

Begin the Conversation: Four Conversations That Healthy Communities Should Have about FGC.

Faith leaders touch the lives of their communities in many ways: at weekly prayers, during lifecycle events, during individual counseling, or out in the community. Each of these interactions can be a **teachable moment** – an opportunity to discuss health and well-being with your community and share important messages. Here are four key conversations that all faith leaders – regardless of faith – can have with their community:

Introduction

Congratulations, and thank you for your willingness to empower girls in your community through the eradication of harmful traditional practices! FGC, though devastating to a girl's health, well-being, and future, continues to be practiced in many communities, and viewed as good and necessary. Therefore, it may seem a daunting task to change the minds of your community members about these harmful practices. However, educating yourself and continuing to brush up on your newly acquired knowledge about FGC will help you pave the way for real and sustainable change in your area.

These conversation starters are a good first step to engaging your community in a conversation about the practice of FGC. They are meant to provide talking points and key messages to convey to your congregation and community about these practices. Each talking point/key message comes with appropriate theological/scriptural references to back them up.

There are many ways to use these conversation starters – it's up to you. No matter how you choose to use them, though, be sure to study them carefully before you begin talking to your community about FGC – and continue to use them as a resource for yourself, as needed.

Instructions

Read through these conversation starters, and then, further below, the theological/scriptural references around each talking point/key message. Reflect on them, and absorb the information. If you find anything you disagree with, take this as an opportunity to educate yourself further. These theological/scriptural references have been tested and approved by both Christian and Muslim faith leaders.

When you feel ready, and adequately prepared to speak about FGC using these talking points/key messages and their scriptural references, you can begin engaging your community in a discussion about these issues. There are several ways you can do this:

- If you make frequent home visits to your community members, use them to help you structure conversations about these topics. These conversations can be as long or as short as you like – you don't need to get to every talking point/key message! Just one per conversation can be enough, since everyone will likely have a lot to say.
- If you lead a men's or women's group, use them as a way to informally get them thinking about the realities of FGC for their daughters. It is best to begin by engaging a small, trusted group you know will listen and discuss issues with each other respectfully.
- If you feel comfortable enough, you can use these conversation starters to address larger groups of adults or youth in your community.

Again, how you use these conversation starters is up to you. Once you have educated yourself, and feel prepared, feel free to use your own experience and style to be creative!

Eliminating FGC: All Human Life Has Dignity

- **Conversation 1:** Are our bodies the creations of God/Allah, the perfect creator? If so, does female genital cutting reduce the dignity of human life?
- **Conversation 2:** As medical facts have proven that FGC is not good for women, why not stop cutting out a healthy, beautiful, perfectly functioning body part?
- **Conversation 3:** FGC is harmful, but used anyway in an attempt to “guarantee” virginity in girls. Does FGC punish the innocent before a crime is even committed?
- **Conversation 4:** How can responsible, healthy, and productive communities work to eliminate harmful practices like FGC?

Please refer to Module 2 (above) for scriptural elements that may support you, your congregation and your community in your conversations on these topics. Module 2 includes specific references from the Bible, Quran, and other religious sources so that you can tailor these conversations to your specific faith community.

Begin the Conversation: Four Conversations That Healthy Communities Should Have about FGC.

Begin the Conversation: What's the Big Idea?

Faith leaders touch the lives of their communities in many ways: at weekly prayers, during major life events, during individual counseling, or out in the community. Each of these interactions can be a **teachable moment** – an opportunity for you to discuss health and well being with your community and share important messages. 'Start the Conversation' outlines 4 key conversations that you can have with your community.

KEY TERM:

A **TEACHABLE MOMENT** is any opportunity for you to share an important lesson with your community. It doesn't have to be in a sermon, a class, or a formal setting.

How Do I "Begin the Conversation"?

It's not about waiting for the perfect moment or having all the answers...it's about offering you opportunities to encourage **others**. Those opportunities might be during a meeting of your women's group, during a sermon, during pre-marital counseling, during a holiday celebration, or another appropriate moment where you can start a conversation about these issues.

Sometimes it can be hard to have conversations about HIV/AIDS...don't worry. When we talk about HIV or risk reduction, we are really talking about what we can all do to create healthy and strong communities – and that's a goal that all religious communities share.

Remember, these are suggested 'conversations,' not lessons. You can just ask the question and support your community as they engage with these issues. However, if you are reading this toolkit, chances are you have a lot to contribute!

We know that talking about FGC is not always easy and may be even a bit awkward... don't worry. What we are really talking about is creating and maintaining healthy communities, and that's a good thing! Use this guide to help start the conversation...

OK, enough chit-chat. Let's start the conversation. Conversation One begins on the next page...

Begin the Conversation on Eliminating FGC – “All Human Life has Dignity”

Conversation One: Are our bodies the creations of God/Allah, the perfect creator? If so, does female genital cutting reduce the dignity of human life?

The BIG ideas:

All human life has dignity.

- We are perfect creations of the perfect creator. “I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful” (Psalm 139:14).
 - i. FGC, or the removal of a beautiful, healthy, functioning body part, is calling ugly/offensive what God has made clean. “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.” (Acts 10:15).

All human life has dignity.

- We are all perfect creations of Allah, the perfect creator.
- Cutting or harming a body part that we were born with when there is nothing wrong with it, as happens in FGC, goes against Allah’s wishes.
- “...and there is no changing Allah’s creation. And that is the proper religion but many people do not know.” (Quran 30:30)
- “...and make not your own hands contribute to your destruction.” (Quran 2:195)

Key Facts

- FGC can cause infection, whether from the procedure itself or complications afterwards.
- FGC can cause obstetric fistula, a condition causing incontinence of urine or feces, and many other damaging physical and mental issues for the woman affected.
- FGC makes marital relations and childbirth/delivery extremely painful, due to an excess of scar tissue and an obstructed vaginal opening.
- FGC can cause infant and maternal mortality, due to the obstructed vaginal opening.
- FGC is not healthy circumcision; it is instead like removing the entire male member.

Some Quick Tips

- Look for opportunities to begin talking to your community about issues of **health and wellness**. We want to make sure that people walk away with a sense of personal and communal responsibility for their health and well-being as well as the knowledge that they have the power to control their health.
- Address the **Key Facts** referred to above. If people have misconceptions about FGC, it's important to correct those (see below for additional resources to help you do that).

Additional Resources:

For more basic information and **Key Facts** about FGC, see **Module 2: "Teach Yourself"**. For more help on how to talk about FGC or have difficult conversations, see 'Some Common Questions' in **Module 1: "Getting Started"**.

Begin the Conversation on Eliminating FGC – “All Human Life has Dignity”

Conversation Two: As medical facts have proven that FGC is not good for women, why not stop cutting out a healthy, beautiful, perfectly functioning body part?

The BIG ideas:

God’s creation is perfect.

- After creating both man and woman, “God saw all that he had made, and (said) it was **very good**” (Genesis 1:31).
- FGC, when used to ensure virginity before marriage and fidelity after marriage, is punishing the innocent before a sin was even committed – this type of injustice towards the innocent deeply hurts God.
 - i. In fact, God never intended for us to consider any part of our bodies shameful or ugly: “Adam and his wife were both naked, and felt no shame” (Genesis 2:25). It was only after the fall of Adam and Eve, when they were tempted by Satan, that they covered their bodies out of shame. “Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves” (Genesis 3:7). This is not to say that we should go around naked in our daily lives, but to show that God never originally created humans with offensive, shameful parts that need removal. After the fall, still under the influence of evil, they concluded that sexual/reproductive organs are shameful. Still, however, God did not say that these parts need to be removed. Believing that these parts are so disgusting and dangerous that they require removal is a further corruption.
- FGC is neither beneficial to health family life nor is it a healthy covenant with God; instead, it is an insult to God through an act of violence and humiliation toward innocent women and girls. The Old Testament signs of covenant included MALE – ONLY circumcision. Genesis 12: 2-3: “Every male among you shall be circumcised.” In these days, it was a sign of closeness with God, something that set them apart from the nonbelievers.

- i. However, 1st Corinthians 7:19, St. Paul said, “Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing.” As the Word of God (the Bible) does not contradict itself, the above verses mean that male circumcision was a sign of covenant during the Old Testament times, but in the New Testament circumcision does not have any religious significance. It is only a health measure, which does not affect the male penis in the same way it affects the female clitoris/other parts.
- ii. FGC is not the same as male circumcision. Medically speaking, the glans clitoris is equivalent to the head of the penis – to cut either off is a gross affront to human dignity, as it deprives victims of the potential joy found in healthy marital relations.

Allah’s creation is perfect.

- “Verily we created man of the best stature” (Quran: 96:4).
 - i. The beauty of a human body is to be left as it was created by Allah, unless there is an authentic basis allowing interference with it. Authentic bases include medical indications and the clearly stated male circumcision. Conversely, FGC could be seen as an insult to Allah that is an issue to repent/confess for saying (in action): ***your creation is imperfect, let me correct it for you!*** Of course, the underpinning argument is that Allah has created women abnormally, and that we need to take corrective measures. Current medical science, however, agrees with perfect creation.
 - ii. FGC is not a healthy form of circumcision or covenant with God, as with male circumcision.
 - iii. It is instead an insult to God through an act of violence and humiliation on innocent people.
 - iv. It is not equivalent to male circumcision – in fact, it is akin to removing the entire male member.
 - v. “Oh you messenger [Muhammad] proclaim [the message] which has been sent down to you from your Lord. And if you do not then you have not conveyed His message” (Quran: 5: 67).
 - vi. If FGC was a religious requirement, the Prophet would have explicitly taught it, and his wives and daughters would have been circumcised. The Prophet taught about correct Islamic behavior in all aspects of life, including toilet manners, table manners, relations between husband and wife, and so on. It is not logical, therefore, that he would be silent on a matter that affects an important human reproductive organ.
 - vii. Kindness means never inflicting harm unless necessary – and even then, mercy is far more admirable

Key Facts

- FGC can cause infection, whether from the procedure itself or complications afterwards.
- FGC can cause obstetric fistula, a condition causing incontinence of urine or feces, and many other damaging physical and mental issues for the woman affected.
- FGC makes marital relations and childbirth/delivery extremely painful, due to an excess of scar tissue and an obstructed vaginal opening.
- FGC can cause infant and maternal mortality, due to the obstructed vaginal opening.

Some Quick Tips

- Stress the fact that all people can play a role in reducing your community's practice of FGC, and thus play a key role in promoting the health and wellbeing of girls and women. Whether it is telling people about the harmfulness of FGC, supporting family members who decide NOT to practice FGC, or choosing not to inflict FGC on our daughters, there are many things that we can each do to help create a healthy community.
- Make sure that during this conversation your community begins to really understand the basic facts about FGC, as these will be built-upon in subsequent conversations.

Additional Resources:

For more basic information and **Key Facts** about FGC, see **Module 2**: "Teach Yourself. For more help on how to talk about FGC or have difficult conversations, see 'Some Common Questions' in **Module 1**: "Getting Started".

Begin the Conversation on Eliminating FGC – “All Human Life has Dignity”

Conversation Three: FGC is harmful, but used anyway in an attempt to “guarantee” virginity in girls. Does FGC punish the innocent before a crime is even committed?

The BIG ideas:

Both boys and girls should be treated with love and respect

- In John 13:34-35, Jesus said, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” This means that we should love both boys and girls in our families equally, and not value one above the other. Practices like FGC and early marriage imply that we value boys above girls; this is not how God wants us to treat each other.

Both boys and girls should be treated with love and respect.

- Quran 60:8 “*God loves the equitable.*”
 - i. We are all fellow human beings, not one physically inferior to the other: “Assuredly, women are the twin halves of men.” (Sahih reported by Abu-Dawud (RA) This is physically, factually true – cutting of the clitoris is equivalent to the cutting off of the entire male penis. We are physically wired very similarly, just constructed differently! Allah wants us to act according to the truth, and FGC is not in line with this Quranic ideal. In other words, gender inequality is not Islamic.
- Acts such as FGC punish the innocent in the absence of a crime—which is an injustice before Allah. The Prophet did not recommend it for any of the women in his house, nor did he approve of the practice when he saw it being done.
 - i. **Hadith of Ummu-Attiya:** This is the *Hadith* most commonly used to link FGC to Islam. The *Hadith* relates that the Prophet said to a woman of Medina, a circumciser called Ummu-Attiyah, “O Umm `Attiyyah, ‘*ashimmi*’ and do not exaggerate; as doing so will preserve the fairness of the woman’s face and satisfy the husband.” As one Islamic scholar noted, one line of this *hadith* attempts to express the reaction of the Prophet to the screaming of the girl being circumcised. “The Prophet held his head and shared her agony” for a while—meaning he disagreed with this pre-Islamic, harmful traditional practice. Cognizant of the

- ii. contextual interpretation of the Hadith, other scholars believe that during that time, the Prophet was not authoritative enough to strongly denounce such widely tolerated traditional practice.
- **Quran 4:124** *“But the believers who do good works, both men and women, shall enter paradise.”*
 - i. Men and women are equal in the sight of God.
 - ii. FGC is a practice that can harm a girl for the rest of her life – affecting her ability to enjoy a relationship with her husband, and often making childbirth complicated and unbearable.

Key Facts

- Female Genital Cutting (FGC) is illegal in our country.
- FGC is not healthy circumcision; it is instead like removing the entire male member.

Some Quick Tips

- Know that FGC has never been shown to have ANY beneficial effects whatsoever; on the contrary, all studies on the subject show the many detrimental effects of FGC.
- Make the conversation easier by talking about what a healthy marriage and a healthy family looks like and how one way to support one another is making sure that everyone in the family stays healthy. Eliminating FGC is one way to do that

Additional Resources:

For more basic information and **Key Facts** about FGC, see **Module 2: “Teach Yourself”**. For more help on how to talk about FGC or have difficult conversations, see ‘Some Common Questions’ in **Module 1: “Getting Started”**.

Begin the Conversation on Eliminating FGC – “All Human Life has Dignity”

Conversation Four: How can responsible, healthy, and productive communities work to eliminate harmful practices like FGC?

The BIG ideas:

Knowledgeable, responsible, happy, healthy, and productive communities work to eliminate harmful practices like FGC.

- The proven harms of FGC are great, and there are no actual benefits.
 - i. FGC can cause obstetric fistula, a condition causing incontinence of urine or feces, and many other damaging physical and mental issues for the woman affected, including infertility.
 - ii. FGC can cause infections, whether during the procedure or afterwards.
 - iii. FGC has life-long consequences, and can even cause death.
 - iv. FGC does NOT eliminate sexual desire.
- We do not cut off our hands so that we might not steal, for the desire/command to steal comes from the brain and not from the hand.
 - i. Indeed, according to Matthew 5:27-28, sexual sin, or adultery, includes lustful looks and thoughts - which are not removed by cutting the genitalia: “You have heard it said, you shall not commit adultery. But I say to you that everyone who looks at another with lustful intent has already committed adultery in their hearts.” Therefore, cutting the genitalia to prevent sexual immorality does useless, irreversible harm and no good.
 - ii. God commands us not to punish the innocent, but instead to protect them. “Help the weak” (Thessalonians 5:23). Young girls cannot defend themselves properly when others want to harm a part of their body – but we can be a voice for the voiceless by ending the practice in our communities.

The practice of FGC does not just hurt one girl; it hurts the entire community, and robs it of its dignity.

Knowledgeable, responsible, happy, healthy, and productive communities work to eliminate harmful practices like FGC.

- The harms of FGC outweigh the benefits.
 - i. FGC can cause infertility.
 - ii. FGC can cause infections, whether during the procedure or afterwards.
 - iii. FGC has lifelong health consequences, and can lead to death.
- “And if anyone saved a life, it would be as if he/she has saved the life of the whole people” (Quran 5:32).
 - i. There is no question that stopping the practice of FGC saves and greatly improves lives. True heroes in the community are those who combat harmful and deadly practices like FGC.
 - ii. Halting unnecessarily cruel practices like FGC can improve the lives of the whole community – girls who are healthier are happier, and enter into marriages better-prepared to enjoy a good relationship with their husbands.
- It was Iblis (Satan) who said, “Verily I will mislead them and surely arouse in them false desires and I will order them to slit the ears of cattle and indeed I will order them to change the nature created by Allah...” (Quran: 4: 119).
 - i. According to the Quran, any act that amounts to changing Allah’s creation is considered the work of Satan.
- “Allah changes not the condition of a people until they change that which is in their hearts...” (Quran 13:11).
 - i. We cannot make great changes in our communities until we change our thoughts and feelings towards all humans – this means recognizing the full humanity of and showing compassion towards girls and women, as with all people.
 - ii. The practice of FGC does not just hurt one girl; it hurts the entire community, and robs it of its full potential.

Key Facts

- Female Genital Cutting (FGC) is illegal in our country.
- FGC can cause infection, whether from the procedure itself or complications afterwards.
- FGC can cause obstetric fistula, a condition causing incontinence of urine or feces, and many other damaging physical and mental issues for the woman affected.
- FGC makes marital relations and childbirth/delivery extremely painful, due to an excess of scar tissue and an obstructed vaginal opening.
- FGC can cause infant and maternal mortality, due to the obstructed vaginal opening.
- FGC is not healthy circumcision; it is instead like removing the entire male member.

Some Quick Tips

- Recognize that our decisions do not just affect us – they affect our families, loved ones, and all those around us.
- Help your community to understand that this means: FGC similarly does not just affect us. If a daughter or mother dies in childbirth due to FGC, or is shunned due to a fistula, they are less able to work and support our families. We have a responsibility to protect ourselves and those around us.

Additional Resources:

For more basic information and **Key Facts** about FGC, see **Module 2: “Teach Yourself”**. For more help on how to talk about FGC or have difficult conversations, see ‘Some Common Questions’ in **Module 1: “Getting Started.”**