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*Special Issue: Gender Equality in Abrahamic Circumcision:  
Why or Why Not?*

EDITORIAL

**Introduction: gender equality in Abrahamic  
circumcision – why or why not?**

*Ingvild Bergom Lunde, [i.b.lunde@medisin.uio.no](mailto:i.b.lunde@medisin.uio.no)  
University of Oslo, Norway*

*Matthew Thomas Johnson, [m.johnson@lancs.ac.uk](mailto:m.johnson@lancs.ac.uk)  
Lancaster University, UK*

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This issue emerges more than 40 years after the initiation of zero-tolerance global campaigns to end all forms of female genital cutting (FGC). The practice of cutting female genitalia without medical necessity is commonly referred to as ‘female genital cutting’, ‘female genital mutilation’ and/or ‘female circumcision’. Sometimes, the term ‘girl circumcision’ is used in order to make a distinction between the childhood and adulthood genital cutting of females. The practice is commonly categorised into four types by the World Health Organization: type I – cutting of the outer clitoris; type II – the partial or total removal of the outer clitoris and the labia minora, with or without excision of the labia majora; type III/infibulation – narrowing the vaginal opening through the creation of a covering seal, with or without removal of the outer clitoris; and type IV – all other harmful procedures to the female genitalia for non-medical reasons. A body of research from a range of fields shows that in contemporary hegemonic public discourse, the acceptable way of talking about, interpreting and comprehending the practice is through a framework of condemnation (Hauge, 2012; Shell-Duncan et al, 2016; Hodzic, 2017; Lunde, 2020).

However, in 2018 and 2019, the Dawoodi Bohra Women’s Association for Religious Freedom in India released official statements insisting that they practise a form of female circumcision that is less invasive than male circumcision in order that girls be treated equally to circumcised boys. The statements further made it clear that

the Bohra do not practise ‘female genital mutilation’ – in fact, they condemn the practice (DBWRE, 2018; 2019). These statements highlight two central limitations in the global work to end FGC. First, there has been little to no differentiation between different forms of FGC. Indeed, it is the most invasive form – and likely the least common globally – that has received most attention in public discourse and among researchers and policymakers. Second, there are central, unresolved questions regarding the Global North’s acceptance of the medically unnecessary circumcision of boys, of which there is great variety in the practice, ranging from removing parts of or the entire foreskin of the penis to a cutting in the urinary tube from the scrotum to the glans.

Taking Richard Shweder’s (2022) article ‘The prosecution of Dawoodi Bohra women: some reasonable doubts’ as a target piece for discussion, the aim of this issue is to better understand these limitations. In the article, Shweder proposes that some forms of FGC be legalised, arguing that the form of FGC practised among Dawoodi Bohra Muslims is less invasive than the typical circumcision of boys and that FGC is a religiously meaningful ritual among the Bohra. This proposal implies that girls should have the same rights to cultural and/or religious identity as circumcised boys. It is a controversial proposal insofar as it directly challenges the central tenet of global campaigns to end FGC, such as Target 5.3 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal: girls can only be empowered by protecting them from being subjected to a fear-inducing and painful experience.

This issue examines both directions within the equivalence argument: the plausibility of the legalisation of FGC; and the possibility that boys require protection from forms of male genital cutting. This second possibility – of proposing an age limit or ban on male circumcision – is also controversial, particularly at a time in which there is growing concern about anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. This may, in part, explain worldwide reluctance by otherwise-interventionist policymakers to act upon the similarities between male and female circumcision.

Nevertheless, increased concern on children’s rights, anti-circumcision activism and emerging interest within the media in the similarities between female and male circumcision mean that the articles in this issue feed into a dynamic set of debates within societies. Indeed, where previous generations may have cut without question or rejected any discussion of cutting at all, parents may increasingly need to interrogate the questions of whether, when, how and on what grounds they circumcise their children.

By accommodating a wide range of perspectives on the implications of divergent accounts of harm, this issue does not seek to promote any one particular position. Indeed, the authorship is deliberately diverse in terms of disciplinary, professional and cultural background. However, as with the *Boston Review* series of debates regarding Yael Tamir’s (1996) position on FGC, Shweder’s article serves as a reference point for a series of critical responses that examine the implications and applications of the notion of the genital cutting of girls and boys being equivalent.

In the first article, Fuambai Ahmadu and Tatu Kamau (2022), who analyse the paradox of the treatment of FGC in Kenyan law, in which legislation appears to privilege gender-confirming surgery in a cultural context with less fluid gender norms. Brian Earp (2022) then shows how he and Shweder agree on the presence of double standards but depart in their normative conclusions, with Earp rejecting all medically unnecessary medical cutting of children. Next, Allan J. Jacobs (2022)

shows how understanding of the anatomy of female and male bodies can contribute to debates about circumcision, arguing that the differences in female and male anatomy make female circumcision dangerous in infancy and male circumcision safest in infancy. [Carlos Londono Sulkin \(2022\)](#) then interprets Shweder's imaginative framework as semiotic webs that are not only tools to understand others outside of us, but also means of making sense of ourselves, arguing that semiotically constituted experiences of genitalia are central to how human beings articulate and experience images of the self. Then, [Seth Rozin \(2022\)](#) analyses the anticipated and unanticipated pushback he received in response to his play 'Human Rites', which sought to challenge audiences' assumptions about FGC. Next, sharing experiences and reflections on participation in the Islamic bioethical discussion in the 2017–19 Fiqh Council in North America, [Aasim I. Padela \(2022\)](#) calls for the inclusion of social scientists, public policy experts and other relevant scholars in Islamic bioethical deliberations in addition to clinicians and jurists. Then, [Brid Hehir \(2022\)](#) argues that the UK legal context discriminates against women from specific ethnic backgrounds in its criminalisation of FGC and permission of forms of labiaplasty. Next, [Juliet Rogers \(2022\)](#) shows how the High Court of Australia's failure to consider equivalence disregards women's agency towards God and community in its subscription to the view that the body of a woman becomes injured – a remnant – when she is circumcised, as opposed to the male body, which becomes part of the nation through circumcision. [Michael Rosman \(2022\)](#) then usefully explains and analyses the debate between Congress and a District Court over the applicability of Section 116 of the US Criminal Code to the Dawoodi Bohra case. [Bettina Shell-Duncan \(2022\)](#) argues that in order to understand the particular constraining conditions within particular contexts, it is necessary to add broader structural and global factors to concern for legal, social and modern versus traditional understandings of the agency and choice of parents. The final reply comes from [Ellen Gruenbaum and Samira Amin Ahmed \(2022\)](#) who claim that Shweder's defence of the practices of the Dawoodi Bohra is not helpful in Sudan, arguing that female and male genital cutting are best approached as two separate issues, with efforts to eradicate FGC – predominantly type III – already well established and the acceptance of male circumcision entrenched in public discourse. In his epilogue, [Shaye Cohen \(2022\)](#) writes how his book *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised?* ([Cohen, 2005](#)) is not about the circumcision of women, but rather about the non-circumcision of Jewish women and what makes Jewish women Jewish. The issue ends with a reply by [Shweder \(2022\)](#) to the respondents.

### **Conflict of interest**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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