Young Somali girls want modern circumcision

Attitudes toward traditional circumcision are changing in Somalia, but new forms may be replacing the old.

Ingvild Lunde, a research fellow at the Norwegian Centre for Violence and Traumatic Stress Studies (NKVTS), has studied campaigns against genital cutting in Hargeisa in Somalia. She has also examined attitudes towards female genital mutilation (FGM) and to the possible abandonment of the practice. She interviewed 22 representatives of organizations working on FGM issues, and 16 individuals from different societal strata.

All of the interviewed women believed that infibulation, the traditional form of female circumcision, is harmful. The women have come to oppose the practice, since this most extensive form of FGM is not religiously mandated.

Marriage and status

The origin of the practice of FGM is uncertain, but it is a tradition that stretches back thousands of years and is practised among both Muslims and Christians. The custom is linked to the idea that girls’ and women’s sexuality must be protected and controlled.

The World Health Organization has defined four types of FGM.

- Clitoridectomy: the complete or partial removal of the clitoris, also called sunna circumcision.
- Excision: the complete or partial removal of the inner labia, with or without removal of the clitoral glans and outer labia.
- Infibulation: the removal of the external genitalia and the fusion of the wound. The inner and/or outer labia are cut away, with or without removal of the clitoris.
- Unclassified: all other harmful procedures to the female genitalia for non-medical purposes, for example: pricking, piercing, incising, scraping and cauterization.

It is estimated that 99 per cent of women and girls are circumcised in Somalia, and that 98 percent of these have undergone infibulation.

The women who were interviewed said that it is necessary to be circumcised in for social status and good marriage prospects.

“Modern practice”

The interviewed women associate infibulation with the old days, yet the majority still want to practice sunna circumcision, which is perceived as a less invasive intervention. They explained that this is a new and modern practice.
One of the women told that women and girls with infibulation are often stigmatized by the younger girls who have undergone the less extreme sunna circumcision.

“Religious ideas were used by virtually all women to justify sunna, while religion was also used to stop infibulation, which is considered sinful in Islam,” says Lunde.

Lunde explains that it is unclear what is meant by sunna circumcision. “Informants described it as everything from a "prick" to the clitoris to the same as infibulation. It also seems as if all the campaigns against FGM only focus on infibulation, and that some of the activists themselves support sunna. This raises the question whether what we’re finding is a real change in practice or only a change in terminology.”

Her advice to organisations that are working to stop FGM is that they must make clear what they are trying to stop: all female genital cutting or just certain types.