

# UNDERSTANDING FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION/CUTTING

**Female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) describes the act of cutting, destroying or removing some or all of the external parts of the female reproductive organs.**

It is estimated that more than 200 million women worldwide have undergone FGM/C, and that every year a further 3 million girls are 'cut'.

## WHY AND WHERE DOES IT HAPPEN?

FGM/C is a harmful practice that has been taking place for more than 2,000 years. People often think FGM/C is

performed for religious reasons, but it began before any of the major faiths and is not required by any religion.

The reasons why FGM/C continues today are complex. Reasons given for practising FGM/C include:

- family/society's expectations and to maintain family honour
- tradition and/or people mistakenly thinking it is a religious requirement
- the idea that it preserves virginity and prevents promiscuity

- community/social acceptance
- the false belief that it is better for cleanliness/hygiene
- the mistaken idea that it prepares girls for womanhood and enables them to have a good marriage.

FGM/C happens mainly in 30 countries in Africa and the Middle East, in some areas in South-East Asia (including Indonesia, India, Malaysia and Pakistan) and also in particular communities settled around the world.

## HOW DOES FGM/C AFFECT GIRLS AND WOMEN?

There are no health benefits to FGM/C, and it causes a great deal of harm.

### IMMEDIATE PROBLEMS CAN INCLUDE...

- very severe pain, sometimes leading to fainting
- excessive bleeding, which can lead to anaemia

- life-threatening infections including tetanus and sepsis
- problems in urinating as a result of being frightened or in too much pain to go to the toilet. This can lead to serious health problems.

- damage to the urinary tract
- shock and trauma
- death, usually through severe or untreated infection or excessive bleeding.



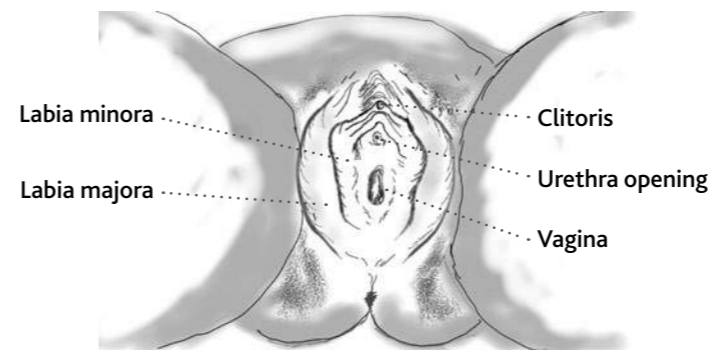
### LONG-TERM EFFECTS CAN INCLUDE...

- permanent deformation of female genital parts and formation of scar tissue
- numerous complications during childbirth, including prolonged labour and excessive bleeding. This can be life-threatening to both the mother and the baby if good medical care is not available.

- problems during sexual intercourse including pain, lack of desire, dryness and difficulty in reaching orgasm
- tears between the vaginal wall and the rectum and/or the bladder, which can lead to incontinence
- labial fusion in some women – especially for type 2 and type 3 of FGM/C, where the flesh around the vagina seals over

- difficulty in urinating and menstruating, especially if infibulation (type 3) has been performed, which restricts the flow of blood and urine
- psychological impacts, including persistent fear about sexual involvement, even with a loved partner. Some survivors report flashbacks to the time of cutting.

## FEMALE GENITALIA



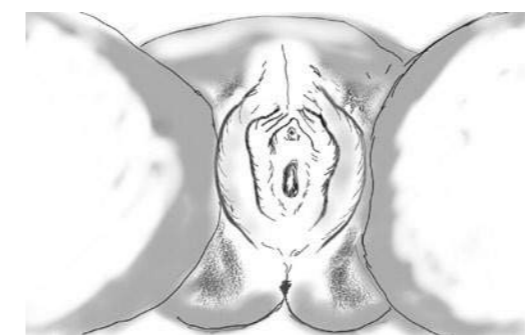
Female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) is an issue that urgently needs revealing and tackling.

Only through open discussion of this practice will communities gain full understanding of the risks it presents to millions of girls and women's health and well-being.

You can use these pages to help explain to people in your community about the problems caused by FGM/C. If FGM/C is not practised in your community, consider supporting organisations working to end it in communities where it is performed.

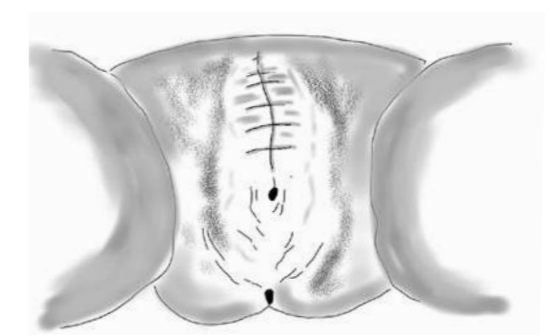
## THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION (WHO) HAS CLASSIFIED FGM/C INTO FOUR TYPES

### TYPE 1



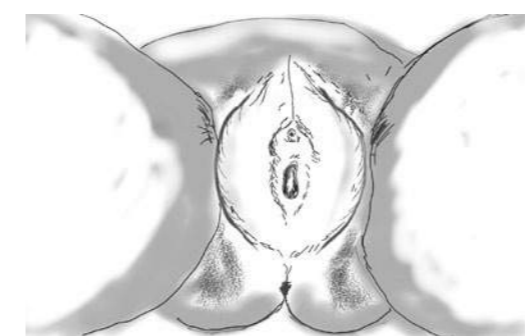
**CLITORIDECTOMY:** The partial or total removal of the clitoris (a small, sensitive and erectile part of the female genitals), and in very rare cases, only the prepuce (the fold of skin surrounding the clitoris).

### TYPE 3



**INFIBULATION:** Narrowing of the vaginal opening through the creation of a covering seal. The seal is formed by cutting and repositioning the labia minora or labia majora, sometimes through stitching. It may or may not include the removal of the clitoris.

### TYPE 2



**EXCISION:** The partial or total removal of the clitoris and the labia minora (the inner two folds of skin on either side of the opening of the vagina). It may include cutting away the labia majora (the outer folds of skin).

### TYPE 4

**OTHER HARMFUL PROCEDURES:** All other harmful procedures to the female genitalia for non-medical purposes, eg pricking, piercing, cutting, scraping and cauterising.

*Adapted from resources by 28 Too Many (www.28toomany.org), the World Health Organization's FGM/C fact sheet and Tearfund's toolkit Reveal, which supports communities to tackle hidden issues. See www.tearfund.org/Reveal*

Illustrations: Bill Crooks/Mosaic Creative