



The link between halal food certification in Australia and female genital mutilation in Indonesia

FGM is not exclusively an Islamic practice, but it is mandated in Indonesia

Some Australian halal-certification funds have been proven to go to a leading endorser of FGM in Indonesia. Australian halal-certification organisations linked to this endorser still enjoy charitable status.

Dee Ellis

**Senate Candidate,
Secular Party of Australia**

Introduction

Nine out of the top ten countries that practice female genital mutilation (FGM), in terms of prevalence by population, are Muslim majority nations according to statistics released by [UNICEF](#)¹ and combined with [PEW Research Center](#) religious population data. These top ten countries are all situated in Africa, and statistics show that the majority of their females aged 15 to 49 years old have suffered FGM—as many as 98% in Somalia.

Recently, however, [UNICEF](#) has also released figures about Indonesia. The Indonesian government has only just started collecting data on FGM on a broad scale, and only on girls up to 11 years of age. The figures for women aged 15 to 49 were not available for Indonesia; however, the results are still disturbing. Some 49% of Indonesian girls had undergone FGM. Given Indonesia is the world's most populous Muslim-majority nation, home to approximately 209 million Muslims², in 2016 UNICEF ranked Indonesia third in the list of countries that practise FGM³ and concluded that a huge proportion of the world's FGM sufferers come from Indonesia, destroying the myth that FGM is purely an African practice.

In February 2016, [Marie Claire](#)⁴ ran an article outlining the scope of the problem there, following on from the magazine's editor, Abigail Haworth, witnessing a mass FGM ceremony performed on Indonesian schoolgirls in 2006, which was organised and paid for by an Indonesian Islamic foundation that runs mass FGM events annually.⁵

According to the [World Health Organization](#)⁶, Female Genital Mutilation comprises various procedures that include damage to, and sometimes complete or partial removal of, a girl's clitoris (clitoridectomy), labia (excision) or vaginal opening (infibulation). The term 'female circumcision' has been discouraged by the WHO as misleading, because FGM is not similar to male circumcision. It provides no health benefits but many detrimental effects, so is more comparable to the female

equivalent of castration⁷. In the most severe cases, a girl's entire clitoris and labia are removed and her vaginal lips sewn together, leaving only a small orifice for menstruation and urination.

This barbaric procedure is often carried out under primitive conditions, usually while the girl is held down or restrained. It leads to a lifetime of health problems, increases the difficulty of childbirth and the likelihood of infant and maternal death during labour, and can make sex both unpleasant and often painful. Shockingly, the latter is the real reason for the practice's persistence—it is performed solely to control women's sexuality.

In her book *Desert Flower*⁸, Somalian-born model and UNFPA Goodwill Ambassador Waris Dirie gave her own account of the suffering she endured at the age of five.

'Mama tied a blindfold over my eyes. The next thing I felt my flesh was being cut away. I heard the blade sawing back and forth through my skin. The pain between my legs was so intense I wished I would die.'

UNICEF estimates that at least 200 million women worldwide have undergone FGM. Female genital mutilation has been condemned by the UN as a human rights violation, and consequently the UN has adopted a [resolution](#)⁹ to eliminate FGM worldwide.

Unfortunately, Australians are unwittingly complicit in the practice, as some of the funds raised by halal certification of products sold in Australia are funding Indonesian-based endorsers of FGM.

Halal is a set of religious rules for Muslims relating to food purity and what is permissible to eat, yet despite just over 2% of Australians identifying as Muslim, many Australian food producers are paying Islamic organisations for halal certification.

1 UNICEF. (2016) Based on DHS, MICS and other nationally representative surveys, 2004–2015. Retrieved from: <http://data.unicef.org/child-protection/fgmc.html#sthash.gui9F-4wD.dpuf>

2 <http://www.mapsofworld.com/world-top-ten/world-top-ten-countries-with-largest-muslim-populations-map.html>

3 UNICEF (2016) Retrieved from http://www.unicef.org/media/media_90033.html

4 Proudfoot, J. (2016, February 9). 'Recent Figures Reveal "FGM Is Not Just An African Issue."' *Marie Claire*. Retrieved from <http://www.marieclaire.co.uk/blogs/551811/recent-figures-reveal-fgm-is-not-just-an-african-issue.html#GV8Vg52sVwBABAqI.99>

5 Haworth, A. (2012, November 18). 'The day I saw 248 girls suffering genital mutilation'. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2012/nov/18/female-genital-mutilation-circumcision-indonesia>

6 WHO (2016) Fact Sheet 241. 'Female Genital Mutilation'. Retrieved from <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs241/en/>

7 The analogy is not exact. Castration in males prevents reproduction, but does not necessarily impair sexual function. FGM does not prevent reproduction, but its *purpose* is to impair sexual function.

8 Dirie, W. (1998). *Desert Flower*. HarperCollins, New York.

9 UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/67/146. (2012, December 20). 'Resolution on Ending Female Genital Mutilation'. Retrieved from http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/csw52/AC_resolutions/Final%20L2%20ending%20female%20genital%20mutilation%20-%20advance%20unedited.pdf

Australian consumers, paying for halal items via their grocery purchases, especially meat, contribute to local or international companies that pay sometimes exorbitant fees for certification to groups that actively encourage FGM.

In 2015, the ABC's *Four Corners* '[The Truth About Halal](#)' program found that a significant proportion of Australian halal-certification funds are distributed to Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI)—Indonesia's top halal authority and a leading endorser of FGM. MUI, also known as the Indonesian Ulema Council, is a quasi-governmental body recognised as Indonesia's most senior Islamic group, making halal certification fees a nice little earner for the Indonesian government, which legislated that all products sold in Indonesia must be halal certified.

Even more concerning is that MUI has issued a fatwa stating that 'female circumcision' (often a euphemism for FGM) is a religious obligation for Muslim women as part of Sharia (Islamic law), and should be performed to control women's sexual desire. Additionally, MUI managed to get an earlier (2006) ban on FGM overturned in Indonesia in 2008¹⁰.

It is important to note that the variation in adherence to FGM in different Islamic countries can depend on which particular school of Islamic law predominates. There are four different schools of Islamic law, based on the Hadith (sayings and deeds of the Prophet). They have much in common, but there are some differences. In three, FGM is considered an 'option', but in the fourth—the Salafi'i school of Islamic law, originating in Yemen, which is predominant in Indonesia—it is mandated. (For a discussion of the different schools of Islamic law, and the relevance of Salafi'i to Indonesia, see *The Third Choice: Islam, Dhimmitude and Freedom* by Mark Durie.) A Salafi'i interpretation is now being more strictly enforced, which helps explain why FGM is such a growing problem in Indonesia.

Salafi'i MUI, as Indonesia's top halal authority, runs the [World Halal Food Council](#), which has its headquarters in Jakarta. The World Halal Found Council has also publicly endorsed Sharia (Islamic law that severely oppresses women and other minority groups, denying them their rights).

But it is not only through their weekly grocery shop that the average Australian consumer might be unknowingly funding Islamic bodies that potentially support FGM; alarmingly, a number of high-profile Australian halal certifier organisations also have charitable status! For instance, The [Australian Federation of Islamic Councils \(AFIC\)](#), Australia's peak Muslim body which was recently renamed Muslims Australia, is a registered charity and is thus exempt from the reporting and tax obligations of most Australian businesses. In fact, none of the organisations that currently certify halal meat in Australia are public companies, so they are exempt from having to publicly report the earnings they receive from halal certification. However, voluntary financial statements from the AFIC revealed that in 2012 it made \$647,722 profit from halal-certification fees¹¹. The change of name to Muslims Australia was in part due to the AFIC's involvement in a long list of controversies, including accepting money from Libyan despot Muammar Gaddafi¹², investigations into some \$9 million worth of misappropriated school funds for the Malek Fahd school (formerly administered by the AFIC, which later [refused](#) to repay it¹³), and the organisation's support of controversial cleric Sheikh [Taj El-Din Hilaly](#), who compared women who had been sexually assaulted to 'meat left out for cats' in 2006¹⁴.

The AFIC also maintains some dubious links to MUI, having offered money to MUI (although denying it was a bribe), for a bigger cut in the Indonesian halal market.¹⁵

Despite their often unsavoury connections, unfortunately our government perceives these halal-certifying bodies to be as worthy of charitable status, and therefore as deserving of substantial tax exemptions as, say, the Cancer Council Australia or Clean Up Australia.

11 <http://www.acnc.gov.au/RN52B75O?ID=6E1DECE6-1D82-495D-99BC-F1B713EE25D3&noleft=1>

12 White, P. (1987, December 15). 'Gaddafi Sending \$140,000 A Year To Australian Muslims'. *Sydney Morning Herald*. Retrieved from http://newsstore.fairfax.com.au/apps/viewDocument.ac?docID=news871215_0075_4715

13 Hall, L. (2015, October 19). 'Islamic school refuses to repay millions to Department of Education'. *Sydney Morning Herald*. Retrieved from <http://www.smh.com.au/national/education/islamic-school-refuses-to-repay-millions-to-department-of-education-20151014-gk8rrs.html>

14 (2006). 'Ethnic leaders condemn Muslim cleric'. *The Age*. Retrieved from <http://www.theage.com.au/news/national/ethnic-leaders-condemn-muslim-cleric/2006/10/26/1161749223822.html>

15 *Four Corners* (2015). 'Ikebal Patel says MUI officials had to be kept happy'. ABC. Retrieved from <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-09-07/ikebal-patel-says-mui-officials-had-to-be-kept/6754172>

10 Afrianty, D. (2016, February 17). 'Indonesia under pressure over female genital cutting'. *Indonesia at Melbourne. The University of Melbourne*. Retrieved from <http://indonesiaat-melbourne.unimelb.edu.au/indonesia-under-pressure-over-female-genital-cutting/>

It would be simplistic to blame Islam for all of the female genital mutilation occurring in the world when it is clear there are also appallingly high rates of FGM among Christian populations in a number of African countries. Yet FGM doesn't appear to be widespread in Christian communities in nations outside of Africa, despite FGM remaining a significant problem in Islamic countries worldwide. While some Islamic doctrine endorses FGM, there is no equivalent in Christian teaching.

Even African nations that have a high rate of Christian FGM sufferers (e.g. Eritrea and Ethiopia) have links to Islam (either in having large Muslim populations or being situated close to Islamic countries). For instance, the populations of both Eritrea and Ethiopia are more than one-third Muslim. Ethiopia, while considered a predominantly Christian country, still has a higher Muslim population than neighbouring Somalia, which is more than 98% Muslim. Ethiopia has a much larger overall population than Somalia. It is, however, also true that a large number of FGM sufferers in Eritrea and Ethiopia are undeniably Christian, and other African countries that lack sizeable Muslim populations still practice FGM at high rates. Also, at least one African country that has a large Muslim population—Niger—has extremely low rates of Muslim FGM sufferers.

In 2013, UNICEF acknowledged, 'While the majority of cut girls and women are Muslim, other religious groups also practise FGM/C.' But more and more evidence is mounting that reveals Islamic links to FGM, such as the Indonesian statistics. And some Islamic nations thought to have a low incidence of FGM, such as Iraq¹⁶ and Malaysia¹⁷, have turned out to have a much higher prevalence than thought.

The point of this report is not to lay all the blame for FGM on Islamic communities, but rather to point out the appallingly high prevalence of FGM within Islamic nations, which must be acknowledged and investigated.

The statistics prove that whilst FGM is not an *exclusively* Islamic problem, it is a *predominantly* Islamic problem—one we are sure many Australians are shocked to find they might be inadvertently contributing to if they buy halal groceries. Unfortunately, even despite the [2015 Senate Inquiry into Third-Party Food Certification](#), which recommended a single certifier and better labelling of halal food domestically, it is particularly difficult for Australian consumers to avoid funding halal certification. Most meat and grocery items sold domestically within Australia have been halal certified. However, many of them (particularly

meat) are not labelled halal as they are surplus to the export market. Consumers must push for greater transparency, via labelling laws, if they wish to make the ethical choice to avoid halal. Currently, consumers have little alternative, and it might be that producers are being strong-armed into certifying if they wish to export or as part of a larger halal production chain (that is, in order to be certified halal, a product that contains several ingredients must ensure those ingredients are also halal; even some transport companies have been pressured into obtaining certification). Even the Senate Inquiry agreed that halal certification had been 'unscrupulously exploited' in Australia, and that some practices were little more than a rort¹⁸.

Some proponents of halal certification argue that it opens up lucrative export markets to Australian businesses. But would we turn a blind eye to millions of men being castrated to help our trade balance, or are we only comfortable with this when it happens to women?

Pushing for a single certifying body to cater to the 2% of domestic Australian Muslims who require halal would help ensure certification fees were not misused.

We are constantly being told that the Federal government needs to save money. Would it not, therefore, be better for religious exemptions for halal certifiers to end, and for any profits to be channelled into areas that require attention, such as healthcare—something that benefits all Australians, no matter what their religion. After all, the medical establishment's motto is, 'First, do no harm.'

Even being more mindful of not contributing to the coffers of halal certifiers may not be enough. Shouldn't western women be more actively involved in anti-FGM activism? We have a social responsibility to our Muslim sisters, whether they live in Australia or overseas, to fund only secular charities that do not have links to Islamic organisations which promote FGM and that have no religious agenda or history of exploiting women. Let's stop funding activities and religions that harm women worldwide. Instead, let our money do the talking and give our dollars to those who do respect women's rights.

Request the full report from dee@secular.org.au or visit the Secular Party of Australia's website: <https://www.secular.org.au/>

16 Human Rights Watch. (2010, June 16). 'They Took Me and Told Me Nothing': Female Genital Mutilation in Iraqi Kurdistan. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/report/2010/06/16/they-took-me-and-told-me-nothing/female-genital-mutilation-iraqi-kurdistan>

17 Kasztelan, M. (2015, February 20). 'Female Circumcision Is Becoming More Popular in Malaysia'. *VICE*. Retrieved from <https://www.vice.com/read/female-circumcision-is-becoming-more-popular-in-malaysia>

18 Aston, H. (2015, December 2). 'Nothing more than scammers': Senate committee calls for halal overhaul. *The Age*. Retrieved from <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/nothing-more-than-scammers-senate-committee-calls-for-halal-overhaul-20151201-glcrl.html>