**Female genital mutilation in Egypt**  
---the free choices of Muslim women

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“I will not stop fighting until there is 0 female victim of FGM.” [24]
------ Latty from Egypt

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**Introduction and background**

Female genital mutilation (FGM) refers to the practice of cutting away parts of a girl’s or a woman’s outer sexual organ for non-therapeutic religious reasons.[1] It violates the fundamental conception of SDG 5.3 in gender equality: All countries should eliminate harmful practice including the female genital mutilation.[2] Impacts of FGM are seriously condemned including the rise of HIV diseases caused by the lack of professional knowledge in anatomy and injuries of other organs caused by the infection. [3] Due to complex cultural and religious reasons, female genital mutilation exists ineradicably in Arabian countries. Reports from ESCWA in gender equality of Arabian religion indicate that the empowerment of women in Arab region is still deficient which is clearly reflected by the situation of women in the religion. The prevalence of VAW is high in the Arab region where 1 out of 3 ever married women have
experienced sexual violence and female genital mutilation. While in Egypt, the country where exists strong traditional religious resistance, the risk of female genital mutilation increasingly multiplies. Based on the background that 36% of Egyptian people regard it reasonable that husbands are justified in conducting violence to his wife due to certain circumstances, female genital mutilation is nearly universal among girls and women of reproductive age in Egypt. It indeed that around 50% of people support the continuation of FGM and believe it’s the necessary religious requirements. Data shows that the key element to FGM in Egypt is the perception of 10-49 year-old women undergone genital mutilation by the official personnel is largely occupied, which indicated the dominant role of community-level gender system in affecting the operation of FGM and also the correct direction of policy designing.


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**Community-level gender system**

Related law was published by Egyptian government to respond the spirits of United nation who banned the practice of female genital mutilation in 2011 and defined it as the serious criminal offense. However, community-level gender system, which is the main hidden resistance of official law, still enforces women to suffer from FGM. The system consists two important characteristics: the collective social norm in common sense and the structural opportunities for women outside the family system, which fills conceptual and empirical gaps in research on the multilevel on FGM in classic patriarchal belt of Middle East and North America with Muslim doctrine.

The collective social norm is defined as the practice of relevant groups that is motivated by two social standards: the empirical expectation that others practice the behaviors and the normative expectations that others think the practice should be held. In this case we conclude that whether girls’ genital should be mutilated depends on the recognition of their parents about the expectations of the community. In Egypt, female genital mutilation is associated with the gender identification, feminine beauty and purity, and the control of women sexuality. It means that parents must care about the moral standings of social identity and status of their girls inside the community. Common sense of most communities in Egypt indicate that help to realize the feminine aesthetics of purity, smoothness and cleanliness. The necessary condition of marriage is to cut the genital to fix the reproductive role for girls. Therefore, it expresses that if the expectation of descriptive norms is high in the community, even unwilling, parents are still forced to make their daughters burden FGM. Through the fulfillment of
virginity and conformity of expectations, social forms in communities play important role in maintaining FGM.

Women’s structural opportunities in communities outside the family refers to the restrictions of women in the areas outside the family structure, including the inequality in economics and political participation. Mothers play a role as subject to spread impacts on the decision of FGM in the background of patriarchal settings. In Egypt, opportunities for married women outside the family structure are still limited. Current researches show that the number of women representatives in the House of the Representatives were only 89, which occupied 14.93% in total members. [13] Meanwhile the labor force of female unemployment in Egypt reached 21300 in 2019 while for male there is only 6700 unemployed. [14] These data show that the opportunities in society for male and female have already been extremely inequal, no matter in non-official social manners or official laws. If female doesn’t have the same privilege as male does, then we conclude that married women must form the necessary dependence on men for the basic survival. To the strategy under patriarchy, women are said to make choice for their daughters within the situation that they don’t enjoy the privilege to choose. The limited chances form women in community made her let her daughters mutilated regardless of her personal attitudes, just for the purpose to make sure the “best choice” for daughters in the community. In conclusion, these structural obstacles of women in gaining opportunities and resources form the dependence on men and the obedience towards internal family practice.

[sources: World Bank Indicator scores, women and business, Egypt]

**Effective solutions**

Existing measures have been taken for half of the century to prevent the widespread of female genital mutilation. In 2007-2008, the government has issued a decree on the 26th to prohibit “circumcision” operations by women in the country, Egyptian minister of Health Hatem told the outside world at a press conference that Egypt has issued a decree prohibiting all medical professional in Egypt, whether in private or public hospitals. The clinic performs the operation of circumcision. He said that any circumcision operation is considered a violation of law, which is the permanent ban and all violations of these regulations must be punished accordingly.[15]

Honestly, this is not the first time Egyptian government and even those African institutions set the regulations for the purpose of banning the FGM. According to UN women, Ethiopia has included it into criminal law while in Tanzania or Niger, it will be operated as detailed measures such as imprisonment and fines. [16] The reason why female genital mutilation is still operated is that the legislative measures miss the main contradictions of FGM. Based on the rooted traditions of Islam culture, the importance of attitude change is necessary precursor to behavior change [17] In Egypt, finding the balance between Muslim doctrine and modernization is the sufficient way to achieve thorough-ban of FGM. The doctrine of Community level gender system offers a platform to made us focus on the detailed solutions in primary level instead of macro law establishment. Through the community-gender system, we analyze from two aspects— interior and exterior.
Community members are treated as the main dominant subjects of female genital mutilation in community and the traditional resisting power of abandoning this devil custom. Under the background of patrilineal society, changing the collective social norms is quite important. It has possibilities that Egypt could remove the success of Tostan Dignity program which has already conducted in the western African countries like Mali and Senegal. It conducted human rights-based community program to allow community members to draw their own conclusions about female genital mutilation and lead their own movements to make their own changes.[18] This program has already been treated as the motivation of abandonment of FGM in Senegal and Gambia. Naturally, the purpose of this program is to raise the self-motivation of community to destroy the traditional gender collective form based on the expectations in common sense, where Egypt could gain successful experiences from it. Due to the objective data that Egypt has only 60% of education attainment in total population,[19] this initiative suggests that Egypt should develop an entire system of community empowerment. First, communities should set human-rights based classes and each class should be divided into two groups: one is adolescents and the other is adults. Because the education background of everyone in the community is different. Therefore, by holding separate classes of the two groups, we can ensure that adults and youths can both participate and contribute carefully in the classroom. The knowledge should be discussed as the content of fundamental conceptions of gender democracy, human rights and problem-solving models, especially dealing with the knowledge of hygiene in anatomy with the purpose of letting community members being aware of the risk of FGM in future generation. By operating the classes, communities can achieve not only letting people know their responsibilities in forming a correct social norm in abandoning traditional customs but also the way to manage sustainable development to their communities. In a word, focusing on transforming the outdated gender collective form into the modern one is the key for this measure to succeed in getting rid of the deep effects of social expectations on FGM.

Another angle we describe is the external opportunities of women. Due to the situation that women lack the opportunities of improving themselves, the necessity of starting women empowerment should be put in agendas in Egyptian communities. In the background of COVID-19, the Executive Director of UN Women Melissa Fleming addressed the inequality of women violence suffering and the personal experiences when she worked for male organizations,[20] which furthermore proves the importance of empowering women in Egyptian society. Education in Egyptian community is supposed to be the key factor here to spread modernity across the society. First, by exposing women to outside influences education expands women knowledge out of common one, which is related to the knowledge scope in social sciences or literature instead of pure housework. Here we recommend that communities should take advantages of social medias to effectively give exposure to the external knowledge. In Egyptian society, nearly 98.36% female population has a mobile device.[21] Government and non-profit organizations should give guidance towards women in communities about their wise use and full control in social medias. Second, teaching women how to manage the material goods is essential for them to escape the dependence of husbands. The data that only 26.99% of Egyptian women have an account in financial institutions indicate that women don’t know the wise way to possess full control of their wages.[22] Therefore, giving some guidance for financial knowledge such as stocks and fund inside communities is designed to help women form independent economy basis for their lives. This will be operated meanwhile with the wise instructions to help women confirm their career planning. Egyptian women Empowerment show that the most industries women are employed are service economy, which can be used as the guideline to clearly set up economic plan for themselves. The percentage of population has reached 50% for Egyptian women and research shows that if female labor participation is equal to that of male in finance, the GDP of Egypt will increase 34%, which is essential for Egypt to achieve its vision 2030. Therefore, eliminating the gender violence such as FGM and giving more external opportunities for women can also benefit the transformation of private sector in Egypt.[26] Generally speaking, the sufficient method to eradicate FGM in Egyptian communities is to change the values of different objects based on the use of education. For internal community members, we can use divided classes to give them separated education while for women themselves, we use the advantages of social medias to let them learn external knowledge. Finally, it’s expected that the traditional community level gender system can be transformed into modernization.
Potential obstacles and hope

Challenges will gradually appear with the deep penetration within the process of transforming community level gender system. It’s believed that the crucial point is whether Muslim doctrine can be well balanced with the modern values, which can also be regarded as the most serious challenge. The pre-condition of conducting measures on collective social norm and structural opportunities for women is the respect towards the religious doctrine instead of damaging it. FGM may not be endorsed by various religions but religious narratives are commonly deployed to justify it. Recent decades, Christian groups have begun to abandon FGM in Egypt while the Islamist groups still remain to promote FGM as part of the Muslim womanhood. [23] There will definitely be clashes between the education in community and the resistance from Muslim religion, which can be defined as the nature of women identity and a cultural practice that couldn’t be decided individually.

It actually separated the meaning of education and religions. In 2007, the secretary of the UNESCO had declared that “the high-quality education is defined as the inclusive one that lets all participants to engage regardless of gender, social status, ethics and religions” The education in community of gender must be closely associated with the positive doctrine of Islam religion. Therefore, by the intervention of UN bodies such as UNESCO while with the assistance of government law, We believe that the Muslim culture and modern value can reach to the final agreement on solving FGM and promoting gender equality in the end.

Final conclusion

We are supposed to realize that Egypt, as a modern country in Africa, is still not on tract to reach the SDG target of eliminating FGM, compared to the rate of decline in the practice observed in the last 15 years, progress would need to be about 15 times faster to reach elimination by 2030. [25] Numerous factors contribute to the prevalence of the practice. Yet in Egyptian society, FGM is a manifestation of entrenched gender inequality. We should never relax ourselves in the process of solving FGM practice in Egypt. More global efforts and the development of policies and laws are needed to accelerate this process. We hope one day with our contributions, female genital mutilation will no more exist in this beautiful planet.

“We are working day and night to stop female genital mutilation and now we are free from it.”[24] ------ Fatuma from Egypt

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