

Male circumcision is an unwarranted breach of a child's integrity – just like FGM

Posted: Tue, 31st Jul 2012 by [Kenneth Houston](#)

The Muslim-Jewish alliance of religious 'leaders' who condemned the recent German court ruling in Cologne on male circumcision stands as a testament to the need for secularism. The court had decided that the right of individuals to freely express their religious beliefs did not extend to the 'right' of parents to mutilate their children's genitals.

It was an entirely sensible and long-overdue assertion of individual liberty by a European court in favour of society's most vulnerable and voiceless members: its children.

But with the near-deafening silence of the powerful gender equality lobby, and with German chancellor Angela Merkel promising these so-called minority leaders that she will work to overturn the decision, who will stand up for baby boys?

The deplorable position of the Jewish representative body, in making comparisons with the discriminatory policies of the Third Reich, shows faith representatives cynically overplaying their hand. If individual rights and freedoms clash with the privileges of corporate religion then individual freedom should always triumph.

Maybe Germany should hold a referendum on children's rights. In a reversal of gender inequality, the campaign against female genital mutilation (FGM) appears to have progressed further than its brotherly counterpart.

Recently, I had occasion to be party to a discussion on gender equality and our discussion moved to the plight of women in developing nations, particularly those contexts where patriarchal violence towards women is endemic and even – dare we say it – culturally sanctioned. One particularly heinous practice, of course, is FGM.

I pointed out that there was not nearly the same animated attention given to male circumcision. I made the (I thought) unremarkable point that male genital mutilation (MGM) should be opposed as vigorously as FGM. However, my attempt to place male and female genital mutilation on the same footing was not enthusiastically received.

I found this puzzling. Male circumcision invariably occurs without the consent of the infant upon whom it is imposed. I asked why our justified moral outrage at FGM was not replicated when boys had part of their genitals forcibly removed for religious reasons. I found none of the answers remotely satisfactory.

Why MGM and FGM are not considered equally reprehensible defies compassionate reason.

FGM is carried out – for cultural/religious reasons – by restraining a young girl and removing her clitoris with a sharp implement. It is done without her consent ostensibly in order to control the sexual urges of women.

MGM was not uncommon practice in western Europe until recently. It even had mainstream medical sanction. But more recently the justification for MGM has been undermined. If it is not

medically necessary then there are no good reasons to mutilate a child's body.

Freedom of religion should not grant licence to holy men to mutilate infant boys' genitalia. It is barbaric and its tacit acceptance in Europe demonstrates a misplaced deference to religious sensibilities. That only one regional German court stood up unambiguously against it is shameful. That it has been castigated by political leaders for doing so demonstrates the erosion of secular liberal values and ideas of individual freedom.

MGM amounts to a gross breach of the bodily integrity of baby boys. There is a fundamental inequality at work here. In direct contravention of gender equality, boys are treated differently to girls. Anyone who takes a knife to a baby's penis in 2012 is committing a breach of human rights. They should be prosecuted, not pandered to.

Women who have fought for equality for girls should take up the banner for their baby boys. Otherwise the great leap forward that was feminism will begin to look like a silent accomplice to oppression.

Dr Kenneth Houston lectures at Webster University, Thailand. This first appeared in the Irish Times and is reproduced here in the interest of open debate and the free exchange of information. The views expressed in this blog are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the NSS.

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