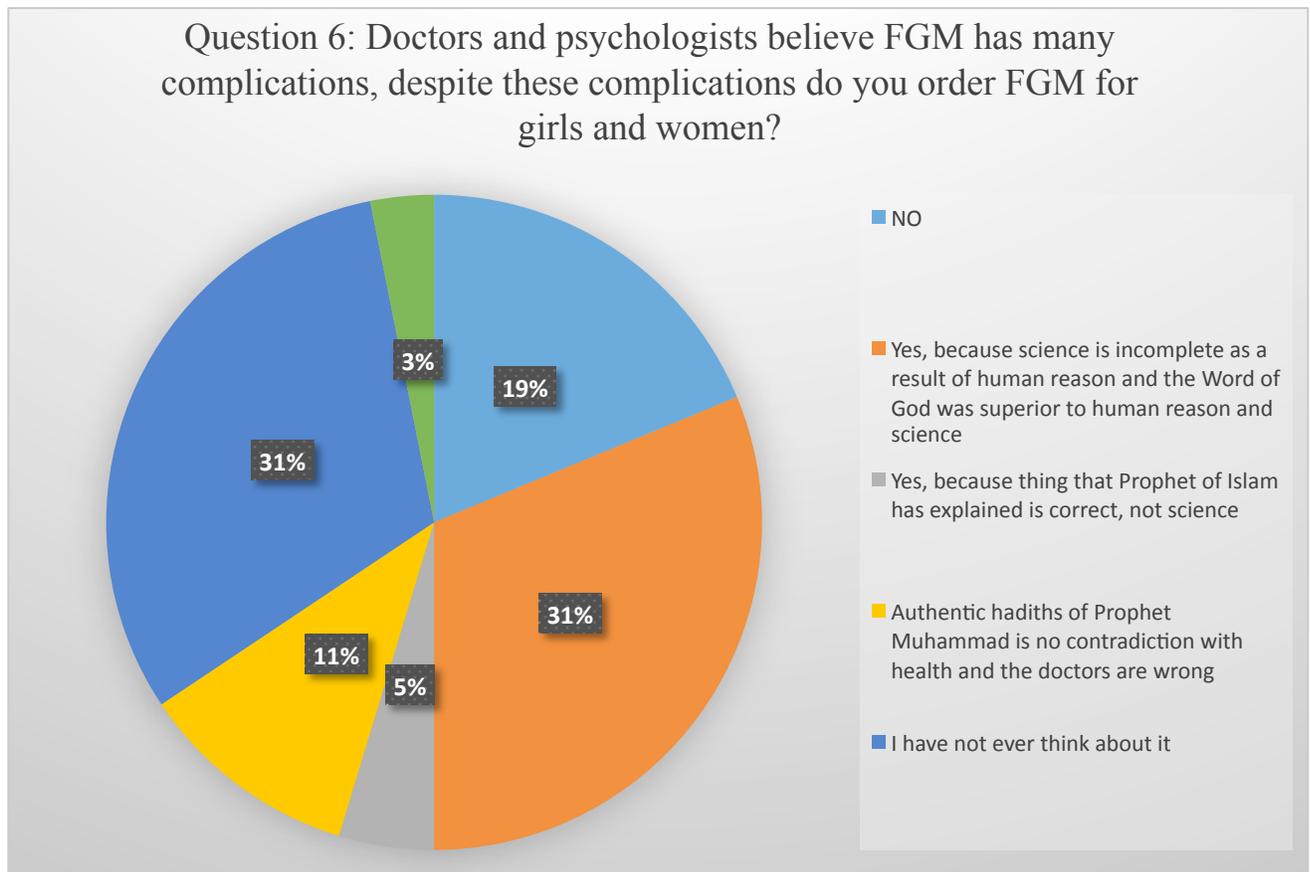
Question 5: What are the complications of FGM?		Frequency	Percent
1	Psychological effects (low self-esteem, stress, depression, OCD or anxiety)	12	10%
2	Negative effects on marital relationships	20	17%
3	Increased risk of sexually transmitted diseases	3	2%
4	Infection	7	6%
5	Sexual effects	20	17%
6	Pain and pregnancy problems	2	2%
7	Because it’s Islamic practice, FGM has no complications	30	25%
8	I don’t know	25	21%



Questioned about complications resulting from FGM the biggest group (25%) believes FGM has no complications, because it is an Islamic practice. Other mullahs believe that there are psychological effects (10%), negative effects on marital relationships (17%), increased risk of sexually transmitted diseases (2%), infection (6%), sexual effects (17%) and pain and pregnancy problems (2%). 7% of mullahs say they don't know of any complications.

**Question 6: Doctors and psychologists believe FGM has many complications, despite these complications do you order FGM for girls and women?**

Question 6: Doctors and psychologists believe FGM has many complications, despite these complications do you order FGM for girls and women?		Frequency	Percent
1	NO	12	19%
2	Yes, because science is incomplete as a result of human reason and the Word of God was superior to human reason and science	30	31%
3	Yes, because thing that Prophet of Islam has explained is correct, not science	3	5%
4	Authentic hadiths of Prophet Muhammad is no contradiction with health and the doctors are wrong	7	11%
5	I have never thought about it	30	31%
6	I prefer not to answer this question	2	3%

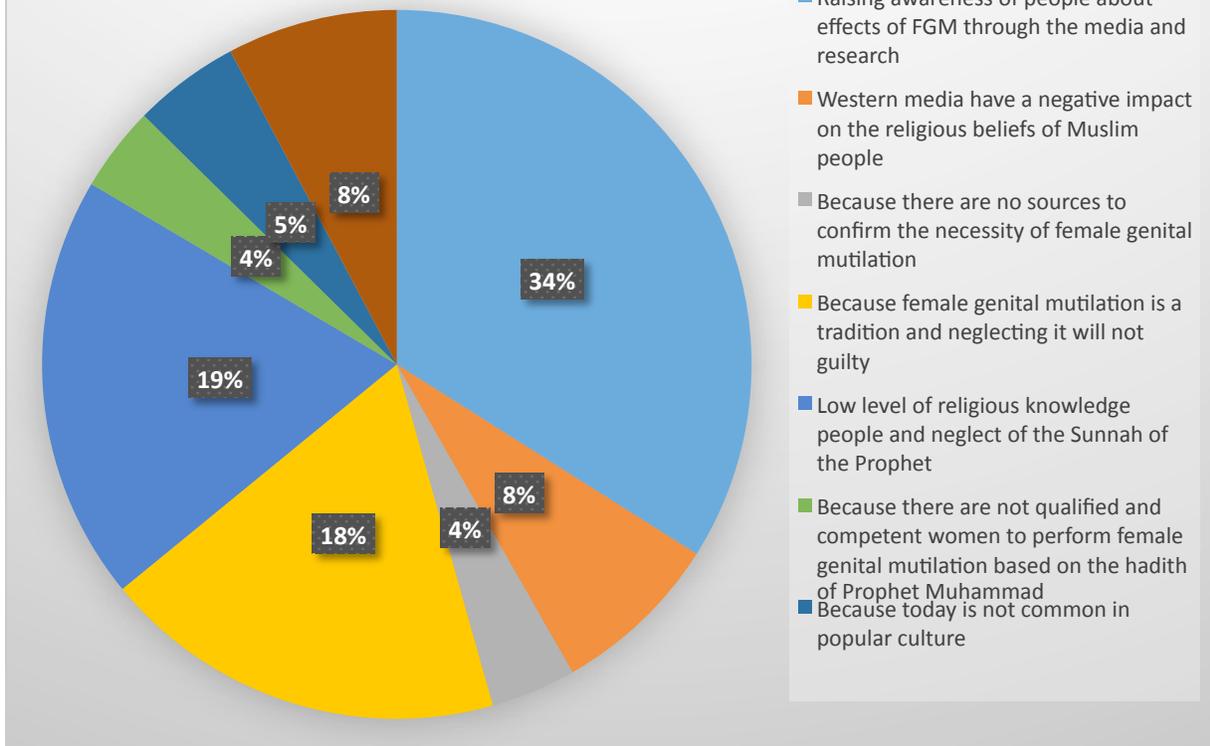


A critical question of this research asked mullahs “doctors and psychologists believe FGM has many complications, despite these complications do you FGM for girls and women?” In answer to this question a third (31%) believed science is incomplete as a result of human reason and the Word of God was superior to human reason and science. Another 5% believes the Prophet of Islam has explained it correctly, not science. 11% of mullahs believe authentic hadiths of Prophet Muhammad can not be in contradiction with health and thus the doctors are wrong. 31% of the mullahs said they did not think about this issue up to now and 3% of them preferred not answer this question.

**Question 7. Why in recent years fewer people tend to circumcise their daughters?**

<b>Question 7. Why in recent years fewer people tend to circumcise their daughters?</b>		<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>1</b>	Raising awareness of people about effects of FGM through the media and research	35	34%
<b>2</b>	Western media have a negative impact on the religious beliefs of Muslim people	8	8%
<b>3</b>	Because there are no sources to confirm the necessity of female genital mutilation	4	4%
<b>4</b>	Because female genital mutilation is a tradition and neglecting it will not make them guilty	19	18%
<b>5</b>	Low level of religious knowledge and neglect of the Sunnah of the Prophet	20	19%
<b>6</b>	Because there are no qualified and competent women to perform female genital mutilation based on the hadith of Prophet Muhammad	4	4%
<b>7</b>	Because today is not common in popular culture	5	5%
<b>8</b>	I don't know	8	8%

**Question 7. Why in recent years fewer people tend to circumcise their daughters?**



In last question mullahs were asked why FGM is done less or why in recent years fewer people tend to circumcise their daughters. In answer to this question 34% of the mullahs believe that FGM is done less because awareness of people about effects of FGM increased through media and research. 19% of them believe low level of religious knowledge of people and neglect of the Sunnah of the Prophet is a major reason for the decrease of FGM. 18% of mullahs said FGM decreased because female genital mutilation is a tradition and neglecting it will not make people guilty (of neglecting their religion). 8% of mullahs link the decrease of FGM with the negative impact of Western media on religious beliefs of Muslims. 5% believe FGM has decreased because today it is not common in popular culture. Some of mullahs (4%) said FGM decreased because there are no sources to confirm the necessity of FGM and other believe FGM decreased because there are not qualified and competent women to perform female genital mutilation based on the hadith of Prophet Muhammad (4%). 8% of mullahs say they don't know the reasons for the decrease of FGM.

**Conclusion**

The results show that FGM is still justified by a majority of mullahs in Kermansheh province as a religious deed. Only a small minority of 4% says that it is not an Islamic practice (not Sunna). The vast majority believes that it is Islamic. A good third (35%) sees it as recommended or Sunna (the right path), but do not call it an obligation. Yet, almost as many (32%) say it must be

done. A number of Hadith are referred to, to justify this view and a small number of mullahs even falsely believes that the Holy Quran itself calls for female genital cutting.

However, there is also a highly ambiguous group of 23% who take the seemingly contradicting position of calling it obligatory and Sunna, but say it is not necessary in their opinion. This may be interpreted as a sign of change within the religious establishment or a reaction towards changing opinions in society.

On the other hand, knowledge of negative consequences exists. A majority (54%) have heard of different negative effects like psychological problems, infections and marital problems. Thus, it can be concluded that awareness campaigns have at least partly reached their audience. This is also shown by the answers to question 7 where 34% answered that the decrease of FGM is due to awareness raising through media and research.

The results imply, however, that one and the same mullah may know about negative health effects and still defend the practice as a religiously good deed. This seems to be even true when important values in Islam like marriage are affected: 17% of the mullahs believe that FGM can have negative effects on marriage. Some of these 17% justify FGM with religion nevertheless.

It can be concluded that awareness raising is showing some effect even in this highly conservative sector of society. However, the seemingly contradictory views of knowing about negative effects on the one hand but still promoting FGM as a religious deed on the other hand should be highly alerting.

To explain this contradiction the mullahs distance themselves from modern science as is shown by the results of question 6 where 46% chose one of the answers which prioritize religion over scientific research and medical studies. Only 19% take the position that FGM should not be done if doctors and psychologists show that it leads to complications.

From the results of this study it can be concluded that education about negative health effects of FGM does not lead to a rejection of the practice if strong religious beliefs stand in the way. Medical studies seem to be rejected by a vast majority of mullahs if they contradict their religious beliefs, thus scientific results are simply not believed.

Since mullahs have a strong influence on people's beliefs and practices in the Kurdish regions of Iran, it seems a high priority to challenge the existing religious beliefs about FGM or to keep mullahs from promoting these beliefs, e.g. by law.

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