

Why female genital mutilation still exists in modern Singapore

By Yvette Tan
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Image caption

Zarifah (not pictured) was just two weeks old when her mother handed her over to the midwife. Female genital mutilation is carried out by communities around the world. But though it is not commonly associated with modern, cosmopolitan Singapore, it is quietly happening all the time, as the BBC's Yvette Tan writes.

Zarifah Anuar didn't find out she had been circumcised as a child until she was 23. She was just two weeks old when her mother handed her over to her bidan, a traditional midwife, to have part of her clitoris cut.

Years later, a colleague asked her if she had undergone the procedure.

"I answered very confidently that I would know if I had," said Zarifah. "You should ask your mother", she told me."

So she did.

"What was a previously casual and happy mood turned sour and antagonistic very quickly", said Zarifah.

"Did I cry? Was I asleep? Did I wake up?' I asked my mother. She didn't answer and told me the conversation was over."



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More than 200 million women and girls worldwide have been cut

The WHO estimates more than 200 million women and girls worldwide have been cut, varying from a partial nick to a complete removal of the clitoris or sewing-up of the labia.

Most Singaporeans have little idea of the procedure's existence in the city-state, but it is observed, typically among Malay Muslims, who make up some 13% of the total resident population.

Sunat Perempuan, as it is known in Malay, is usually carried out on girls before the age of two, who normally have the tip of the clitoris cut, with a tiny piece of skin sometimes removed.

"Many of my Indian Muslim friends didn't have the procedure done on them, and were shocked that such practices still exist within the Malay community," said Filzah Sumartono, who found out she had undergone the procedure as a baby when she was in her teens.

Singapore has no legal ruling against FGM, but many Muslims take guidance from the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS), a statutory board that provides advice on religious matters to Muslims.

Ibrahim Sawifi of MUIS has said the body "does not condone any procedures which bring harm to the individual", adding that the council has "always held the position that FGM should be avoided".



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Some believe Sunat Perempuan is a compulsory part of Islamic law

But many Malay Muslims, especially amongst the older generations, believe the procedure reduces a woman's libido and decreases the risk of extramarital sexual affairs.

Others believe it is a compulsory part of Islamic law, though it is not listed as mandatory in the Koran.

"I had it done, my daughter had it done, and I would definitely like my granddaughter to do it too," said a 45-year-old Muslim Malay woman the BBC spoke to. "It's something compulsory for us to do in Islam."

Do first, ask later

"If performed, one gets extra merit but if not performed, it is not considered sinful or going against the precepts of Islam," said Dr Maznah Mohamad of the Department of Malay Studies at the National University of Singapore.

"But people are still afraid of going against Islam if they don't subject their young daughter to it."

Yet it is not the procedure itself that many find fault with, but rather the lack of consent that it signifies.

"We start trying to control women's bodies at infancy. It's the first sign to a child that her body is not hers, it's the community's," said Filzah, who is a project co-ordinator at gender equality rights group Aware.

"An infant at two weeks wouldn't know anything at all. How could she possibly consent to anything?" adds Zarifah.

According to her, all the Malay Muslim girls in Singapore she knows have undergone this procedure. All of them were unaware of it until they asked their parents.



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ZARIFAH ANUAR

Image caption [REDACTED]

"I now know just how much my body is not mine," says Zarifah

"Parents should be responsible for keeping their children safe, this goes completely against that. There is a part of me that regrets asking, because I now know just how much my body is not mine," she said.

But not everyone agrees.

"There are many things parents do without the consent of the child, out of love and their best interests." said 28-year-old civil servant Siti*, who also underwent the procedure as a baby.

"What parent would intentionally put their child through harm?"

"I have no knowledge of how different things would feel with or without [the procedure] but I can feel what needs to be felt," Siti added. "It doesn't make me less of a woman."

What all the women can agree on, is that more awareness is needed on the subject.

"The community itself is divided," said Siti.

"MUIS must create a conversation regarding this topic to help the community move forward and equip young parents with the knowledge they need to make an informed decision."

"The Muslim Malay community needs to talk about the issue and understand and accept that it is against the human rights of girls," said Zarifah. "I refuse to accept that this conversation is over."

**Names have been changed*