

Female Genital Mutilation in the Sultanate of Oman

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“You brought back to me scenes that I thought were buried in my memory. I remember the voice of my mom inviting me to go to the shop with her. She was saying “I’ll buy you ice cream and yogurt-filled-chocolate”. I joyfully run behind her in my green trousers and dress. We walked into dark roads farther than the shop. God, I will never forget how sickening and awful that place was. Mom took me there to have me circumcised. I remember myself in severe pain, crying my lungs out, and bleeding heavily on my trousers and dress. And I never had my ice cream and yogurt-filled- chocolate!”

(one participant in the survey)

Introduction

The Sultanate of Oman has seen great improvement concerning gender equality in the last decades. Particularly in the field of education women have come a long way from a country where girls were first enrolled in primary school in 1970 with an estimated illiteracy rate among women of almost 100% to an overall enrolment today with female illiteracy standing at only 19,4%. The government has taken different measures to encourage women to higher education and to enter a career. Yet, even though government policies and the point of view of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos Ibn Sa’id can be considered very progressive concerning women’s rights, many restrictions on women prevail passed down by tradition.

Female circumcision is one such tradition. While wrapped in extreme secrecy and discretion, female circumcision is causing great clamor and controversy in Oman. The government has recognized its existence and the need to eliminate it. Yet, the single noticeable measure taken was a ban of the practice in state hospitals. The Health Ministry’s ‘[Five-Year Health Plan: 2006-2010](#)’ announced to study the prevalence of FGM in Oman and design programs for community awareness. In 2005, the ministry targeted 2010 for having baseline data on female circumcision in the sultanate.

Yet, no such study has been published so far. There are rumors that studies have been conducted, however, neither researchers nor journalists were able to obtain copies from government institution.

Thus, the practice has remained behind closed doors of homes, and shut deep in the hearts of the circumcised women. As a result, it has been difficult to know where the practice still exists and where it stopped. It was commonly believed to be mainly spread in the Southern province of Dhofar with only small pockets on the North where it is still practiced. Non-survey based

estimates concluded 20% to 30% of Omani women being circumcised - an estimation probably way below the actual number.

It was also hardly known how this practice was carried out, and what its various consequences were. It has been even more intricate to verify with certainty whether female circumcision was tacitly approved of by the majority of Omanis, and to understand the stand of the government vis-à-vis this phenomenon, all the more important, as several women reported having been circumcised inside state hospitals and clinics. Strangely enough, the religious opinion is absent in the ongoing debate and discussions about female circumcision, hence the spread of clashing standpoints and perceptions, and the emergence of *ijtihad* (diligence or individual judgment) and interpretations by unreliable sources. All this is rooted in the silence that enfolds this practice, and the people's shyness to address it, while no easy way is available to verify information about female circumcision. Civil society organizations are also being passive: The Omani women's association with branches in all provinces and states of the Sultanate (54 in total) is reluctant to tackle such issues directly related to women and children by conducting studies and research and launching follow up and awareness campaigns.

The aim of the study is to delimit the expansion of the phenomenon, identify its impact and motivations behind it and suggest recommendations.

Methodology:

This study is based on a survey about female circumcision in the Sultanate of Oman. Data was collected through a questionnaire answered by a sample of 100 females and 100 males in the capital of Muscat. Additionally comments and discussions which evolved out of the interview situation were reported and analyzed.

The task was to find participants from different backgrounds representing a wide range of Omani society. Therefore, a variety of places were chosen to conduct interviews each attracting different categories of females and males in terms of education, age, class and geographical origin.

In Oman, Shopping Malls, Hypermarkets and Mc Donald's take the role of public spaces where males and females can be found strolling. Among the passers-by all ages, geographical and educational backgrounds are present. However, not all classes come here and women with a more conservative background may also be missing. To balance this lack, patients or visitors in the waiting area of the women's ward in a hospital were interviewed. To get a good sample of the younger generation from liberal to conservative background university students were interviewed in front of the university.

Monitored areas:

Social media/ Lulu Hypermarket (Bowshar branch)/ McDonald's (Azaiba branch)/ As Safir Mall (Azaiba)/ The Royal Hospital/ University students (female).

Field monitoring period:

25-31 October 2013

Background information:

(Source: the official website of the National Center for Statistics and Information)

Data reports (2) 2013- The Omani woman- July 2013-11-21

1- Women in Oman

- The percentage of women per Omani province varies between 47.8 and 50%. They constitute 49% of the Omani population in 2013.
- The gender ratio or male to female ratio in Oman is 102.8 males for every 100 females in 2013.
- In 2011, the female life expectancy at birth was 77.7 years compared to 73.1 for males.
- The total fertility rate for Omani women in the reproductive age remained at 3.7 live born children throughout 2010 and 2011.
- The illiteracy rate of Omani women (age 15+) has decreased from 29.5% in 2003 to 19.4% in 2012.
- In 2010, approximately one third of Omani women were holders of a General Diploma degree, compared to a quarter of them holding less than a General Diploma.
- The net and total percentages of school enrolment are almost equivalent between the two sexes.
- The percentage of successfully graduated female students in the school year 2009/2010 was 51%. Approximately 58% of these students were enrolled in higher education institutions.
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Source: The Royal Oman Police. March 2013 data. General Directorate for Civil Status.

In its 2013 report, the National Center for Statistics and Information indicated that the number of female live births reached 30.912, or almost 31.000 baby girl, in 2011.

What is female genital mutilation?

People often have vague information about what is referred to as female circumcision because they are unaware of its definition and its legal framework, have never spoken with any of its practitioners, and ignore its consequences and the relevant medical opinion. For that reason, the WHO has recently issued an educational fact sheet on female genital mutilation (circumcision). The fact sheet provides a historical and regional background to this practice, describes its impact and other immediate and long term effects on health. Numerous national and international governmental or nongovernmental organizations have established programs to stop the practice of female genital mutilation. The WHO has defined this practice and categorized it into four different types:

WHO definition of Female Genital Mutilation

Female Circumcision or Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) comprises all procedures that involve partial or total removal of the external female genitalia, or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons.

The practice is mostly carried out by traditional circumcisers, who often play other central roles in communities, such as attending childbirths. However, more than 18% of all FGM is performed by health care providers, and this trend is increasing. Procedures are mostly carried out on young girls sometime between infancy and age 15. In Africa, around 92 million girls, age 10 years and above, are estimated to have undergone FGM.

FGM is recognized internationally as a violation of the human rights of girls and women. It reflects deep-rooted inequality between the sexes, and constitutes an extreme form of discrimination against women. It is nearly always carried out on minors and is thus a violation of the rights of children. The practice also violates a person's rights to health, security and physical integrity, the right to be free from torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, and the right to life when the procedure results in death.

Female circumcision or female genital mutilation is classified into four major types.

1. **Clitoridectomy:** 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).
2. **Excision:** partial or total removal of the clitoris and the labia minora, with or without excision of the labia majora (the labia are "the lips" that surround the vagina).

3. **Infibulation:** narrowing of the vaginal opening through the creation of a covering seal. The seal is formed by cutting and repositioning the inner, or outer, labia, with or without removal of the clitoris.
4. **Other:** all other harmful procedures to the female genitalia for non-medical purposes, e.g. pricking, piercing, incising, scraping and cauterizing the genital area.

FGM has no health benefits, and it harms girls and women in many ways. It involves removing and damaging healthy and normal female genital tissue, and interferes with the natural functions of girls' and women's bodies. Immediate complications can include severe pain, shock, haemorrhage (bleeding), tetanus or sepsis (bacterial infection), urine retention, open sores in the genital region and injury to nearby genital tissue.

The WHO also published long term consequences of FGM which can include recurrent bladder and urinary tract infections; cysts; infertility; an increased risk of childbirth complications and newborn deaths; the need for later surgeries. For example, the FGM procedure that seals or narrows a vaginal opening (type 3 above) needs to be cut open later to allow for sexual intercourse and childbirth. Sometimes it is stitched again several times, including after childbirth, hence the woman goes through repeated opening and closing procedures, further increasing both immediate and long-term risks.

In December 20, 2012, the UN General Assembly issued a resolution on the elimination of female genital mutilation. This resolution came after the UN realized that female genital mutilation is not only an African tradition - as it has been widely believed for decades - but also a practice widespread in Asia and in several Arab countries including Oman.

The UN has declared, through UNICEF, the 6th of February of every year as the **International Day of Zero Tolerance to Female Genital Mutilation**.

The WHO estimated that 120 to 140 million women around the globe are suffering from female genital mutilation, and that the lives of 3 million girls are threatened every year due to female circumcision practices.

WADI, the German human rights organization behind the international campaign for fighting female circumcision "Stop Female Genital Mutilation in the Middle East", has published on its official website a special report on the state of female circumcision in the Sultanate of Oman under the title: "The Sultanate of Oman... bloggers tackle the issue of female genital mutilation).

**Results of the Opinion Poll on
The Female Genital Mutilation in the Sultanate of Oman**

(1) The female participants' questionnaire

Female Genital Mutilation in the Sultanate of Oman

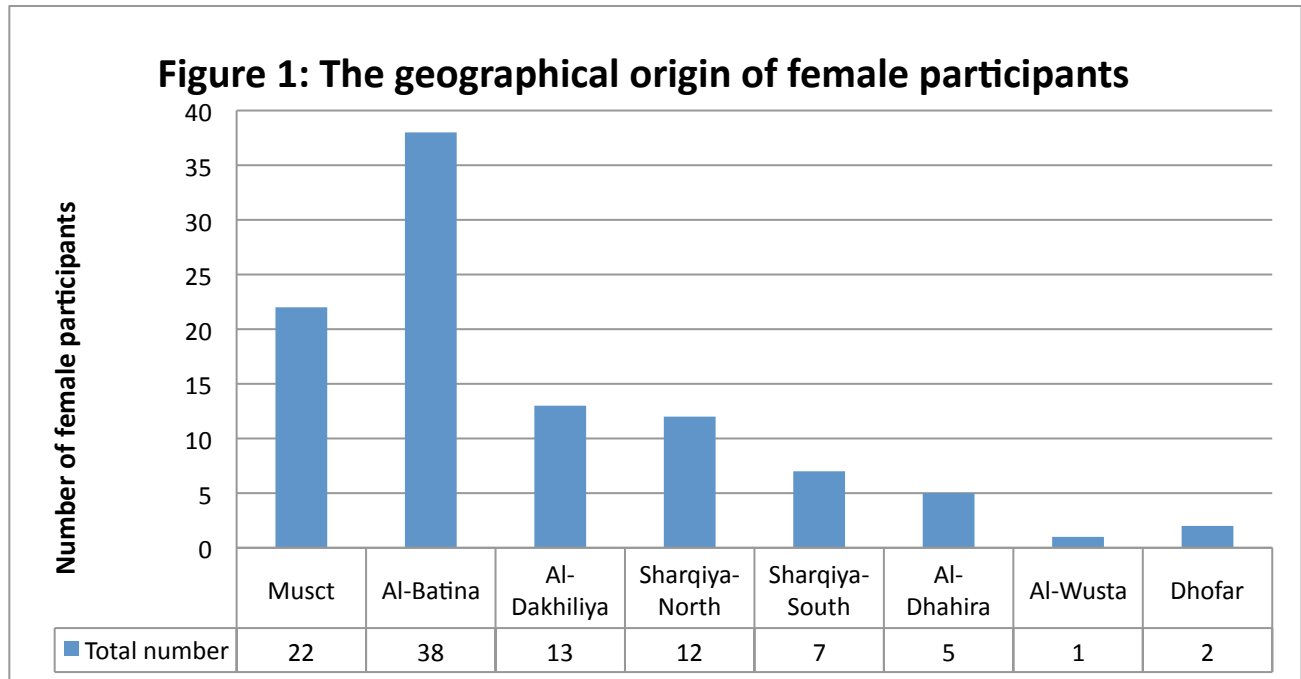


Figure 1 shows the origin of female participants in the survey (100 women) by geographical region. Even though the majority lives in the capital Muscat, the birthplace of those affected is an indispensable information in order to know in which regions and provinces of the Sultanate the practice is prevalent. Female circumcision is practiced as a tradition kept in the family, tribe or region. Migrants from one region to another may well practice it still after generations even if FGM is not practiced in their new home place, while for other groups migration may cause a change of perception and understanding of female circumcision, leading to its disappearance.

Female Genital Mutilation in the Sultanate of Oman

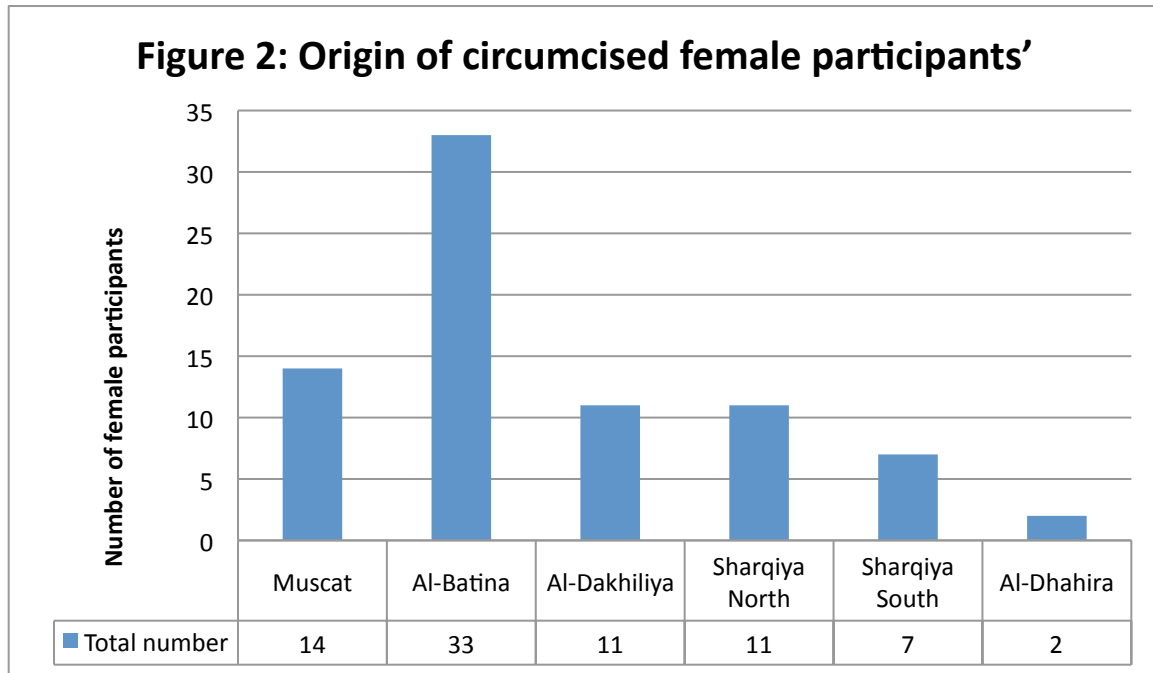


Figure 2 shows the origin of women who said they were circumcised. The highest prevalence of FGM seems to exist in the Sharqiya North and South (18 out of 19), the Dakhiliya (11 out of 13) and the Batina (33 out of 38 questioned). Women who originate from Muscat are less likely to be circumcised with only 14 out of 22 questioned saying they underwent the procedure. Yet, still more than half of the participants from Muscat were affected.

Female Genital Mutilation in the Sultanate of Oman

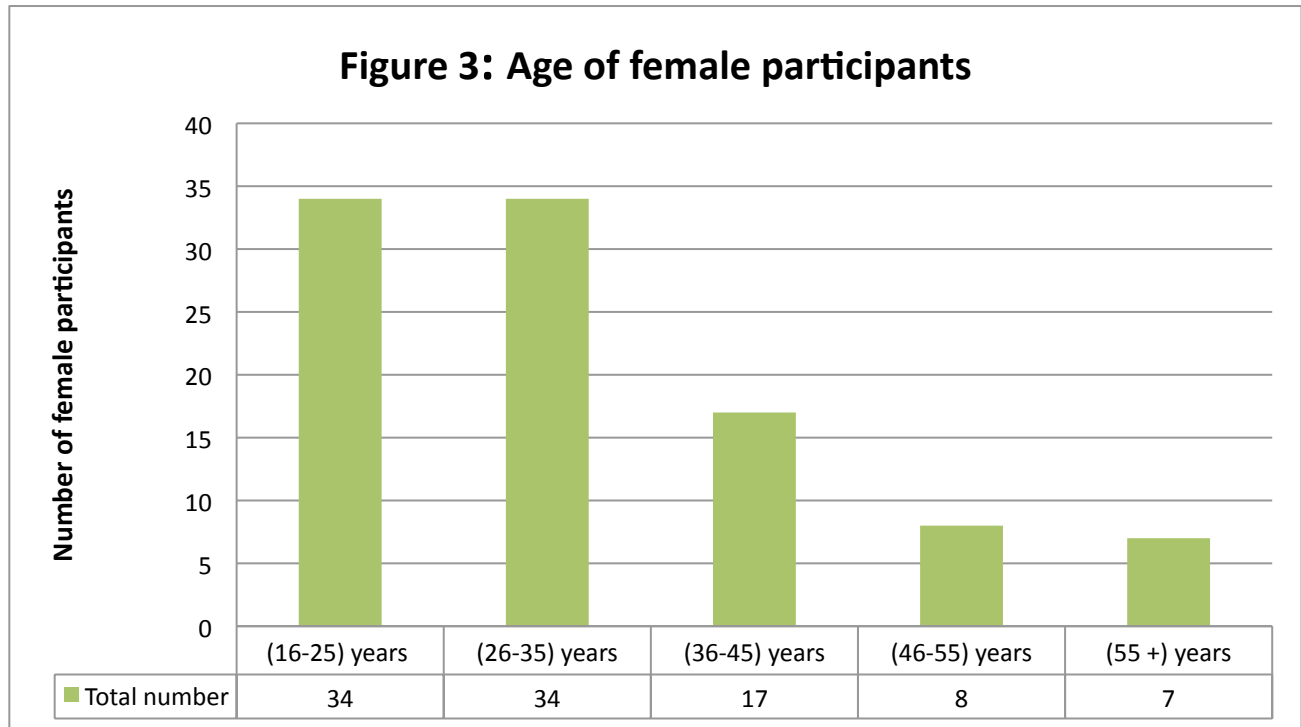


Figure 3 shows the age distribution of female participants in this research study. The majority of female participants are in the (16-35) age category. The Sultanate population is young and females constitute half of it since more than one decade. The percentage in 2013 is 49% of the total Omani population. The total of female births in 2011 was 30.912 or almost 31000 in one year, according to the National Center for Statistics and Information.

It is of crucial importance to know the prevalence of female genital mutilation among this young group and the percentage of circumcised girls among the newly born. Such figures allow to determine the extent to which this phenomenon will persist in future generations.

Female Genital Mutilation in the Sultanate of Oman

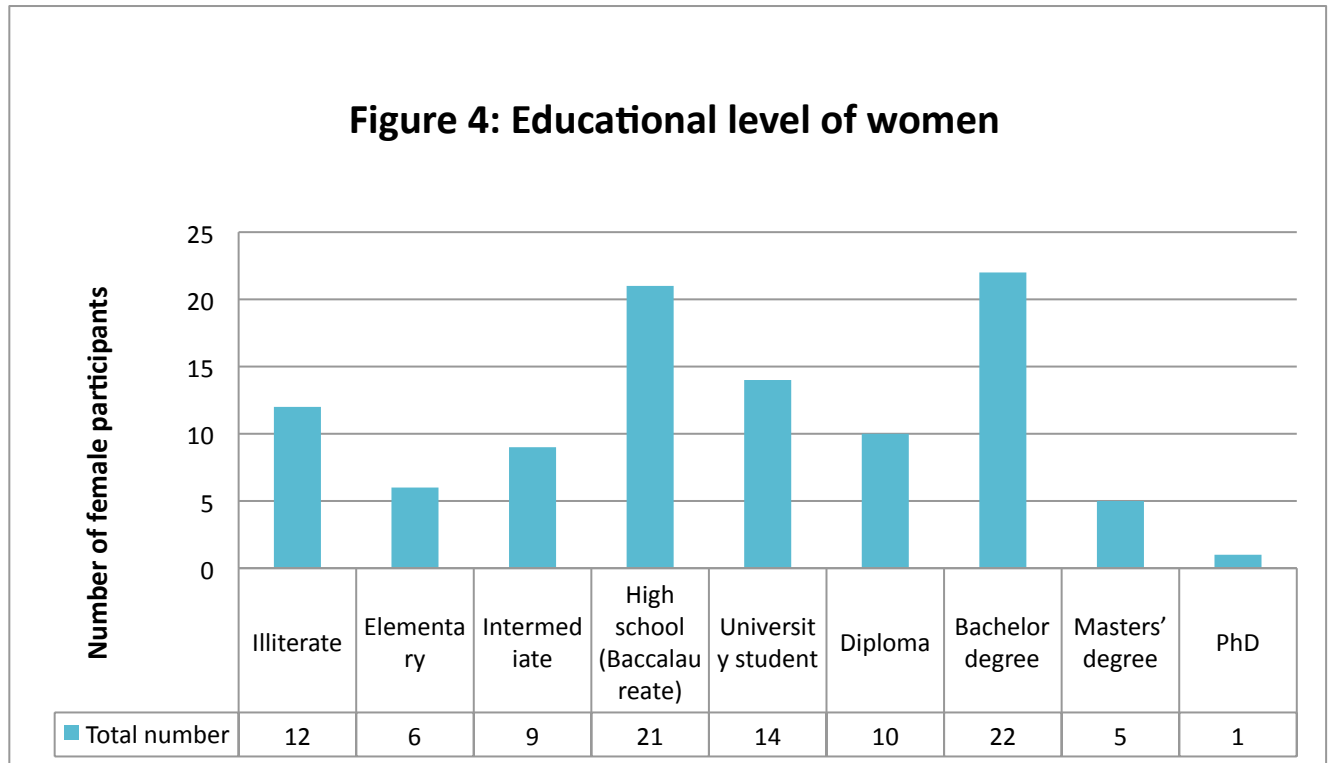


Figure 4 shows the educational level of female participants. This aspect is extremely important to determine whether a correlation exists between the educational level and the persistence or disappearance of female genital mutilation, and whether education has contributed to a change in perceptions and practices. In many African countries studies have shown a clear correlation between education and prevalence of FGM with the higher educated being less likely to continue the practice. However, the conditions under which FGM is performed in Oman and in the Middle East as a whole are quite different from conditions in many African countries. Also motivations and reasons may well be different. Thus, it should not be pre-assumed that educational level has the same effect in different environments.

The percentage of females who hold university and higher education degrees is 38%, while female university students constitute 14% and holders of high school diplomas are 21%.

Female Genital Mutilation in the Sultanate of Oman

Table 1

Do not know	Do not agree	Agree	Total women circumcised	Education level
0	1	11	12	Illiterate
1	1	3	5	Elementary
0	2	6	8	Intermediate
0	4	13	17	High school (Baccalaureate)
0	3	5	8	University Student
0	2	8	10	Diploma
4	3	8	15	Bachelor degree
0	2	0	2	Masters degree
0	1	0	1	PhD
5	19	54	78	Total of female participants

Table 1 shows the educational level of circumcised women and the extend to which women of different educational backgrounds agree with female circumcision. Circumcised women come from all educational backgrounds. However, there are less women circumcised among university students (8 out of 21) and those who hold a bachelor (15 out of 22) or a master degree (2 out of 5), while among the holders of a diploma and the Illiterate 100% are circumcised. The number of cases is too small to conclude a relevant impact of education on the prevalence of female genital mutilation. The majority of educated females who hold higher education degrees continue to support female circumcision and link this practice to Islamic teachings, purity, or disease prevention. However, the percentage among higher educated women who support FGM is smaller than among lower educated women.

It could be concluded that the varying levels of education among women who support female circumcision indicate strong inter-generational influence concerning this phenomenon. At the same time education may have some influence even if minor.

Female Genital Mutilation in the Sultanate of Oman

Figure 5: Percentage of circumcised women

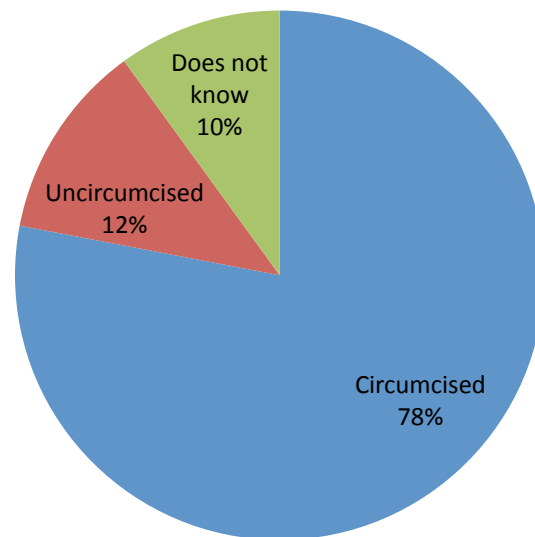


Figure 5 indicates the percentage of circumcised women in the sample. The results have shown that 78% of women reported to be circumcised, compared to 12% who were not, and 10% who do not know whether or not they were circumcised. It is worth mentioning that all female participants who did not know whether or not they were circumcised are university students and 9 of them were not married yet. Half of them answered the question about whether female circumcision was still practiced in the family by “yes”.

These results suggest that especially young women are shy to tell the truth about their circumcision, hence their answer “I don’t know”, while the tradition is still practiced in their families. There could be several possible reasons for such an answer which would all lead to different conclusions. It is possible that these women are in fact not circumcised but live in an environment where uncircumcised women are looked down upon. Thus they try to conceal that they don’t conform to the norm. Another possibility would be that as university students they are well aware of the harmfulness of the practice and try to hide – also to themselves – that they are mutilated. Last, it could well be possible that many of them in fact do not know because they are not married (fig. 6) and they have therefore not discussed topics related to sexuality so far.

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If we consider that half of the girls who said that they do not know were in fact circumcised, the total percentage of circumcised women in Oman would increase to 83%, which is a significantly high percentage.

Female Genital Mutilation in the Sultanate of Oman

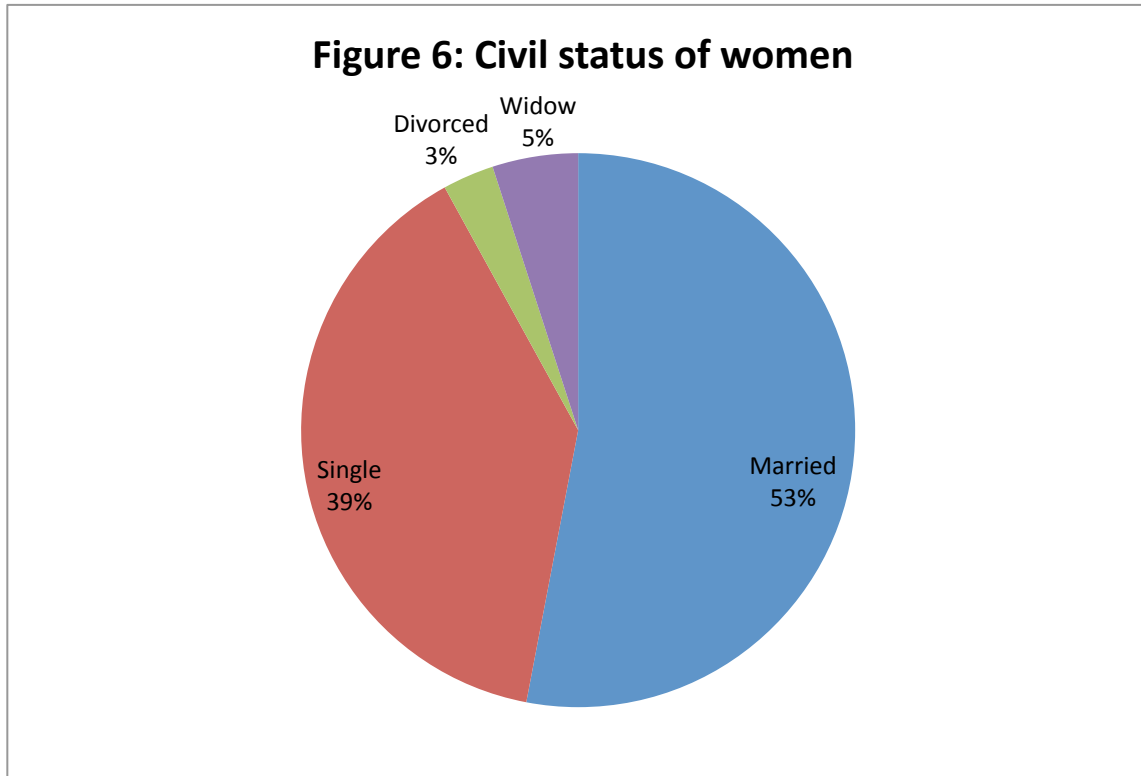


Figure 6 above indicates the civil status of female participants in this research study as follows: 53 are married, 39 are single, 3 are divorced, and 5 are widows. Figure 7 will show the percentage of circumcised women in each of these 4 categories.

Female Genital Mutilation in the Sultanate of Oman

Figure 7: Number of circumcised women based on their civil status

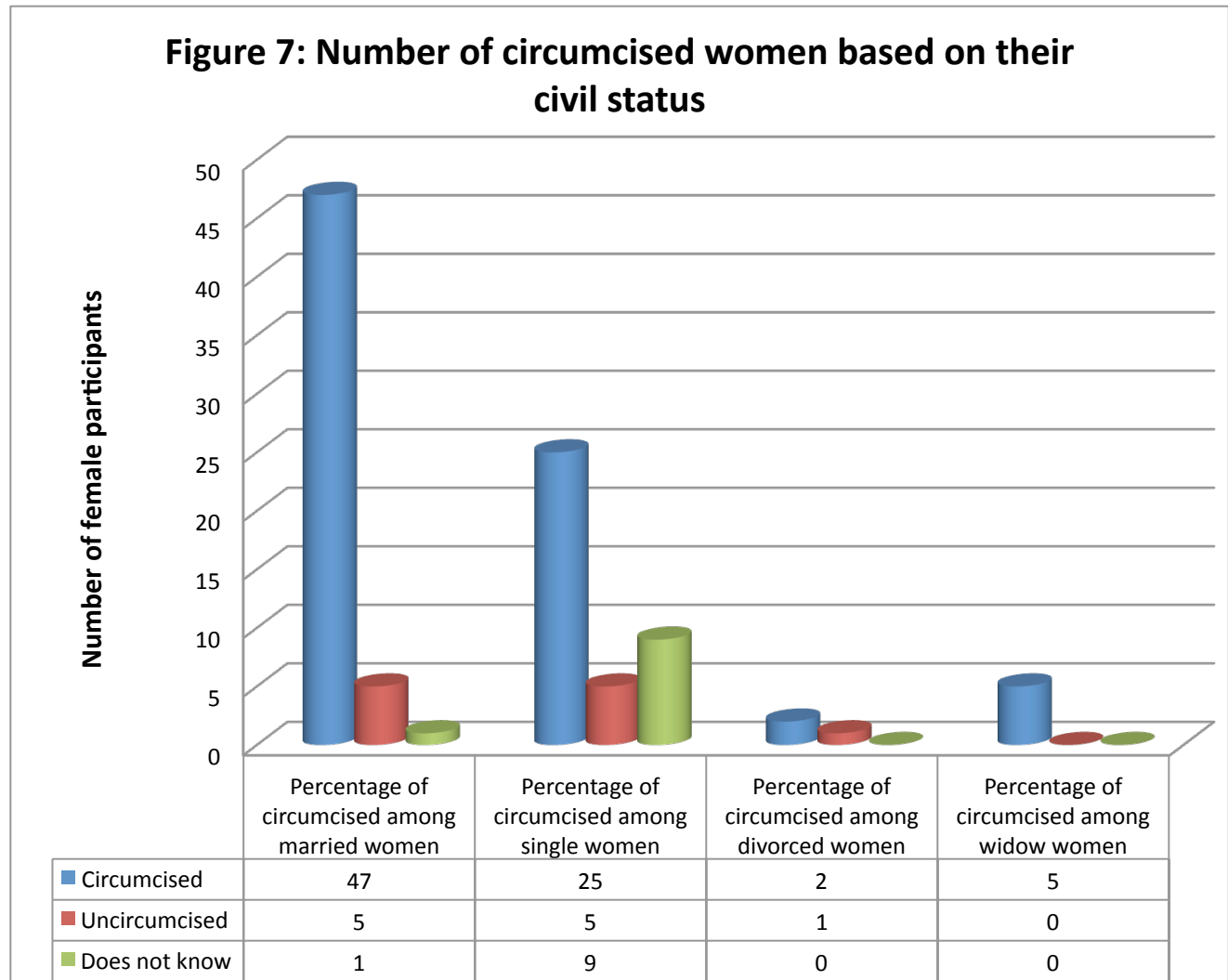


Figure 7 shows the number of circumcised women in each civil status category of female participants in the research study: married, single, divorced, and widow.

- Out of 53 married women, 47 were circumcised, 5 were uncircumcised, and 1 did not know.
- Out of 39 single women, 25 were circumcised, 5 were uncircumcised, and 9 did not know.
- Out of 3 divorced women, 2 were circumcised, and 1 was uncircumcised.

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- All 5 widows were circumcised.

Female Genital Mutilation in the Sultanate of Oman

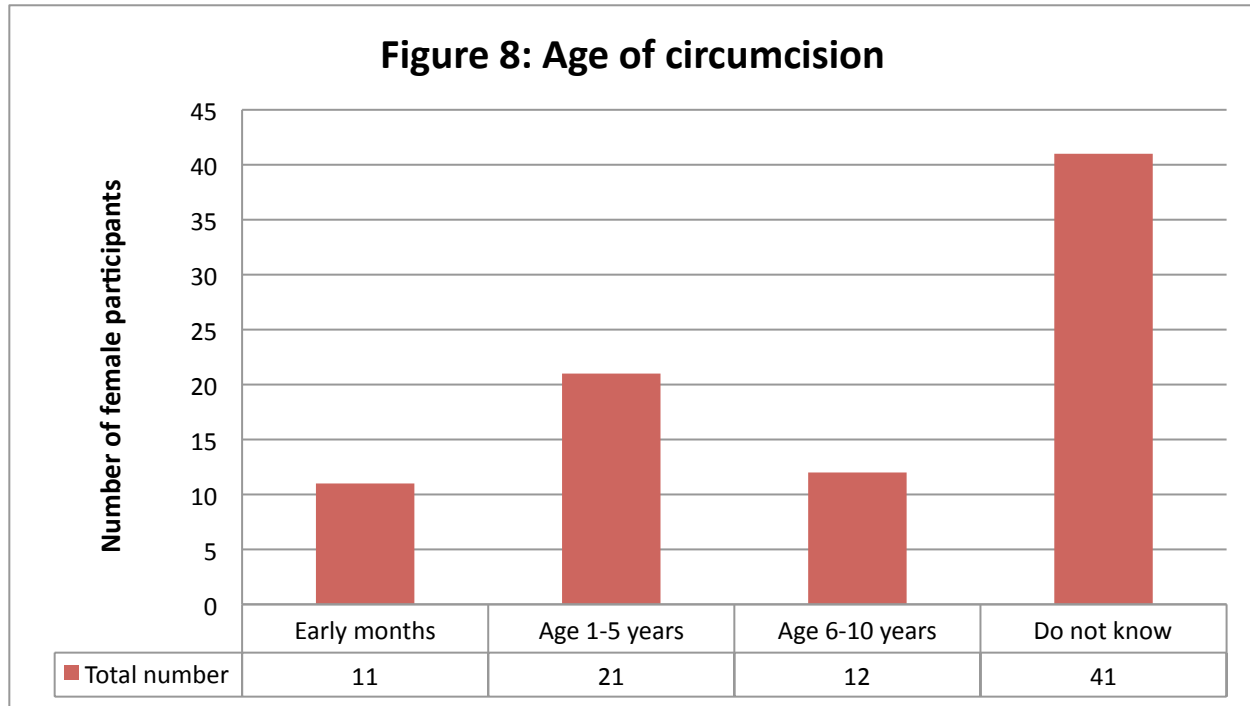


Figure 8 shows the age at which the female participants were circumcised. Results indicate that 11 participants were circumcised directly after birth or in their early months, while 21 reported having been circumcised between age 1 and 5, compared to 12 participants after the age of 6, and 41 circumcised participants did not even know at what age they were circumcised. If they have in fact no remembrance it must be assumed that they were circumcised at a very early age before the age of three when remembrance ability starts especially for traumatic events.

It is worth mentioning that 7 out of the 41 participants who said they did not know at what age they were circumcised had previously answered that they do not know whether or not they were circumcised. They fall within the students' category and the 18 – 21 age group.

Female Genital Mutilation in the Sultanate of Oman

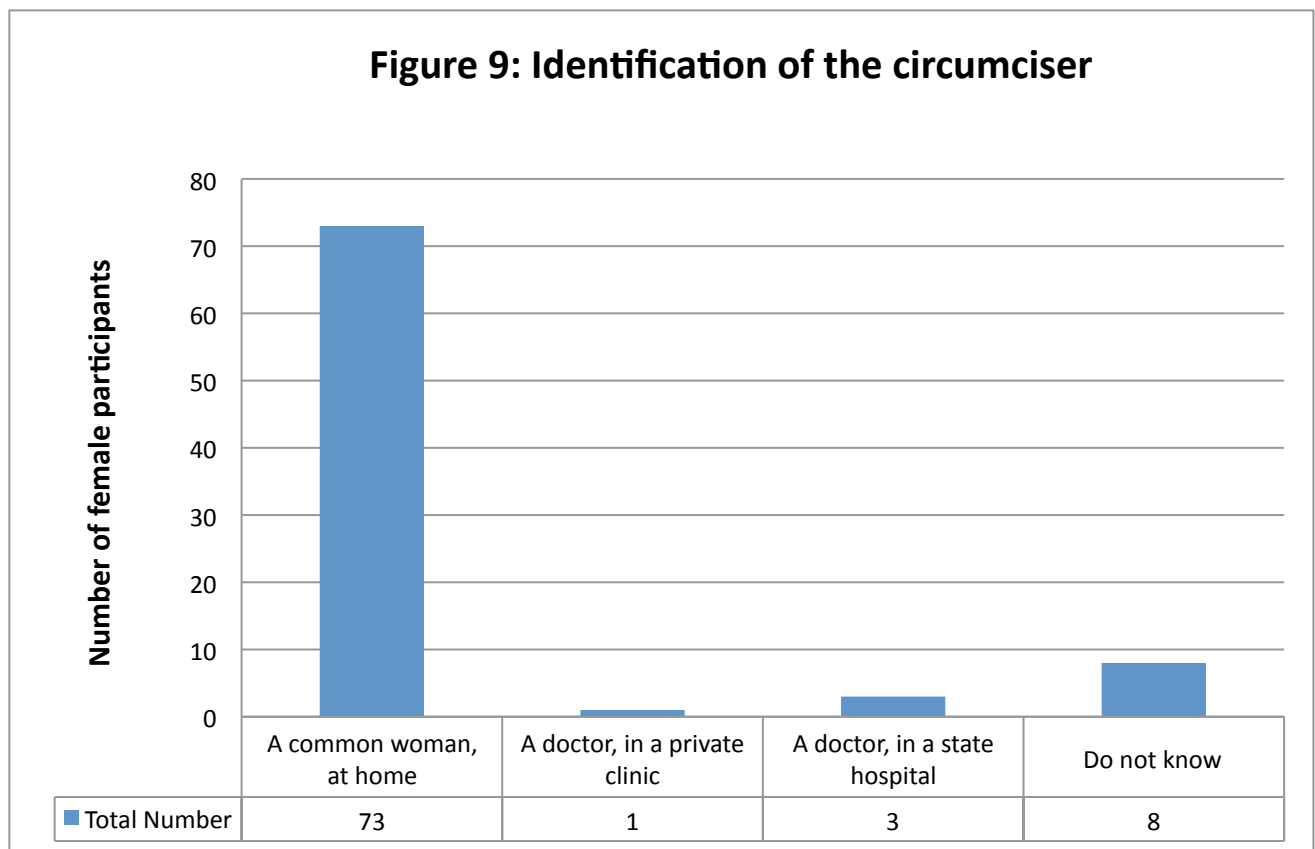


Figure 9 identifies the person who performed the circumcision of female participants. 73% were circumcised at home by a common woman who used traditional tools. 3 participants were circumcised in state hospitals (born in 1989, 1990, and 1994, thus before the ban to perform in state hospitals was in place). Only one participant was circumcised in a private clinic and 8 do not have details about who performed their circumcision and where.

Female Genital Mutilation in the Sultanate of Oman

Figure 10: The female participants' satisfaction with their circumcision

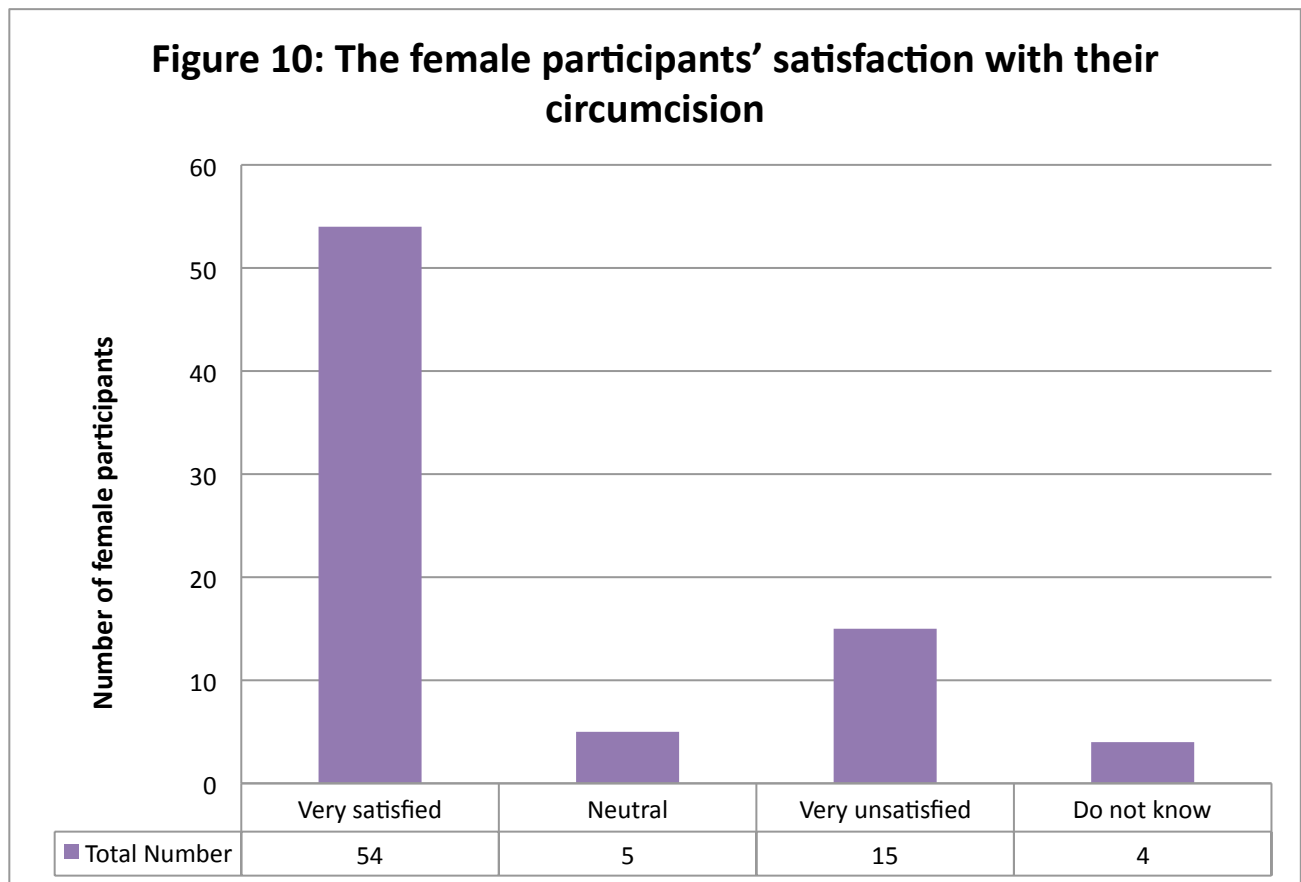


Figure 10 shows the extent to which female participants are satisfied with their circumcision. 54% out of 78% circumcised women said they were totally satisfied and 5% remained neutral because, according to them, they do not have much information about the phenomenon. On the other hand, 15% expressed an absolute discontent and dissatisfaction with their circumcision and 4% said that they do not know how to answer the question.

It must be noted that the satisfaction level is not necessarily equal to the support of circumcision. One woman expressed that she was glad the practice had stopped in her family but had answered before that she was satisfied with her circumcision. When asked how this fit together, she explained: "I am happy because I did not suffer from the negative effects of circumcision." Equally, there could be women who support circumcision who are in the group

of those who are not satisfied with their own circumcision, as one woman explained: “I do not agree with the age and place at which I was circumcised. Even if I support circumcision, I do not agree on carrying it out in the traditional way outside the hospital.”

Female Genital Mutilation in the Sultanate of Oman

Figure 11: The extent to which the husband is satisfied with the circumcision of his wife

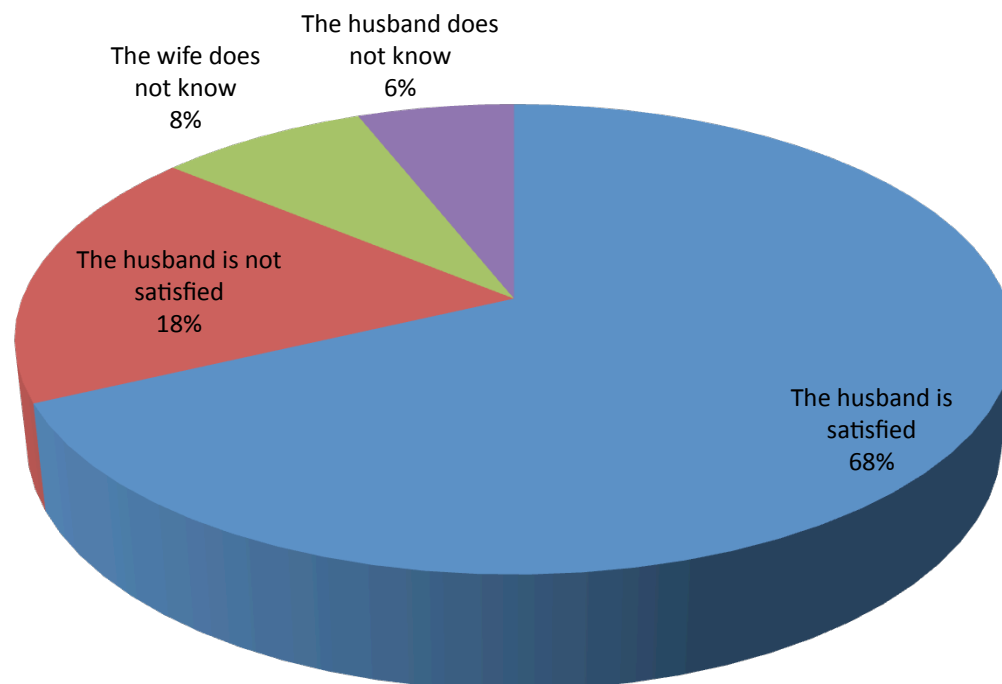


Figure 11 reveals the extent to which husbands are satisfied with the circumcision of their wives. The answers include 2 divorced women and 1 widow. The results show that 68 female participants confirm that their husbands are totally satisfied with their circumcision, compared to 18 who reported their husbands' discontent with their circumcision. 8 did not know whether their husbands were satisfied or not because, according to them, they have never discussed this issue. And 6 female participants confirmed that their husbands do not even know that they were circumcised, as they underwent this procedure at a very young age.

Female Genital Mutilation in the Sultanate of Oman

Figure 12: Perpetuation of the female circumcision tradition in the family

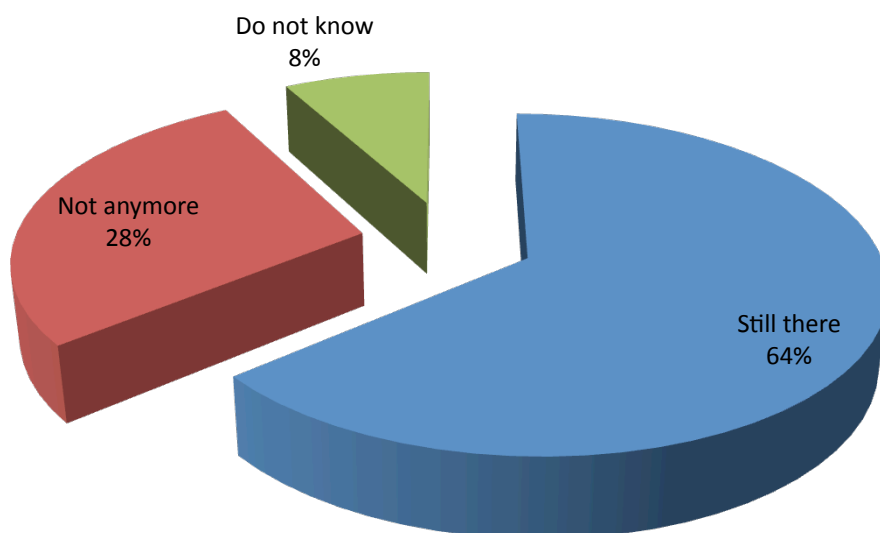


Figure 12 reveals whether or not the female circumcision tradition is still practiced in Omani families. Results show that 64% of the families still practice it, compared to 28% who never practiced it, are on the way to stop it, or have stopped it already. On the other hand, 8% of the participants do not know whether their families are still practicing female circumcision or not.

Female Genital Mutilation in the Sultanate of Oman

Figure 13: The extent to which women believe that Islamic teaching supports female circumcision

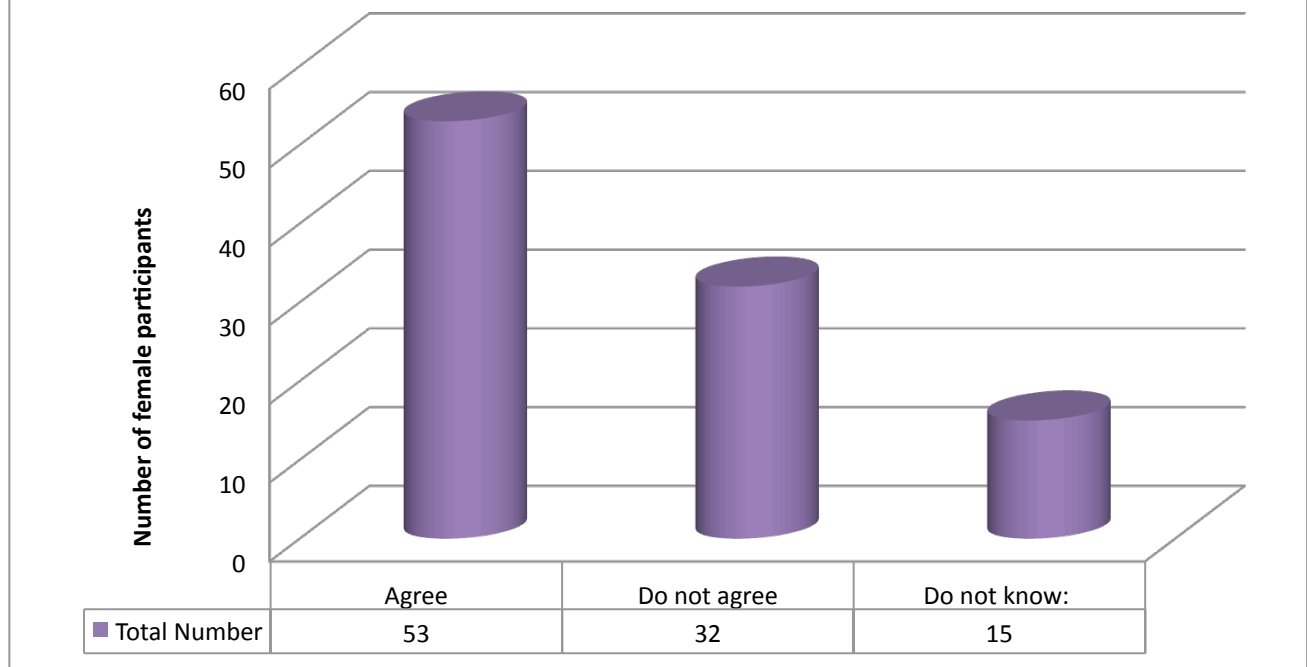


Figure 12 shows the extent to which female participants believe that female circumcision is in accordance with Islamic teaching. During the interview women were asked: “Why do you support FGM?” There were a number of reasons given of which Islam stuck us as mentioned most often in the positive and in the negative. 53% agreed that it is part of Islamic teaching and tradition, grants purity and chastity to the woman, and reduces her sexual excitement, and protects her from diseases. On the other hand, 32% of the participants did not agree on such a belief. They rather consider that female circumcision is a tradition or ritual. A number of participants asserted that female circumcision is a crime and should be forbidden, while 15% answered that they do not know.

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Figure 14: The extent to which women support female circumcision

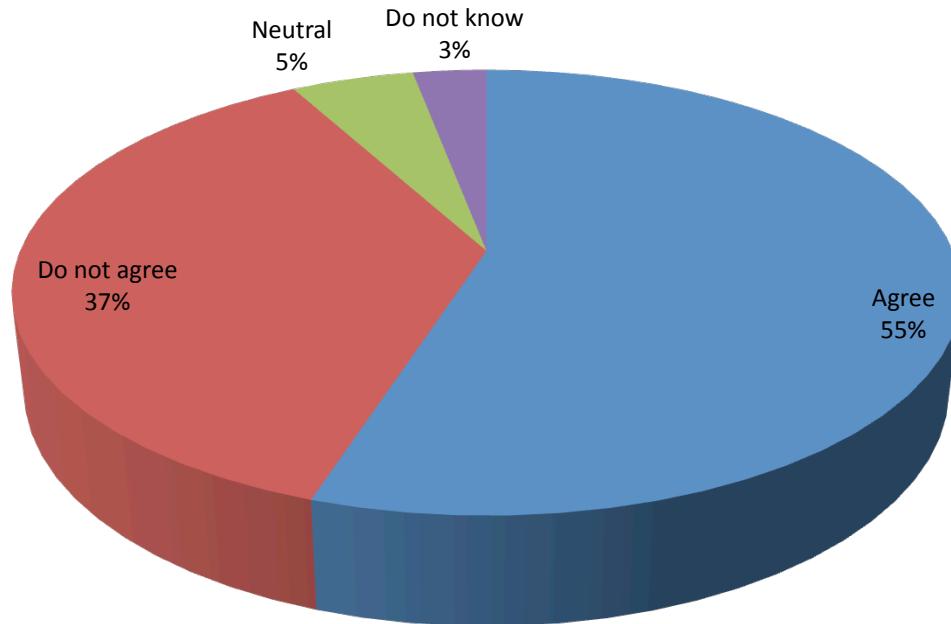


Figure 14 shows the extent to which women support female circumcision. 55% of the female participants in the survey support this practice, compared to 37 who do not support it and 5% who remained neutral, and 3% who preferred not to answer because they are not familiar with the subject.

**Results of the Opinion Poll on
Female Genital Mutilation in the Sultanate of Oman**

(2) The male participants' questionnaire

Female Genital Mutilation in the Sultanate of Oman

Table 2: Geographic origin of male participants

Muscat	Al Batina	Al Dakhilia	Al Sharkia North	Al Sharkia South	Al Zahira	Dhofar
9	27	24	12	11	10	7

Table 3: Age of male participants

16-25	26-35	36-45	46-55	55+
13	52	27	7	1

Table 4: Educational level of male participants

Intermediate	High school	University student	University diploma	University degree	Masters' degree	PhD
1	15	1	18	48	14	3

Table 5: Circumcision of the daughter(s) of the male participant (Is your daughter circumcised?)

Total of male participants who have daughters	Yes, she is circumcised	No, she is not circumcised	Do not know
54	20	33	1

Table 6: The father's satisfaction with the circumcision of his daughter(s)

Very satisfied	Neutral	Very unsatisfied	Do not know
7	3	6	4

Table 7: Perpetuation of the female circumcision practice in the family

Yes, it is still there	No, not anymore	Do not know
41	42	17

Female Genital Mutilation in the Sultanate of Oman

Figure 15: The extent to which men believe that Islamic teaching supports female circumcision

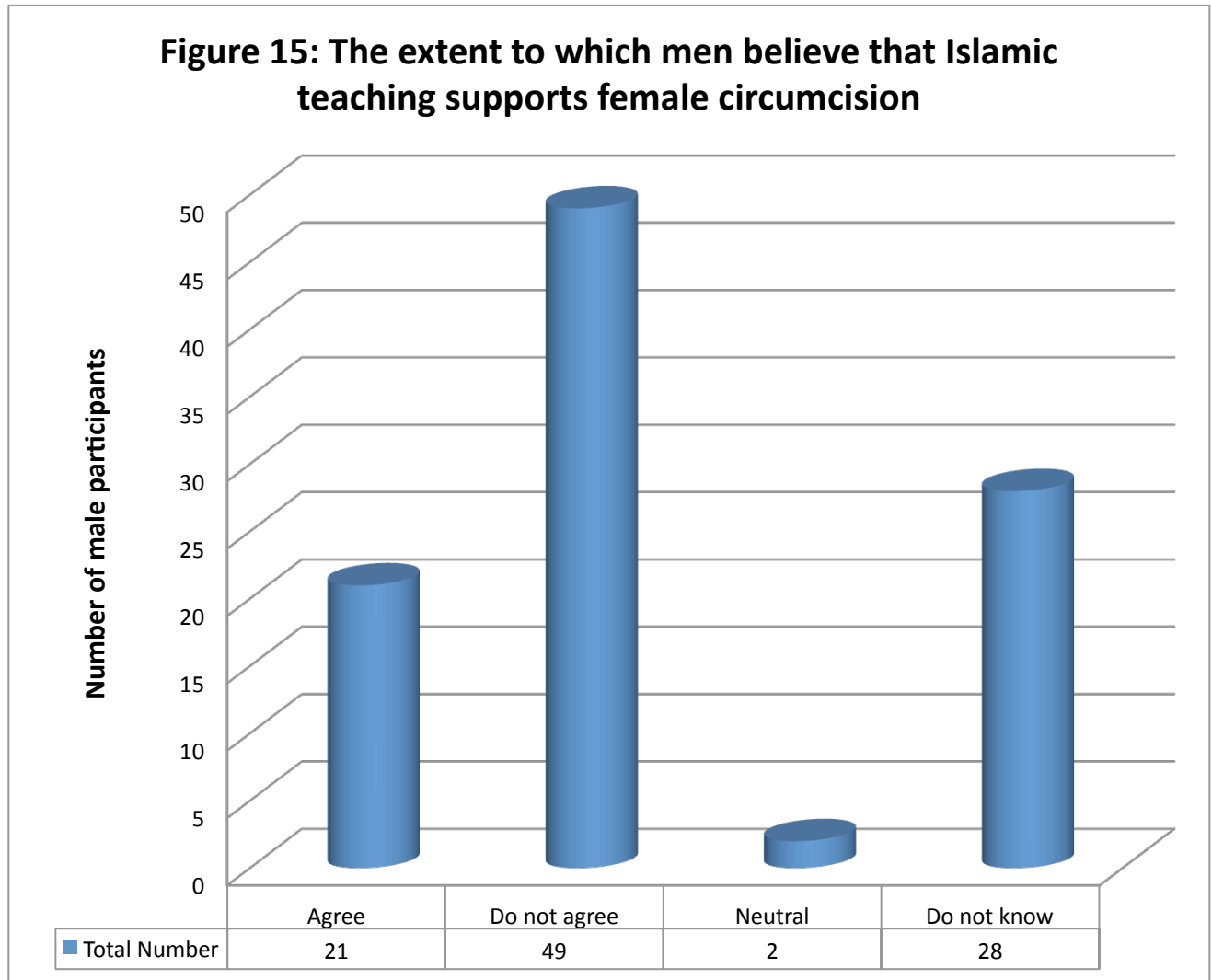


Figure 15 shows how male participants perceive female circumcision and the extent to which they believe it is in accordance with Islamic teaching. The results show that almost half of them (49%) do not believe that female circumcision is part of a religious teaching, while 28% do not know or think that they do not have enough information to give their opinion. However, 21% of the male participants link this practice to religion and only 2 remained neutral.

Female Genital Mutilation in the Sultanate of Oman

Analyses of participants' opinions

While answering the questions of the questionnaire many participants offered their opinion spontaneously (see Appendix for statements in full length). Out of 100 female participants 23 voiced an opinion. Out of 100 males 37 voiced an opinion. Even though this did not constitute a pre-planned part of the survey, the statements turned out to be a valuable source to assess motivations for or against the continuation of the practice. They also help to assess how much and what kind of information is available to people. If trends in these opinions would be verified by a follow-up survey such information could prove essential to develop strategies against FGM.

The number and quality of opinions suggest that FGM is a topic people care about – in some cases strongly.

There was a gender difference in the kind of statements given. While men offered their opinion whether the practice should be continued or not, many women provided further background on FGM without taking a stance pro or con.

For the male group, 11 defended the practice while 14 were against it, seven remained neutral, didn't know enough about it or gave reasons pro and contra circumcision at the same time. Two of the men defending the practice took a stance against pharaonic circumcision.

Out of the female group, seven took a clear position pro FGM, while three were opposed it, one took a stance against pharaonic circumcision. The majority of women did not offer an opinion but background information.

This could suggest that the practice is less debatable for women. Not only did a much larger percentage than men defend the practice, but also those who offered only background information did not seem to question the practice. The opinions provided by the male group show on the other hand, that a vivid debate must exist in society – even if hidden.

Information about FGM is available to a large minority

From those 14 men who took a position against FGM, six expressed a well-informed opinion. Some of them listed in detail health implications, the reduction of sexual function and/or the religious reasoning pro or contra female circumcision. The information they relied on was largely correct. Other did not go into detail but mentioned that they had informed themselves about the subject. As one participant stated: "After all the stories, articles and TV shows that I have read and seen, I do not support this practice."

Female Genital Mutilation in the Sultanate of Oman

The statements show clearly that information about FGM is available to people in Oman. Since Omani media does not provide such information, it can be concluded that a large minority (of men) is interested enough in the subject to have searched for this information specifically e.g. on the internet. It could also be possible that they have come across it when they were abroad or through satellite channels. Even if they came across this information by chance the correct recalling of facts in a street interview situation suggests that a strong interest in the subject exists.

The assumption that information is available and demanded is backed by the opinions of those men defending female circumcision: Four of them argue in line with the religious opinions defending the practice and are able to cite relevant hadiths and other arguments. Thus, here again it can be assumed that a large minority is interested enough in the subject to get this information by themselves or has come across discussions about the topic that seemed relevant enough to them to remember the facts.

From the small sample of women who gave an opinion the result is not as clear. Only two women – one pro and one opposing the practice – elaborate enough to draw the conclusion that they have informed themselves through media articles and other sources and not only rely on hear-say.

Myths circulation about FGM

Many men and women defending FGM cite relevant religious arguments pro circumcision or refer to the undisputable fact that cutting a girls genitals curbs her sexuality (even if specifically in Islam this should not be considered a good thing, but the fact in itself is correct).

However, there were also a number of myths about the benefits of female circumcision or its necessity in religion referred to – some of them seldom heard in other countries.

One men suggested circumcision would prevent cancer, another one had heard it prevented genital and urinal infections. An third referred to “scientifically-proven benefits”. Since these are individual opinions, they could simply be confused (e.g. with male circumcision) or even made up. However, they could also constitute common myths within certain groups in Oman which should be verified in a follow-up survey.

Among the women two were convinced that Muslim women must be circumcised. They elaborated further that uncircumcised women should be “forbidden from fasting and praying” or that “uncircumcised girls are not Muslim”. Apparently these women did not know the religious reasoning on female circumcision.

Female Genital Mutilation in the Sultanate of Oman

The prevalent religious opinions (e.g. fatwas) in Oman do not see female circumcision as an obligation but only recommend it. But even the only Islamic law school considering female circumcision an obligation, the Shafa'i, which is not known to be followed by Omanis, would not go as far as forbidding uncircumcised women from praying or excommunicating them from Islam.

It must be noticed that here again the men appear to be much better informed than the women: While men defending the practice religiously knew their hadith or were able to differentiate correctly between recommendation and obligation, the women obviously do not know the respective hadith, fatwas or arguments in online-forums.

Arguments: sex, health, religion

Religion played a large role as an argument both pro and contra FGM, but was unsurprisingly more often used as an argument pro. Yet, also five men mentioned religion as a reason to stop FGM. Notable is the fact that sexuality was more often mentioned than health reasons – not only by those defending the practice as preserving a girls chastity, but also by men opposed to FGM with arguments such as: “I feel incapable of satisfying her sexually.”

Also among the women sexual satisfaction played a role as an argument. Interestingly one woman defended the practice claiming that it enhances sexual satisfaction for married women.

These arguments show that sexuality is far from being not talked about at all: At least in a situation with a stranger, men and women are not shy to address sex even when they could easily stick with religious or health arguments. Since sexuality does constitute a taboo topic in Omani society it could be concluded that sexual problems are a pressing issue people want to talk about when they have the possibility to do so anonymously.

Societal pressure

Several answers suggest that societal pressure to have daughters circumcised is large. Among the men four stated that they opposed the practice despite their families pro-stance. Two of them had successfully prevented their daughters from being circumcised against the will of the family, while two expressed anger that their daughters had been circumcised against their will or behind their back. One woman recounted that she and her husband had “secretly agreed not to circumcise our daughters”. The answers suggest that family pressure is strong and hard to defy: “I have protected my daughters from circumcision and kept them away from all family influence.” “My wife arranged the circumcision of our daughters behind my back and under the pressure of my elder sisters.”

Female Genital Mutilation in the Sultanate of Oman

Summary of Results

- Female genital mutilation constitutes a widespread phenomenon in Oman in all age groups, and among women from all regional and educational backgrounds. Out of 100 women questioned 78 stated to be circumcised. The highest prevalence of FGM seems to exist in the Sharqiya North and South (18 out of 19), the Dakhiliya (11 out of 13) and the Batina (33 out of 38 questioned). Women who originate from Muscat are less likely to be circumcised, but still more than half of the participants were affected. 64% of all female participants said it was still practiced in the family. The prevalence in the male group was somewhat lower with 41% saying it was still practiced in the family and 20 of those 54 who had daughters affirming that their daughters are circumcised.
- The educational level only seems to have a small impact on the prevalence of FGM and no relevant impact on the support of FGM among those women circumcised.
- The operation is almost always carried out by a common woman at home. About one fourth of the women said they were circumcised in the first months after birth, half of them were circumcised at the age of 1 to 5, and another third between 5 and 10 years. From the high percentage (41%) of women not knowing when their circumcision took place, it can be assumed that most operations take place at a very early age.
- Opposition against and support for the continuation of the practice are balanced. Out of 100 women 55 supported the practice. Among the men a small majority expressed their opposition.
- The statements collected during the interviews suggest that particularly men are well informed about disadvantages on one hand and arguments pro circumcision on the other hand. The responsiveness of both males and females suggests that the topic is debated in society and contested to some extent.
- Religion constitutes an important reason for the continuation of FGM especially among women. 53 out of 100 women believed that Islamic teaching supports female circumcision. Among the men only 21 were of this opinion. Also in the statements additional to the questionnaire religion was mentioned frequently.
- Sexuality played a more important role in arguments pro or contra FGM than health arguments. Several men worried about frigidity and not being able to satisfy their wife. On the other hand, 68 women said their husband was satisfied with their circumcision, only 18% said he wasn't.

- Family pressure seems to be high at least in some parts of society with several participants stating that they had to protect their daughters from the family's pressure to circumcise her.

Recommendations:

- Conduct a nation-wide research study on FGM.
- Make the religious opinion about FGM known to the public.
- Allow women to freely decide their circumcision after they reach adulthood.
- Establish special rules and legislations that ban FGM.
- Organize awareness programs and campaigns.
- Suggest special support programs for FGM victims.
- Activate the role of Omani civil society institutions and women organizations to mainstream the issue of female circumcision in their projects.
- Suggest a transparent discussion of FGM through the various local media outlets.
- Organize sessions, programs, and workshops on this phenomenon.

Opinions and standpoints of participants in the questionnaire

(1) Feedback of male participants

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- I do not support female circumcision at all... especially because of the effects it has and because of what we've heard about it leading to death when carried out by people who are not competent enough, using inappropriate and unsterilized tools, without anesthesia.
- I have one daughter only. She was not circumcised and I do not even think about having her circumcised although this tradition is still practiced in the family. There is a great debate about female circumcision from the perspective of Islam. I personally do not support female circumcision.
- I have two daughters. Both of them are circumcised before they reached the age of six, in private clinics. However, now, after I have learned about this practice, I do not support it although it is still practiced in the family. I do not know whether female circumcision is solicited by religion. Currently, I do not support female circumcision at all. (Lawyer)
- I believe that female circumcision consists in the partial removal of the clitoris (the source of female sexual pleasure) in order to slow down a woman's sexual excitement which could lead to committing a sin. Non-circumcised women are more exposed to sexual excitement even caused by the friction of clothes against that particularly sensitive area. This is according to my humble, and maybe wrong, knowledge of the subject... (University level)
- As far as I know, female circumcision is in accordance with Islamic teaching because it has health benefits and prevents several diseases such as cancer and others... Yes, I do support female circumcision as long as it protects both women and children from diseases at an older age. This is according to my knowledge of the subject.
- Female circumcision is still practiced in the family but the modern generation sees it unnecessary. Yes, circumcision is taught by religion and was recommended by Prophet Mohammad Peace be upon Him. I support female circumcision when it is carried out in a safe manner.
- I do not support this practice at all, and it is not carried out in our family. Yes, circumcision is a religious recommendation but it is not obligatory... After all the stories, articles, and TV shows that I have read and seen, I do not support this practice because its harms outnumber its benefits and because it causes several health and psychological problems to the girl.
- I have one daughter and she was circumcised, against my will, upon her mother's (university level) and my family's request. Female circumcision is still practiced to date and is a religious recommendation; however, religion gives us absolute freedom in this regard, and I personally do not support female circumcision.

- I have a five-year-old girl. To be honest with you, I have no idea whether she was circumcised or not. I haven't even asked her mother as this subject makes no difference to me.
- The Nubian circumcision that is being fought in African countries, Egypt, and Sudan, is different from the legal circumcision that we have in Oman and in other Gulf countries. Our legal circumcision is optional of course and several scholars say that mothers usually opt for the circumcision of their daughters when they have long genitals. Long genitals cause sexual and psychological problems to girls, and circumcision is preferred in such cases. But in general, it is optional. When Prophet Mohammad PBUH, was asked about female circumcision, he recommended "mitigation"- or not cutting but a very small part-to mothers who are having their daughters circumcised; and this is generally respected in the Gulf countries. Still, complications occur at times to girls due to a lack of hygiene in popular cutting procedures, and not due to the circumcision per se. Conversely, the Nubian or Pharaonic circumcision is a very deep and complex cut that sometimes involves infibulation (sewing up), which is prohibited in Islam and unacceptable to the sound mind. Unfortunately, it is a legacy of the pre-Islamic epoch (or *Jahiliyya*) in Africa and on the banks of the Nile River. I am mentioning these details because I have discussed the issue with several women who are educated and very active in women's issues, and found that they do not know the difference between the circumcision that we practice and the other type of circumcision practiced in Egypt, Sudan, and African countries, and which has caused great clamor. I personally support female circumcision, and believe that the decision to circumcise or not depends on the needs of the case at hand. I also suggest that circumcisions should happen in hospitals pursuant to a medical report.
- I have learned from my readings that female circumcision is a "phenomenon" in Eastern communities. I would rather call it a "crime" against women, and had there been a more accurate term, I would have certainly used it to better name this crime of retarded mentality. In general, I have protected my daughters from circumcision and kept them away from any family influence. But female circumcision is still practiced and I see freshly circumcised women passing in the neighborhood in a very horrible state. I believe it is a primitive practice and not a religious one. We only rely on two sources: the Holy Quran and tradition or *Hadith*. The first is much more authentic than the second. Therefore, since the Quran did not mention female circumcision, the Hadith's mentioning of it does not count. As for *ijtihad* (diligence), those who make an *ijtihad* should keep it for themselves... I can even make an *ijtihad*. Once the prophet heard that a woman was going to be circumcised in Al-Madinah, and he prohibited her from doing so. You should read the book "Tuhfat al Mawdud" by Ibn Qiam. Circumcision does not exist for the Jews, Shia, Malikis, Seculars and Christians... medically and scientifically it is

a crime, it is atrocious to the health, and socially speaking, it leads to the spread of marital infidelity. Female circumcision leads to female frigidity. But women are human beings. Why do we deprive them of pleasure or orgasm by committing this crime over and over again? The international - and not Omani - human rights deplore this practice and consider it a crime against humanity. The Sultanate is among the states that have endorsed the obligations of the Human Rights Organization; however, this endorsement is mere ink on paper. (PhD holder)

- I am still single, but I do have sisters. I am the eldest man in the family after my father's death. Being the eldest brother, and knowing that my father used to tell me about female circumcision, I give you the following answers: We come from a conformist rural background. All my sisters have been circumcised on the second week following their birth. They were circumcised by a woman who is known to roam the maternity wards making herself available to carry out circumcision and getting paid for that. I personally do not support female circumcision at all. In Salalah, it is not the men who impose this practice; it is rather the mothers, especially old mothers, who maintain this practice. I do not know if female circumcision is still applied to the new generation girls. This practice is almost sacred to our women who only talk about it in secret. Female circumcision is a social practice and not in accordance with religious teaching. I totally oppose it, but as I said before, it is our women who are perpetuating and carrying out this practice. Men are generally not involved in deciding about circumcision, even if they sometimes brag publicly about having ordered it.
- I guess that my daughters were circumcised at the hospital. I had asked my wife to take care of this. I have no idea about this issue and never asked about it or heard about its negative effects. As far as I know, female circumcision is still practiced in the family. But as I said, it is the women who handle it. I do not know if it is Islamic. We could learn from the results of scientific research of the West where numerous research studies are conducted. So, if these studies prove that female circumcision does not cause any physical damage or any negative impact on the future sexual marital life, I would support it.
- I've heard that female circumcision is still practiced in some families, but less frequently than before. However the percentage of circumcision is still high. In Yanqul alone, it exceeds 30%, and I have no information about Ibri. I do not consider this practice as Islamic. And I oppose it as a man because it affects my sexual intercourse with the circumcised girl who cannot feel the sexual pleasure, and makes me feel incapable of satisfying her sexually.
- Circumcision in our community is practiced by old women who visit the houses very secretly and without the knowledge of the husband. Nowadays, there are private clinics that carry out this operation without being licensed to do so. I've heard about this

practice but I cannot give a specific opinion about it because I do not know its advantages and disadvantages. It is an extremely secret practice. (From Ibri)

- Circumcision was carried out on the third day after birth by a woman who is experienced in female circumcision. I support this practice that is still applied in our family. As for the opinion of our Islamic faith, scholars have clashing perceptions about female circumcision. We consider this practice as an old tradition and I support it for its scientifically-proven benefits.
- I support this practice and oppose it at the same time. I support it because I've heard it is Islamic, and I oppose it because it often causes infections that remain for a long time.
- Female circumcision is still practiced in the family. As far as I know, it is recommended and not imposed... I support female circumcision because it has health benefits and reduces the chances of genital and urinal infections. It does not cause any damage to the health.
- Many people consider female circumcision as a religious recommendation. I see it as a measure to prevent problems which could be caused by women's lust. But if we use proper education to tame this lust, the need for circumcision would cease.
- Female circumcision is related to several sexual issues such as the varying levels of lust in women, and the men's response to this lust (outside the marital home). I believe that female circumcision reduces the female lust and helps her to stay in control of her desires.
- Your research questionnaire should target men who had sex with a number of circumcised and uncircumcised women.
- Female circumcision should be kept simple and partial and not total. I've heard here that it is wrong when it removes everything; hence the high rates of frigidity and divorce.
- I personally consider that female circumcision is the real violence against children.
- I do not have much information about female circumcision and the religious opinion about it or its advantages or disadvantages. I only support what the modern medicine recommends based on science and logic.
- The Islamic teaching talks about Prepucectomy and not circumcision. Prepucectomy is totally different.
- I do not support female circumcision and consider it a horrible tradition that deprives women of many sexual pleasures.
- Female circumcision is not an Islamic teaching. It is a horrible tradition practiced by the ignorant.
- According to the Ibadi rite (*Ibadiyyah*), female circumcision is not an Islamic teaching. Only God knows!

- Excuse me but, are you saying that the generally known female circumcision is practiced in Oman? I did not know that and I have four daughters.
- Female circumcision is not practiced in Qabel.
- I do not support female circumcision because it damages and mutilates the area to be removed and affects the marital life.
- I believe there is no explicit and straightforward text that imposes female circumcision as an obligation.
- Female circumcision is a tradition spread in the remote areas, especially in villages.
- Unfortunately, I have no idea or information about the subject. Sorry!
- Female circumcision is a very atrocious tradition rooted in the minds of Arab Oriental men who fear women “the source of all vices”, and see them as simpleminded humans who cannot control their lust. Female circumcision does not benefit a woman’s health; it rather damages her sexual pleasure. The men’s thought and fear that a woman cannot control her lust was promoted by the Arab and Islamic culture alike. I consider this practice to be very horrible and retarded and offensive to the woman. It is a direct physical and psychological offense. Even men would suffer from it because who would want to marry a woman whose clitoris has been partly or totally removed, and with whom intercourse would be like having sex with a dead corpse? Female circumcision affects a woman’s orgasm and many other aspects of her sexual life. How do we allow ourselves to practice this horrible tradition against our children? Those who support female circumcision should at least wait until a girl reaches adulthood when she would, if she believes in female circumcision, freely go to the “underground doctors” to be circumcised. In general, female circumcision is a horrible tradition and I hope it would be soon criminalized.
- My wife arranged the circumcision of our daughters behind my back and under the pressure of my elder sisters.
- Scholars have conflicting opinions about the extent to which female circumcision is an obligation or a recommendation. It is a social tradition. Arab women, including the Sons of Israel, Jews and Christians, were circumcised before the advent of Prophet Mohammad PBUH. I support female circumcision as it is beneficial and a must for physical purity, and most importantly, it does not cause damage to anyone. I will verify this and do more research on the subject.

(2) Feedback of female participants

- A common woman visits the houses to carry out circumcision.
- I was circumcised at home. Nowadays, girls are circumcised in clinics.
- I suggest that you add one question for married participants: Is your husband happy about your circumcision?
- I say I do not know because this is the first time I hear that girls could be circumcised.
- The cost of female circumcision varies from 2 to 15 Riyals.
- Three students answered all at once: Yes, of course we are circumcised.
- Are you happy with your circumcision? Yes. Is this tradition still practiced in your family? No, no thanks God. Why do you say thank God while you're happy with your circumcision? I am happy because I did not suffer from the negative effects of circumcision.
- Circumcision is woman's dignity.
- I do not agree with the age and place at which I was circumcised. Even if I support circumcision, I do not agree on carrying it out in the traditional way outside the hospital.
- I support female circumcision because it reduces sexual excitement. This practice is very commonplace in the Dima Wa Tayeen region.
- I am not happy with my circumcision. My husband and I have secretly agreed not to circumcise our daughters. Our families do not know that, or else they would be infuriated.
- It is a social tradition confused with religious teachings!
- All girls of our generation have been circumcised. There are private clinics for that nowadays.
- I support female circumcision because I have read that it reduces sexual pleasure.
- My husband never mentioned female circumcision. I guess he does not oppose it because he agreed to have our daughter circumcised and did not resist the idea.
- Seriously, are you circumcised? I thank God that I am. Yes I am circumcised as every Muslim should be. Those who are not circumcised are *haram* and should be forbidden from praying and fasting.
- Seriously, you think that even a woman should be circumcised? Yes, of course. Being a woman does not cancel the fact that she is Muslim. Every person should be circumcised. In the past, we used to say that it is in the girl's best interest to be circumcised. Nowadays, circumcision has become a rarity. People are over analyzing things. Uncircumcised girls are not Muslim, they are Banyans.
- Nowadays, circumcision has become rare. It is no longer a phenomenon. Some educated and intellectual women still support it. I once took part in a discussion about female circumcision and found myself alone against a group that supports this practice... They think that it reduces a woman's sexual pleasure, but I call this oppression. What they do not know is that circumcision does not reduce a woman's sexual desire and does not

necessarily guarantee her chastity... Examples are everywhere. Only the Pharaonic circumcision applied in Sudan eliminates all chances of pleasure, not to mention that it is very risky and takes the lives of countless girls.

- I support female circumcision but my husband refused to have our daughters circumcised.
- I am neutral concerning this issue. But if a female circumcision is to be done, I believe it should be carried out carefully without affecting the health of the girl, and pursuant to the religious opinion because people nowadays are educated and are hence able to accept and understand opinions.
- Female circumcision is banned in Sohar hospitals, so we are obliged to go to a clinic in Buraimi.
- (Media personality) Q: Do you think that female circumcision is taught by Islam? A: Of course I do. But my support to this practice is not restricted to it being Islamic. Female circumcision has benefits proven by Islamic scientists who conducted research on the advantages and disadvantages of circumcision. The results have shown that circumcision has significant benefits. This is why I would like to explain these benefits, because what I will share here, as a circumcised woman, could be useful to your study. In my opinion, the bad circumcision is the Pharaonic type, but circumcision by the teachings of our Prophet PBUH is safe and grants a lot of benefits to the woman as it enhances the shape of her genitals and reduces her lust. And when I say lust, I do not mean sexual satisfaction. Married women who are circumcised get more sexual satisfaction than those who are not. That is because the prepuce - and not part of the clitoris- that is removed when a girl is circumcised but kept for the uncircumcised girl, prevents the woman from being sexually satisfied. There are Western women who have their prepuce removed to enjoy their sexual life to the fullest. A friend of my sister was circumcised in her twenties. She decided to have a circumcision and said that she felt much better and was more comfortable doing her house chores since she was circumcised. What I suggest is not to prohibit the Islamic circumcision, but to have it performed by competent medical specialists and where girls are under medical and psychological supervision. Because although circumcision is a good thing, when performed at home, the girl is exposed to a difficult situation or a psychological shock if she is harshly held or violently treated, because children in general are afraid of such experience. I still remember how my friend was held tight and circumcised while I was watching horrified, not knowing that I was next. This experience has shocked me. So, I support circumcision when it is performed by specialized people, in a civilized way using sterilized tools. I also support female circumcision because it reduces sexual excitement caused by the prepuce friction against the clothes. Without having the prepuce removed, the single, divorced, or widow women would be in endless torture, all the

more serious in the absence of any source of sexual satisfaction since our culture prohibits sexual encounters outside wedlock. Therefore, circumcision is a gift of mercy for women. At the end, I emphasize once more that sexual excitement is not to be confused with sexual satisfaction which occurs normally to married women who are circumcised.

- You brought back to me scenes that I thought were buried in my memory. You are reminding me of painful memories that I never thought I would remember. I remember the voice of my mom inviting me to go to the shop with her. She was saying “I’ll buy you ice cream and yogurt-filled-chocolate”. I joyfully run behind her in my green trousers and dress. We walked into dark roads farther than the shop. God, I will never forget how sickening and awful that place was. Mom took me there to have me circumcised. I remember myself in severe pain, crying my lungs out, and bleeding heavily on my trousers and dress. And I never had my ice cream and yogurt-filled- chocolate!

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