

Let's face facts: FGM has something to do with religion

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Politicians who insist female genital cutting has nothing to do with religion set a dangerous precedent that undermines campaigns to combat it and other religious harms, says Megan Manson.

A bill to extend protection for girls at risk of female genital mutilation (FGM) is on the verge of becoming law. Thanks to this bill moved by Conservative MP Zac Goldsmith, courts will be able to make girls in danger of FGM the subject of interim care orders under the Children Act 1989.

This is very welcome news for the many individuals and organisations who have campaigned tirelessly for this change in law to protect girls' right to bodily autonomy.

But the discussions surrounding this bill and FGM in general have revealed a strange and discomfiting phenomenon: politicians rushing to declare that FGM has nothing to do with religion.

During a debate in the House of Commons last week ahead of International Women's Day, Labour MP Liz McInnes [said](#): "FGM is a cultural rather than a religious practice."

On the same day in the House of Lords, minister for equalities Baroness Williams of Trafford [echoed the sentiment](#): "Cultural practice is often used interchangeably with religious reasons. In fact, the practice of FGM has nothing to do with religion."

MPs continued to flock to religion's defence during the [third reading of Goldsmith's bill](#) on Monday. Goldsmith opened the debate, stating: "I said earlier that FGM has no basis in medicine and, despite what we are often told, nor does it have any basis in any religion."

He went on: "The practice is often wrongly blamed on Islam—this can particularly be seen on social media—both by extremists who want to justify or, in some cases, even advocate FGM and by others who wish to use FGM as a stick with which to bash the religion itself."

MPs raced to join in to defend religion from association with FGM. Conservative MP Simon Hoare added: "It is not the religious requirement of one faith or another".

Labour MP Sarah Champion even went one further to say "FGM is not a cultural practice". She was backed by fellow Labour MP Rosena Allin-Khan: "I stand here with colleagues from across the House tonight and say that this is not done in the name of any religion—certainly not any religion I know—and nor is it acceptable cultural practice in any culture that I know."

These assertions, whatever their intentions, are not only inconsistent with each other; they are inconsistent with the facts.

Like any ritualised human behaviour, the motivations behind FGM are multi-layered and complex. But it cannot be ignored that many of those within 'cutting communities' themselves assert that the practice is religious. A [2013 study](#) on FGM in Africa by UNICEF found that in all but one country surveyed, there were respondents who said that it was a religious requirement.

While it is true that the majority of Islamic scholars reject FGM, it is important to bear in mind that Islam is similarly diverse as Christianity, with many differing views. A significant number of Muslims do believe FGM is a requirement of Islam. The Shafi'i school of Sunni Islam and the Dawoodi Bohra branch of Shia Islam are two sects that consider genital cutting to be a requirement. The Maliki, Hanafi and Hanbali schools of Sunni have also considered female genital cutting a 'virtue'. In Malaysia, where 93% of women from Muslim families have undergone FGM, 82% [claim](#) it is a religious obligation. And FGM is not exclusive to Islam; it is also a feature of some animist belief systems.

It's clear that FGM has something to do with religion. So why do parliamentarians go out of their way to deny it?

Part of the reason is no doubt well-intended. Using theology to argue FGM is not a religious requirement has been a strategy employed by campaigners within communities that practice FGM to dissuade people from cutting their daughters.

But a more worrying reason seems to be a misguided attempt to avoid criticism of religion itself, and other religious practices. More specifically, it shields male genital cutting from similar scrutiny.

It's fair to say male circumcision has existed in the UK public consciousness a considerably longer time than FGM. Unfamiliarity with FGM means it's relatively easy to declare FGM has nothing to do with religion without being disputed, because most Brits had never heard of FGM until quite recently. But to argue the same thing for male circumcision would be impossible. Everyone knows about male circumcision, and everyone knows it's a thoroughly religious practice of Jewish and Muslim communities.

As the public have grown more aware of FGM, increasing numbers of people are wondering: if forcibly cutting the genitals of a young girl without medical need is deemed illegal child abuse by UK society, why do we excuse forcibly cutting the genitals of a young boy without medical need? In 2018, a YouGov survey [found](#) 62% of the population would support a law banning non-therapeutic infant circumcision; only 13% disagreed.

The inconsistency in the law regarding female and male genital cutting was addressed by Goldsmith: "A number of colleagues raised concerns about male circumcision as if there were some kind of comparison between the two," he said.

"Whatever our views on male circumcision, it must be obvious that it does not compare to FGM."

Sarah Champion backed him up: "We often hear this argument comparing the two, but male circumcision, in my experience, is rarely, if ever, done to subjugate the boy, whereas FGM is very clearly done to end women's sexual pleasure."

These statements unhelpfully reinforce some common misconceptions about genital cutting. From a basic ethical perspective, FGM and male circumcision are absolutely comparable in that both involve the painful, risky and usually permanent alteration of the most intimate part of a child's body without consent and without medical need.

Then there is the myth that FGM is always more invasive than circumcision. This myth ignores the wide spectrum of procedures that come under the classification of 'FGM'. No-one would deny that extreme forms of FGM, in which all external female genitalia are severely damaged or removed in unhygienic conditions, cause greater long-term suffering than mainstream forms of male circumcision. Such procedures frequently result in a life of agony for the victim or even death.

But 'milder' forms of FGM, such as those widespread in Malaysia, involve a pinprick to the clitoral hood, sometimes known as the 'ritual nick'. This type of FGM entails a much smaller risk of infection or other unintended complications than other forms, and the amount of tissue damaged is minimal. Nevertheless, along with other forms of FGM, this causes pain and distress to the child and is rightly outlawed in the UK.

In contrast, male circumcision always involves the permanent removal of the foreskin. The extent of the damage done by circumcision is frequently downplayed: the child can lose up to one half of erogenous penile skin tissue. The risks and complications of circumcision also tend to be understated. Between 2008 and 2014, [more than half a million boys](#) were hospitalised due to circumcision-related complications in South Africa, over 400 of whom died. And in 2011, [nearly a dozen](#) infant boys were treated for life-threatening haemorrhage, shock or sepsis as a result of non-therapeutic circumcision at a single children's hospital in Birmingham. Like FGM, there are different forms of circumcision. In some extreme cases practiced in UK without any legal restriction by some ultra-orthodox Jewish groups, the circumciser ritually takes the baby's penis into his mouth and sucks it without regard for hygiene.

Finally, there is the common assertion that FGM is done for the purpose of female subjugation. This seems to be the only motivation behind FGM that parliamentarians will agree on: they may say it isn't to do with religion, or even culture, but pinning FGM on the patriarchy is far more palatable.

While controlling women's sexuality is perhaps part of the motivation behind FGM, there are a number of problems ascribing this as the sole reason for the practice. First, it should be pointed out that every community that practices FGM also practices male circumcision. There's clearly more going on than simply a desire to control the female sex when the male sex is similarly subjected to unnecessary cutting.

Secondly, it is disputable that circumcision is not usually done "to subjugate the boy". One only need look at the history of circumcision in the Anglosphere to find problems with this argument. The US is one of the minority of countries where non-therapeutic circumcision is routinely performed on boys from non-Jewish or non-Muslim families, and a primary reason why it became widespread was because it was thought it would [deter boys from masturbation](#). Boys were therefore circumcised as an attempt to control their sexual urges and behaviour. It can be argued that any form of enforced non-therapeutic genital cutting, be it on women or men, is in itself a form of subjugation and control of the child's body; a symbol that their body does not exclusively belong to them.

Finally, systems that promote female subjugation are almost always fuelled by religious ideas about male and female gender roles and the virtues of purity. A society that says women are worth less than men, or that women must adhere to values of chastity and modesty, will invariably point to religious teachings to justify this. If FGM is motivated by a desire to control women, it is largely because of religions that teach women should be controlled.

Campaigners have triumphed again and again in their efforts to end FGM. It is thanks to the dedication and determination of anti-FGM activists that, perhaps for the first time, people on a global scale are questioning the right of parents to permanently modify their children's bodies without medical need.

But we should be extremely wary of any attempts to excuse the role of religion in infant genital cutting, regardless of the sex of the infant. Insisting that FGM "has nothing to do with religion" sets

a dangerous precedent. It reinforces the idea that all religious practices are inherently "good" or at least "harmless", and anything we consider not "harmless" must not be religious.

This simplistic and one-sided view of religion makes it much more difficult to scrutinise and criticise religious practices that may not be harmless – including male circumcision. That is what's happening right now. Female genital cutting is contrasted with male genital cutting partly by stating that cutting female genitals is not religious, while cutting male genitals is religious. In turn, this implies that if FGM were religious, it may somehow be justifiable.

Insisting that FGM 'has nothing to do with religion' as a reason for its condemnation and prohibition does not merely undermine those wishing to extend protections afforded to young girls to boys. It may ultimately undermine protections against FGM itself. Advocates of FGM have caught on that religion is one of the main arguments shielding male circumcision from scrutiny, and they're pushing the (admittedly logical) argument that what they do to girls in the name of religion should be as equally permitted as what they do to boys. This is particularly prominent among practitioners of the 'ritual nick', who can also argue quite effectively that their form of genital cutting on girls is less invasive than the circumcision they perform on boys.

In order to protect children and indeed anyone else adequately in society, our politicians must be brave and willing to openly criticise harmful religious practises. Saying "it's nothing to do with religion" not only shields the truth; it shields the wrongdoers from being held to account, and shields religion from critical inquiry.

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Megan Manson is the head of policy & research at the National Secular Society. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the NSS.

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