

# CULTURAL PATHOLOGY OF MALE CIRCUMCISION IN IRAN :FOCUSING ON CHILDREN'S RIGHTS AND THE RIGHT TO THE BODY

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## Abstract

*Circumcision is one of the most significant events in a boy's early life. Even though this ancient ritual violates the rights of children, it is still practised in some societies, such as Iran. Despite this, adequate scientific understanding of this practice, its challenging dimensions and its obvious and hidden consequences have not been developed. In traditional societies, this operation on the private part of a child's body is performed alongside a special ritual to reduce the child's anxiety as he enters adulthood. However, in modern societies, every person under the age of 18 is considered a child; thus, any change to his body is without valid consent. Additionally, the public performance of circumcision ceremonies has negative educational impacts. In this article, two main goals have been pursued: firstly, to analyse the cultural and religious dimensions of male circumcision in Iranian society, and, secondly, to objectively analyse this issue in terms of the rights of the child and the right to bodily integrity, to help formulate effective programmes and policies to reduce or eliminate its negative consequences. To do this, in addition to analysing field research using a qualitative methodology and a literature review, targeted interviews were conducted with a number of circumcised Iranians living both inside and outside of the country, as well as interviews with some experts. The role of religion has been crucial to the endurance of circumcision, as shown by the empirical data and the available historical documents. The practice has been performed throughout history by individuals who have no other justification than that they are obeying religious orders. Some people and social groups are persuaded to the point where, while accepting the potential risks of circumcision, they carry it out on medical advice because of an institutionalised belief about the benefits of circumcision that originated in religion and culture. Even though the majority of medical defences are disseminated by experts in the field and through specific channels like scientific and research articles in the media, these arguments are primarily the product of misinformation campaigns meant to conceal the financial motivations of institutions like heavily commercialised circumcision clinics. This shows how the relationship of medicine with the economic mafia's advertising dominates the cultural/religious industries and confirms that the medical discourse is influenced by ideological structures of power to such an extent that it adjusts its functions in collaboration and interaction with them. This discourse uses health to legitimise its business, propagating social attitudes to accept circumcision as a natural and necessary practice, rather than a social construct.*

**Keywords:** *male circumcision, the right to the body, children's rights, cultural pathology, Iranian society*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Circumcision is an ancient ritual that, despite violating various aspects of human rights, is still widespread in modern societies, making it a necessary topic for study by various academic disciplines, including sociology, anthropology and law. In my research and studies, I have always tried to provide a more inclusive understanding of customs and the meanings of customs and culture, while directly representing the voices of the stakeholders - both the supporters and the opponents of social practices and harmful traditions - and to find solutions appropriate to the

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current situation that could be applied in a culturally safe and sound way.

Therefore, the goal of this research is not to support or condemn the practice of circumcision, but to propose strategies that are in line with children's rights and the human right to one's own bodily integrity, taking into account some of the taboo and unaddressed aspects of the subject, and possible effective steps towards improving the condition of this social group.

The results of this study mark the start of fresh, unbiased research in this area and will hopefully inspire people in related fields, including law, medicine, psychology and sociology, to question, observe and research the topic, giving it more consideration in their academic and professional frameworks.

## 2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

One of the most common and significant childhood events for boys is circumcision, which is practised in a significant portion of modern societies. The phenomenon and its problematic dimensions are not, however, the subject of adequate scientific knowledge. Despite its great importance, the subject frequently receives little to no attention. It is unclear why the practice has persisted to this point and why it is rarely questioned, given the scope of the issue and its unquestioned acceptance in Islamic, Jewish and occasionally Christian societies.

The act of circumcision, as it relates to the human body, falls under the umbrella of personal freedoms, ownership and one's 'right to the body' - an idea that has not been well received by researchers. Such views have likely been influenced by the religious significance of circumcision in Iran and how it has become a matter of identity to the men of that nation. In such a situation, circumcision is not viewed socially as abnormal or problematic, but as normal and expected. It is not viewed as misguided because sociologists, anthropologists and lawyers have not focused much attention on it. It should be noted that, especially after the establishment of a theocracy in Iran, problematising this practice may put sociologists in the position of being seen as critical of Islamic law, which will eventually cause problems for them.

Circumcision has biological, cultural, social, psychological, legal and other effects on children - and the present and future status of human society depends on children leading healthy, normal and equitable lives. Children account for about one-third of Iranian communities, and any neglect of their problems often extends to a neglect of the entire community's problems.

Aiming to provide the necessary groundwork for any action, planning or social policy developed on the topic, investigations like the one at hand seek to understand the issues more scientifically. Furthermore, accountable organisations like the Ministry of Health and the Physicians' Society are required to dissociate themselves unilaterally from the mode of propagation and promotion of circumcision and to share with the public the various perspectives on and criticisms of the practice. They must also disseminate the most recent information available.

It is essential to establish thematic protocols and thorough guidelines for any action related to children, including circumcision, and take into account all legal, health, medical and social aspects so that the child's rights are upheld by that action. Unfortunately, it appears that none of the relevant organisations in the country are interested in taking on such a task, and the only way to somewhat bridge the gap is by conducting research.

Unlike in Iran, much effort has been made in other countries in the last decade to inform people at the global and regional levels. Many former practitioners of circumcision are now strongly opposed to it, and the tradition of circumcision is in decline in many countries. A powerful factor in this process is that these communities are open to discussing circumcision because of a level of freedom of the media, both print and electronic. However, the most significant changes have come about through government intervention and the support of non-governmental organisations working with government agencies.

This article pursues two main goals. The first is to reveal the cultural and religious dimensions of the practice of male circumcision in societies such as Iran. Although this phenomenon can be defined as religious, often rooted in the beliefs of two Semitic religions (Judaism and Islam), some health justifications have caused the scope of its practice to move beyond religious boundaries into



other societies. Some statistics show that, in about 90 countries of the world, circumcision is performed on at least 30% of boys (Morris et al., 2016), many of whom are not considered Muslims or Jews.

Although these statistics show that it is an important practice in different societies, it does not mean that it is a correct or useful one. Many opponents, including children's-rights activists, have labelled it a violation of children's rights to bodily integrity and have claimed it has psychological effects and medical consequences.

The second goal of this article is to scientifically and objectively understand the issue of male circumcision and help formulate effective programmes and policies to eliminate any negative effects on Iranian society. With this in mind, cultural justifications for the continued practice of circumcision are discussed, with a focus on children's rights and the right to one's body, as well as an assessment of the research participants' experiences.

Several circumcised Iranians living in and outside of Iran, as well as some experts, were interviewed for this study, using a qualitative method of inquiry. The information gathered from those interviews was then analysed.

### 3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Several key questions, including the following, have been put forth to help this research reach its objectives.

What are the cultural origins of male circumcision in Iran?

How do children's rights, especially the right to bodily integrity, factor into the performance of male circumcision?

What are the common characteristics and dimensions of the experiences of the participants in this research?

What suggestions can be made to reduce or lessen circumcision's negative effects on the body and mind as well as any other problematic consequences?

### 4. CULTURAL ORIGINS IN IRAN

Circumcision has been around for 15 thousand years. One of the earliest surgeries ever performed on children was this one. The practice has been seen by explorers and scientists examining mummified Egyptian bodies. It is mentioned or commanded in the sacred books of both Muslims and Jews. Additionally, it has persisted in various regions of the world to this day, such as among some African-Americans, Australian tribes and other tribes without any major religious affiliations.

One theory of how the practice of circumcision spread into other geographic regions is through the conflicts and conquests of ancient civilisations - the dominant peoples' efforts to spread their cultures, and, in some cases, the effects of the defeated society on the winners. As the intersection of the three continents - Africa, Asia and Europe - Egypt was historically the focus of disputes between great conquerors. According to legend, Cambogia, the son of Cyrus, conquered Egypt's capital city of Memphis in 525 BC and annexed it to the Achaemenid Empire. He then decided to create an alliance between Egypt and Iran and was crowned according to the Egyptian ceremonies. The Achaemenid Government continued to grow under Cambogia's successor Darius I, followed by Xerxes. At Cyrus' request, Darius gave Egyptians freedom to practise their religion and live private lives. Archaeological evidence and excavations attest to the peaceful coexistence and proper human relations between the two civilisations of Iran and Egypt during the Achaemenid era; without them, the Iranian occupation of Egypt would not have lasted for 203 years. During the nearly two centuries of contact between Iran and Egypt, the two nations not only acquired extensive cultural overlaps and a shared language, but also shared the highly developed medical knowledge of the ancient Egyptians. According to historical accounts, the oldest known medical document is a cuneiform inscription carved on clay that was found in the Mesopotamian valleys and dates back three thousand years before Christ (Aslani, 2018).

There is no evidence of circumcision of either gender in Iranian texts, records or other ancient works. Circumcision and other practices like female genital mutilation/cutting are not mentioned



in the Avesta or other Pahlavi texts from ancient Iran. Therefore, it would appear, from the available evidence, that circumcision was not practised in Iran before the arrival of Islam and that male and female circumcision became commonplace only after that time. In some historical sources, it is even claimed that a number of Iranians who converted to Islam at the time of its introduction to Iran were not circumcised. The Iranian general was not circumcised in Mamun and al-Mu'tasim's court, for example, as was the case with Afshin. Afshin did not have himself circumcised, according to Ahmed bin Abi Dawad, because it would harm his health (Towhidi, 1964). Currently, Muslims make up a sizable portion of circumcised men worldwide, along with adherents to other religions like Judaism, and statistics show that, in nations such as Iran where Islam is the state religion, more than 99% of men are circumcised. Muslims continue to seriously practise circumcision globally and have the highest prevalence of circumcision overall (69%), despite the uncertainties surrounding the practice in the Islamic faith - the Qur'an lacks a direct command (Morris et al., 2016).

In addition to Islamic religious convictions, which act as the primary driver and were crucial to the spread of circumcision in Iran, geographic/regional characteristics and international relations should be considered. Iran is a country in the Middle East with a long history of diplomatic ties to Egypt, the primary birthplace of circumcision. Consequently, according to the most recent estimates, these three elements (i.e. the country's geographic location, its ties to Egypt and the spread of Islam) meant that circumcision was widely practised in Iran at various points in its history. In Iran, 99.7% of men have been cut (Morris et al., 2016).

Understanding the significance of male circumcision in Iranian culture - where circumcision is seen as a crucial component of becoming the ideal Muslim man - can be achieved by reading historical books. It is undeniable that a Muslim man's circumcision is important in Iranian marriage. The marriage of a Muslim woman to a circumcised Muslim man is the only one trustworthy and sanctioned by all the Islamic faiths, and Iranian Muslim women and their families place a lot of importance on their husbands' circumcisions.

Corners of Iran's Social History: Behind the Curtains of the Harem Palace records the event of the circumcision of one of the court teenagers:

Today is the circumcision ceremony of Aziz al-Sultan (Melijak II) and I am recording the details of it. The boy is about 18 years old. Because of the intensity of the King's mercy to him, he has not been circumcised and whenever his parents were demanding that after all, our son should finally be a Muslim and if not circumcised, he is not considered a member of the nation of Islam, His Majesty responded that if the Russian emperor did not circumcise, is he not considered the king of the Russian country?! Until recently, when Aziz al-Sultan wrote to the Shah saying that if I am your son-in-law, then why don't you give me your daughter, Akhtar al-Dawlah? They were supposed to have a wedding in Rabi'a al-Awal month. The girl's mother, Soghra Khanum, had messaged that if he wanted to be my son-in-law, he should circumcise first. Love of power and desire for the girl prompted Aziz al-Sultan to submit to be circumcised (Azad, 1998).

The primary and most significant driving force behind Iran's continued practice of circumcision has been adherence to religious belief and social and cultural norms. When Islam arrived in Iran, it spread quickly, as did the adoption of Islamic values. Understanding some historical events is therefore made easier when one is familiar with circumcision and its relationship to Islam.

Studying hadiths, stories and religious directives from religious authorities leads to the conclusion (by both Sunni and Shi'a Muslims) that it is necessary to uphold Abrahamic traditions, including circumcision. Verses 123 of Sura al-Nahl and 161 of Sura al-An'am are cited. However, it appears that Islamic religious laws governing circumcision are derived from hadiths and legal judgments that have their roots in the customs and ways of life of Medina's Jews at the time of the Prophet Muhammad. We must examine the time and place of the prophet at the start of Islam to comprehend this.

The 'establishment-compositional' and 'signature-affirmational' types of Islamic law came into being at the time. According to verses from the Qur'an, the prophet created laws known as 'mandatory establishment laws'. However, the prophet also approved certain native laws that were



already in place, after making some corrections, adjustments and modifications. Almost all Islamic religious rules - even prayers, fasting, hajj and many criminal laws relating to women - existed in the pre-Islamic and Arab traditions of Hijaz. Islam made changes in these cases, rejecting some and confirming others in full or with amendments and notes (Yousefi Eshkevari, 2018). Circumcision is in this 'signature-affirmational' category of Islamic law.

Through the course of Iranian history, the practice of circumcision had been linked to religious, cultural, economic, legal, historical, and medical and health functions; therefore, it is significant in terms of structures and institutions. Religious and ethnic acceptance, the gender identity of men, patriarchy and men's interests are highlighted when explaining the social functions of circumcision; however, commercial reasons persist in terms of circumcision as a job and expertise.

One topic that can help us examine the role of circumcision in the lives of Iranians is the economy of identity. Some economists claim that economics is the science of choice and that one of the factors influencing our preferences and choices is the set of beliefs we have internalised. Preferences are derived from norms, which we define as social rules about how people should behave in different situations (Akerlof, 2015). The importance placed on performing rituals and adhering to religious principles creates strong influences, to the point where some people start to feel they have no choice but to continue down the path of tradition, even if it means having to put up with the pain and suffering that comes with it (Narkevich I. A, et al., 2021).

Some of the most significant reasons for the continued use of circumcision in societies like Iran are the lack of adequate and thorough information, prejudiced views of the practice, and the dominance of culture, tradition and religion. In addition to all this, the role of social pressure in the continuation of the practice should not be ignored. Even if parents have given this issue some thought, they might still act to save their child from social pressure in a culture where not being circumcised is seen as a departure from religion, a disgrace and a source of ridicule for boys.

What is certain is that some doctors choose to ignore the potential injuries and complications associated with circumcision because of the lucrative nature of the procedure in the medical sector - particularly considering that the Iranian Government approves of the practice, and the necessary permits are issued in such a way that a government seal of approval can be seen in clinics equipped for circumcision, as well as in sophisticated and expensive facilities.

What is regrettable in this situation is the violation of children's rights, especially their rights to health and bodily integrity. The removal of the most personal part of the child's body during infancy and their powerlessness - they are not only unable to make decisions, but also they have no understanding of the procedure - have caused many criticisms. It is important to remember that the definition of 'childhood' varies between societies, but those definitions generally include 'lack of maturity' and 'ignorance of one's rights'. One of the main reasons for disregarding and undervaluing children's rights is the belief that children are the property of their parents and they belong to them in some way. In the most severe cases, such as violence against children and, on rare occasions, female genital cutting, children suffer from a wide range of illegal and punishable activities. It is critical to remember that a child can suffer physical and psychological harm as a result of parental neglect or general inattention. In the long run, other groups and institutions that the person joins, such as friendship groups, workplaces and schools, may be affected.

Even though the Qur'an claims that man was created without flaws, the deep-rooted history of, and religious belief in, circumcision; the conquest of culture and tradition; the business of the circumcision industry; the medical mafia; the circumcision ceremony and its associated income; the religious emphasis; and the legal loopholes are some of the factors that obstruct change and reform.

## 5. CULTURAL CONTEXTS FOR THE PERSISTENCE OF CIRCUMCISION

Examining the justifications for the continued practice of circumcision across the globe reveals that, in some ethnic groups, there are regional traditions; in some places, religious orders; in other places, medical recommendations; and in many cases, a combination of all three elements are thought to be important contributors to the practice's expansion and survival today. This



demonstrates how the phenomenon of circumcision is dominated by medical, traditional and religious discourses and how each of these discourses objectifies it. The religious legitimacy of circumcision and its connection with power structures and mechanisms is a point for reflection.

### 5.1. Ethnic Grounds, Social Traditions And Norms

Mehdi Feizi, an economist at Ferdowsi University of Mashhad and the translator of Identity Economy, in our interview comments on the prevalence of circumcision in cultures where traditions and norms are highly valued:

There are times when you are confronted with a society that, for very broad historical reasons, has diversity and social classifications like ethnicities. Examples of these societies include Eastern societies generally and Middle Eastern countries specifically. Many other nations around the world lack the level of ethnic density that exists in Afghanistan, Iran, or among some African tribes. We must therefore accept that some societies have a greater variety and variance. Each group has its own identity, and it seems that when everyone tries to accentuate their identity further, this identity dispersion, identity fragmentation, or identity conflict becomes more serious.

The statistics on circumcised men in different countries of the world show that traditions are very important to some multi-identity societies, but in others the people are not simply drowned by customs. For example, if we consider the case of Canada, despite its diversity of ethnic groups and identities, only 31.9% of men in that country are circumcised. Dr Mehdi Feizi, in his analysis during the interview emphasises on the differences between Eastern and Western societies:

Circumcision as it is practised in the East is a historical and evolutionary phenomenon, while in the West it is an emerging one, and these two cannot simply be compared. They are hugely different. In the West, there is a form of multiculturalism, but it is only a shell, and when you go inside it, you will see that there is homogeneity. On the other hand, in the East, it is not like this at all. For example, in Canadian society, you do not take gender identity seriously at all, while in the East, gender identity is serious, or you do not take ethnicity seriously at all, but this issue is very serious in the East. They may make such a claim, but ultimately, if you want to be successful in that society, you have to 'integrate'. Integrating means you have to settle in that society and its dominant culture, so you have to put aside all your differences. By the way, the point is exactly that, the condition of survival in the West is to forget the identity factors, and in the East, the exact opposite is true, and you have to make the identity factors very serious and critical.

He also points to the pressures that are imposed on people in the form of 'shame' if they fail to follow the norms of society. This shame is created through social distinction and binary categories of society and thus is a constructed emotion. In the case of circumcision, social distinction is applied through the binary distinction of circumcised and uncircumcised. The uncircumcised are rejected and marginalised by the norms of the same society. Here, social exclusion and social construction are two explanatory theories. Feizi adds:

If someone chooses not to perform social rituals or traditional ceremonies or religious rules related to the category assigned to others, that person will inevitably experience some form of social pressure. Since he or she has not adhered to the social norm, so to speak, it is called social shame. This is how it manifests. The psychological aspects of this reveal themselves soon after and cause the person to reduce the psychological cost[;] i.e. they will reduce the amount of consumption to reduce this cost, and they will agree with the crowd no matter if the work is good or bad.

He continues to discuss which groups of societies are more likely to give in to these rituals and traditions:

It tends to happen more with minorities in general because someone who is a minority is afraid of being left out. Therefore, he would have to give in to these rituals much more, and if he does not give in to this ritual, it will be much less accepted. Now, this minority can be ethnic, skin colour, gender or anything else.

Circumcision is often so closely tied to the attitudes and beliefs of people in mainstream society that most members of society define it as a natural practice. They believe that circumcision is necessary to become a man and that no one can be a man without being circumcised. In those



societies, circumcision is seen as a symbol of virility and masculinity, and the act of circumcision, although a social construct, is understood to be natural. It seems that, in this context, the theories of the sociology of gender are explanatory. One of the men involved in this research, who is 65 years old, holds a secondary-education diploma and lives in Canada, states:

My understanding was that everyone should do it; that is, it was an action that everyone should do to some extent so that we could deal with this issue more easily; that is, we used to hear before that, for example, were you circumcised or not - for example, if you were one of the uncircumcised, that means that - so-called - that you did not become a man in reality, or that it was a sign - something - that indicated the growth of a person. That is, it evoked a form of value in the mind. Although we knew that there was a cut and there was pain; then, finally, the shape with that extra skin was not acceptable, because babies were like that. When we were at that age, if someone would look into it, they would understand that we are not grown up. This means that we were not reluctant to do it. We knew that something must be done (Hassan, H. H. F. 2021).

One of the key reasons and motivations for men in nations like Iran seeking out circumcision is to be in tune with society and to avoid being scandalised. The problem of dishonour, arising from the text of the traditions and norms that prevail in societies, has always narrowed the opportunities for the emergence of social differences and actions. It seems that social approval theory, mass society theory, and social conformity theory apply here.

The statements of the 65-year-old Iranian man living in Toronto are expressive in this context:

I mean, this was not my opinion; that is, it is still the same. That is, we did not recognise it as a harmful act. Then, even in terms of health, that member was better. It was another thing that was so unusual in our society - if this surgery was not done. Because we would be called into question later. I mean, because it's so common - and how can I say it? Maybe the word 'stigma' doesn't express it very well, but that's it. Circumcision was a normal and harmless operation that had to be done; otherwise, we would have trouble with people.

The sum of these signs indicates the power of social traditions and norms, as a result of which many people, without finding a specific and clear reason for their actions, succumb and follow in the footsteps of previous generations.

For a better understanding of this, we can investigate the answers given to a general questionnaire for this study. Most of those who responded to this questionnaire mentioned social norms, customs and traditions when explaining the reasons for circumcising themselves or their children. A 35-year-old woman from Javanrood in Kermanshah province says:

I have two boys and I circumcised them both before they were two months old. Usually people around us circumcise their children at that age. About why I [circumcised them]: to be honest, it wasn't like I sat and thought and then did something. This subject is so accepted and normal in the Sharia and the customs of our society that no one thinks about it. It's like asking someone, 'Why should we eat with a spoon?' Because of the support Sharia and the custom of circumcision have received so far, and the positive attitude they have concerning health, this operation is quite normal and accepted in our society.

The influence traditions, cultures and customs have on people's ways of life and the decisions they make is so great that, in cases like male circumcision, some people follow the ways of the past without thinking why. For these people, disobedience to the norms of society and tradition is a kind of deviation from the criteria that determine the natural state in society, and it seems that circumcision is one of the examples of the natural state in traditional societies such as Iran. This is, to an extent, what a 43-year-old man living in Tehran means when he talks, in response to the questionnaire, about the reason he circumcised his child: 'I had no reason, but mainly because in this society everyone has to do this one day.'

In fact, in addition to obliging people to follow the rules, traditions also block the way to discussions about them. Traditions, by naturalising phenomena that are inherently social constructs and are created by society and its conditions, including the practice of circumcision, block the way to questioning and considering and leave no room for freedom of decision and social criticism. To better understand this issue, the answer of a 65-year-old man from Torbetjam about the reason for



circumcising his child requires consideration: 'It was a normal operation that had to be done according to the norms.'

But is following one's ancestors an unavoidable necessity or are there caveats? Considering the maturity and independence of humans in the contemporary world, it seems that every person should choose his or her path logically and rationally. Shahram Eghbalzadeh, a translator, critic and author of children's literature, states:

The West arrived at this stage much earlier than the rest of the world, for instance, as a result of capitalism's extensive network of relationships, which forces it to transcend national boundaries. This is because it had to supply its raw materials as well as export its excess production and goods. As a result, the relationships are very extensive. This expansion affects not only the economy but also politics, culture, and other spheres of life. In the beginning, when the concentration of capital and monopoly of power between political factions have not yet been formed, the necessity of free circulation of capital causes political and cultural freedom and disenchantments some religious rituals. It even forbids the church from meddling in cultural and ideological affairs. Many gender stereotypes and false religious beliefs are contested and questioned thanks to the freedom of thought. Eventually, through a historical process, religious authorities, political institutions, ethnic, tribal, or religious leaders who have the authority to decode and interpret sexual prohibitions and taboos find the authority to decode and interpret these pseudo-holy and taboos that they have acquired, which empowers them to become a powerful stratum or caste. Thus, religious authority is transformed into political, cultural, and economic social power, and has found special privileges, creating a hegemonic class as a whole. They currently belong to the ruling class, which is supported by two pillars: political power and religious power. This new kind of power does not permit any sort of decoding or interpretation. Because if one day their authority is broken and their credibility and spiritual authority are lost, their political power and hegemony will be questioned and this can be a real crisis for them.

Oligarchy and gerontocracy are also behind the logic of those who believe in circumcision. In a traditional society, elders and 'sheikhs' have high credibility and authority. One of the participants in this research is a 30-year-old woman living in Shahinshahr, Isfahan province. In her answers, she states why she consented to the circumcision of her son: 'We went according to the opinion of the elders.'

In this regard, it should be acknowledged that redefining and attributing ideas like masculinity and bravery to circumcised boys, as well as how society views those who aren't circumcised, has resulted in a positive attitude toward male circumcision (Polevoy G. G, & Sablin A. B, 2022). As mentioned above, the social polarisation between the circumcised and the uncircumcised is a contributing factor in the social exclusion of the latter, who consequently resort to the practice to gain social acceptance. In other words, these actions have led to the practice of circumcision becoming a custom of high value in some civilisations over time. Since following traditions is appreciated, children are willing participants in this ritual. When asked what led to him circumcising his children, a 65-year-old Iranian man from Shandiz, Khorasan Razavi province, responds: 'Nothing. It's very much like praying; because our father prays, we also pray at that age.' The remarks of some respondents who had their children circumcised in Iran, but are now residents of another country make it clear that the environment and region in which people live have a significant impact on their decisions and agency to follow customs mindlessly or act wisely. For instance, a 56-year-old Toronto-based Iranian woman explains why she had her son circumcised: 'Because it was customary in Iran, and there was no other reason.'

Also, a 70-year-old Iranian man living in Cologne, Germany, said that he had his son circumcised by blindly following tradition. In other words, after leaving the traditional environment and society, these individuals found the opportunity to think with clearer insight about the whys and wherefores of following custom. Many seem to do it so that their children will be accepted into the society they live in - society homogenises them. These lived experiences reflect the power of society to shape the minds of social actors in closed, traditional and tribal societies, where not following social norms is seen as non-conformity that ultimately leads to social exclusion. As a result, no one



is given the freedom and liberty to act creatively, and people are prevented from acting contrary to the norm and the majority for fear of rejection and exclusion. In other words, the fear of being alienated, excluded or stigmatised leads to conformity and adherence to circumcision as the dominant societal norm.

Social labelling theory and social exclusion theory seem to apply to this situation. A 36-year-old student from Sanandaj, Kurdistan, who lives in the UK, does not support circumcision because she believes it is a form of self-mutilation, but refers to the norms of traditional society and mentions the difficulty of holding on to this belief:

Circumcision, in my opinion, is a form of sexual mutilation, and if I have a son, I will never circumcise him. However, I am aware that if I live in a religious or traditional family that performs circumcisions due to tradition, religious orders, or health issues, they will undoubtedly stand against me or even against my child, making this decision challenging. Nevertheless, I will try to convince them that this is a form of sexual mutilation.

Some limitations that a circumcised man may encounter in his daily life are revealed in the experiences of participants. It appears that the idea of cleanliness and what is referred to as 'purity' in religious literature has a close relationship with the act of circumcision and has been very successful in persuading them to perform circumcision. For example, a 34-year-old Ahvaz resident who is an educated Shi'a Muslim says:

I remember we went with my father and uncle, and I became a clean Muslim by experiencing the blade of Islam. Before circumcision, they told me that you cannot cut the head of a chicken because you are not circumcised, and therefore you are not clean. Of course, after circumcision, I did not cut the head of a chicken. I was given a series of prizes and I was happy. Then they were searching for the excrement of a female donkey to burn as [it is believed that] the smoke of it is good for me. I remember wearing a red skirt for some days.

## 5.2. Religious Settings

The role of religion has been critical in the persistence of the practice of circumcision, as historical records demonstrate. This is also supported by the responses provided by mothers and fathers to the general research questionnaire regarding the reasons they circumcised their children. A 65-year-old Canadian man states:

It was something, after all, that was common. After all, we were in a religious society, and this had something to do with religion. I mean, at the same time, we heard those whose religion is different from ours. Now I say I don't believe it. At that time, as a Shi'a, we knew that this had to be done and that it was a form of identity. We knew, for example, that Christians don't do this.

A 30-year-old woman from Birjand, South Khorasan, cites adherence to Sharia as the main reason for having her child circumcised. A 29-year-old man from Taibad, Khorasan Razavi, says obedience to religion and family was the reason for his son's circumcision. A 59-year-old woman from Kashmar, Khorasan Razavi, also cites Islam and health. In another instance, a 36-year-old woman from Tehran states:

I circumcised my son and I was sure that I would circumcise him because circumcision is the Sunnah of the Prophet and we must circumcise our children. If one day my son asks me why I was circumcised, I will tell him that since you are a Muslim, if you are not circumcised, you cannot marry and your prayers will not be accepted.

Dr Alireza Kermani, a child sociologist, cites two factors as the most significant reasons for the persistence of circumcision throughout history: ignorance and the normalisation of circumcision caused by the influence of religion on human life:

We grew up and lived in a culture where there were so many advertisements praising the benefits of circumcision that we mistakenly believed it was a normal practice that should be carried out. If I were to give equal weight to each of the causes of the spread and persistence of circumcision over time, I would say that ignorance, the centuries-long encroachment of religion on human life, and perhaps something called the medical industry in the modern era could explain it.

Regardless of people's opinions about the differences between the sexual behaviours of circumcised and uncircumcised men, which are based on their personal experiences, the strength



of religious norms and their influence on people's choices cannot be ignored. This is about women who, despite believing that a circumcised man may not have an especially strong sexual performance, are forced by their geographic locations and social customs to choose circumcised men for marriage. For instance, consider these words from a 35-year-old Javanrud, Kermanshah resident:

Few men in our society reach adulthood without being circumcised, but society can't look at an uncircumcised man as a normal person. Most men are circumcised in childhood and it was not their choice to be circumcised or not. However, this issue has so many religious and secular justifications that it automatically affects society's view of the uncircumcised person. For a woman, especially if she adheres to Sharia and Sunnah, her husband must be circumcised. She might even look at not being circumcised as a form of flaw.

Many of the participants in this study, particularly those with Western life experience or higher educations, do not view respecting religious norms as merely deferring to them. According to Dr Karami, to be a child of our time, one needs to develop a way of thinking that prevents criticism of social norms and traditions from being interpreted as abandoning religion or as sin.

Susan Rezaei, a PhD student in Oriental Studies in Cologne, Germany believes that one of the ways to change the attitudes of Muslim and Jewish communities towards circumcision is to increase awareness of its social functions:

And if we approach circumcision in this manner, we can later persuade society and parents that the procedure is acceptable because it serves a social function, just please allow for a more delicate and painless procedure. To put it another way, rather than removing a piece of someone's skin, you could make a small scratch as a metaphor. Similarly, rather than causing a child so much suffering, you could end the tale with a celebration and mark his entry into a new stage. But this is something that must be done gradually; it cannot be done overnight.

The religious contexts of circumcision are so significant that some people think many international organisations have adopted conservative approaches and stop the development of international policies against circumcision. For instance, Reza Yahyaee, a paediatrician in Canada, discusses the reasons why civil and international institutions do not oppose male circumcision and why they remain silent:

Since the primary branch of medical science is Jewish in origin and everything related to Judaism is not opposed in any way, there is no discernible opposition to circumcision. This is not limited to circumcision and includes other issues as well. Regarding circumcision, since the Jewish religious belief is that children should be circumcised on the eighth day, anyone who says otherwise is simply labelled as anti-Semitic.

While demonstrating the religious origins of circumcision, these statements also give social legitimacy to its practice. Since religions and traditions have long histories, they need a long time to change, even if aspects of them create trauma.

Circumcision, due to its thousands of years of practice and religious legitimacy, is an issue that requires comprehensive investigation. Changing the attitudes of people who have accepted things like circumcision as inseparable parts of tradition and religion is neither easy nor immediate, but enlightenment, awareness-raising, and public and civic education are crucial.

### 5.3. The Beauty and Health Industry

Besides the USA, there are other countries, like Iran, that circumcise their children for medical and health reasons. Regardless of the benefits or drawbacks of circumcision in industrialised nations like America, it has become more common to circumcise male children due to the proliferation of the practice in nonreligious as well as modern and developed countries. It seems that the prevalence of circumcision in developed societies has turned it into a socially acceptable fashion industry. This idea was observed in the statements of some of the participants in the research, including some Iranian citizens. The social fashion and medical practice legitimise the act of circumcision in relatively more developed countries. A 34-year-old Iranian woman living in Turkey said:

I don't care if they say that it is a religious order or that it has been popular since ancient times,



but I have heard that it has been medically proven that circumcision guarantees the health of boys, and now in European and American countries they are also confirming that circumcision is very positive. If it was bad, they wouldn't circumcise children in America.

Some proponents of the practice assert that it makes the male penis more beautiful; from the perspective of the general public, this perception has grown to serve as a justification for it. Circumcision has thus been favoured by social actors in a time when beauty and fashion are intertwined and there is no discernible line between them. For examples, we can refer to the words of two female participants:

Circumcision makes the male penis more beautiful and it also prevents infectious diseases (a 35-year-old woman from Kermanshah province).

In terms of beauty and health, their penis is better and they have better sex in general (a 36-year-old Iranian woman, a student in Cologne, Germany).

To legitimise the practice through medical justifications, the medical institution attempts to arouse and strengthen social trust by explaining the act of circumcision and claiming that its consequences can be treated and resolved. This encourages circumcision as a natural and necessary act and not a social construct. Although medical justifications are mainly introduced to society by people with scientific qualifications and through legitimate channels such as scientific and research articles, these reports are largely the result of propaganda that tries to hide the commercial objectives of such centres as specialised circumcision clinics. These centres try to encourage people to circumcise their male children by using scientific-sounding reports and terms such as 'Specialised Circumcision Centre', 'Painless Circumcision', 'Specialised Circumcision Clinic', 'Infant Circumcision Clinic', 'Paediatric Circumcision', 'Low-Cost Circumcision Services', etcetera. These advertising phrases, which were obtained by searching for the word 'circumcision' in Google, besides revealing the social and economic status of the customers, demonstrate the fierce competition that exists in this field.

Most of the specialised circumcision clinics, on their websites and social pages, especially Instagram, produce content about the positive results of circumcision and try to instil the belief in their audiences that, in their 'specialised centre', this operation will be performed using the best method and the most technologically advanced equipment. There are materials on the dedicated pages of these doctors and clinics about the benefits of circumcision, such as the prevention of AIDS and penile cancer, but the side effects and negative consequences are either not reported or are discussed infrequently. This demonstrates how the relationship of medicine with the economic mafia of advertising dominates the cultural and religious industries. It further confirms that the medical discourse is influenced by ideological structures of power, adjusting its functions in complicity and interaction with powerful centres of society.

## 6. SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACHES: THE RIGHT TO THE BODY

In premodern thought, the concept of the body was discussed in a variety of contexts, most notably in discussions of Christian theology. In many of these discourses, 'the body' is frequently portrayed as a negative element that can sin and deviate, impeding the transcendence of the spirit.

Body management, individuality, the right to own one's body and euthanasia are some of the main discussion points in postmodernist thought.

Ethical, religious, cultural and medical issues have always been present in discussions about human ownership of the body. The corporeal approach, constructionism and hybrid approaches appear to be the three perspectives that are best suited to a sociological understanding of a biological phenomenon like circumcision. An overview of a few methods is provided in the paragraphs that follow.

Sociology of the body is a field that was seriously introduced by Michel Foucault (and later Brian Turner) in the second half of 1980. The objective of this field is to investigate and study the effect of the body on society and the effect of society on the body. Mary Douglas considers the body to be a cultural text that reflects the values as well as the cares and concerns of a specific culture and gives them an objective manifestation. She clarifies how the body is represented in a certain



culture and how it becomes a site for the behavioural models and denotative actions of society. Douglas believes that the social body restricts the understanding of the physical body. What is achieved through the interaction of the social body with the physical body is expressed in the body as a limited medium. According to her, our natural body is limited and formed by the laws of society (Farzaneh, 2008).

Different parts of the body attract different cultural values, and cultural, religious and social norms each target particular parts of the body. For instance, the face is, more than any other part, the centre of values from the perspective of social and religious norms. More than any other body part, a person's sense of identity can be observed in their face. Alternatively, the penis is the focal point of religious, social and legal values and norms (Mohseni, 2006). Circumcision, affecting a component of the genital system, is a source of debate and dispute among many institutions, placing the normative person amid polemics and decision-making.

Anthropologists such as Evelyn Reed and Margaret Mead agree with Michel Foucault in believing that the human body is not simply a biological or medical entity. However, when it enters the field of interaction and collective life, it finds itself in a social field and shows economic, religious, artistic, political, legal, military, cultural, class and gender functions. It is thus evaluated in these terms, including, from a social perspective, as a field for gender, racial and class discriminations; from a political and legal perspective, as a field for protest, torture and execution; from an artistic perspective, as a field for make-up, painting and ritual artwork; from a medical perspective, as a field for examinations and necessary or unnecessary cosmetic surgeries; from a military perspective, as a field for warfare, combat power and sacrifice; from an economic perspective, as a field for employment and unemployment; from a religious perspective, as a field for worship, martyrdom and the practice of religious rites and rituals; and from a cultural perspective, as a field for symbols, customs, beliefs and lifestyles.

Given the fundamental roles of consciousness and language as material components of social control, examples of indirect attention to the body in classical sociological work are (a) Marx's analysis of the subordination of the working body to the machine in the process of developing technologies of capitalism and (b) the process of rationalisation of bodies in bureaucratic systems, such as Max Weber's analysis. Within the social sciences, coinciding with the challenges faced by the idea of 'separation of nature and society', these scholars have conceptualised the body both in relation to the 'human actor' and in relation to 'sociological procedures' (Fatehi & Ekhlesi, 2010).

After the 19th century and the connection of dietary regimes with nutritional science, the rationalisation of the body was connected to the human sciences. In modern rationalisations, the body is assumed to be a 'deeply gendered' phenomenon to be organised according to the efficiency of the means of the new social systems. In bureaucratic organisations, women's bodies are subject to more control than men's bodies because they are expected to conceal their bodies by managing menstruation, pregnancy and menopause. Global systems in late modernity expose people beyond their social positions to increasing technological and environmental risks and provide grounds for the 'globalisation of the body' (Turner, 1987, p.123).

In social constructionism, the body includes social meanings that are limited and invented by society. The common denominator of constructionist branches is the opposition to analysis of the body as a biological phenomenon. According to Goffman, social situations provide the 'natural theatre' where physical performances are performed and interpreted. Goffman digs into the 'bodily' by proposing the term 'presentation of self' and examining social interaction in terms of 'backstage', 'onstage', 'private space' and 'public space'. In his theory, bodily actors try to attract the attention of others by resorting to social-signalling methods. These bodily agents are 'embodied' agents of character and status that are interpreted by other actors (Turner, 1987, p.123).

According to Foucault, 'power relations' have an immediate attachment to the body, in such a way that the body is always being 'invested', 'marked' and 'educated'. That puts pressure on the body to 'perform tasks', 'participate in rituals' and 'produce signs'. 'Strategies of self' refers to the methods through which people work on their bodies to achieve a sense of satisfaction, influenced

by dominant social, political and cultural discourses. The 'self' as constructed by society is 'embodied' and 'incarnated', which is accomplished by categorisation, administration and discipline. Body appearance gives people bargaining power and people use it for investment (Zokaee, 2007, p.124). The body in the flow of 'power' as discourse is newly produced and institutionalised. 'Knowledge-power' establishes a process through which the body identifies itself as an 'object'. 'Self-monitoring' is a process in which 'subjects', as active and informed members, thorough concepts such as 'public health', submit themselves to medical experiments. In this case, the boundary between private and public is blurred. A person's health is not a personal matter, but a social one that many institutions are designed to monitor. People, as civil or obedient citizens, not only do not resist this surveillance, but also consciously submit to it. Foucault considers the purpose of these efforts to be 'surveillance of the body' (K'Odhiambo, 2019).

According to Mary Douglas, as hinted earlier, the human body is a cultural artifact that reflects the values, concerns, and attitudes of a particular society. In her view, the body is an objective manifestation of a culture's beliefs and is used to express and reinforce social norms and behaviors. Douglas argues that the social body can limit our understanding of the physical body, and that the ways in which society interacts with the body are expressed through it in a limited way. She contends that our natural bodies are shaped and constrained by social norms and laws (Farzaneh, 2008). Further, she emphasises that institutions are tied up in constructions similar to the body and considers the social functions of institutions in relation to the 'ethical management of the body' and its reproduction. Despite the common form of human bodies, there are differences in social conditions and body-based symbols, which are used to express various social experiences. Douglas considers the body to be a symbol of society. While arguing that the body is the most accessible image of the social system, she points out the similarities between current ideas about the body and conventional ideas about society. Different groups in society accept approaches to the body that are consistent with their social bases (Fatehi & Ekhlasi, 2010). Therefore, 'every human being has two bodies in a symbolic state: the individual body (physical and psychological) that is formed by the birth and the social body that emerges during life and development in a specific society and culture' (Helman, 2007). As a result, the concept of the body does not exist independently of society, and because human knowledge evolves from generation to generation, the concept of the body also changes in tandem with social change.

## 7. THE RIGHT TO HEALTH IN IRAN'S LAWS

Under the laws of the Islamic Republic of Iran, there is no mention of the practice of circumcision of boys and the legality or illegality of it; therefore, it cannot be examined in terms of a direct law or calls for its amendment. However, Article 269 of the Islamic Penal Law, adopted in 1991 by the Judicial and Legal Affairs Commission of the Islamic Consultative Assembly, provides that amputation or injury, if intentional, causes qisas (an Islamic term interpreted to mean 'retaliation in kind'). The person convicted of a crime may be punished in accordance with the conditions of the case against him. However, since circumcision is an act of Sharia and originated in Islamic jurisprudence, many consider it obligatory for boys as a condition of being a Muslim, and some jurists consider it as *mustahab*; i.e. an act that is better done than not.

Considering these laws and that the legal system of the Islamic Republic has religious origins, when the father and paternal grandfather dominate the lives and properties of children so much that, even if they murder the child, they are exempted from the punishment prescribed in the penal code (which proscribes qisas for murder), how can we discuss the father's criminal responsibility for circumcision and physical and psychological abuse of his child? Fathers are required by law to adhere to Muslim tradition and circumcise their sons on schedule (Prakand, 2018).

It can be inferred that Iran has recognised the right to health, because it has ratified international agreements like the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights; the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination; and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In addition, there are numerous internal laws and regulations related to public health and steps to improve it.



### 8. CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

It is important to consider children’s rights, since they are a vulnerable group and they cannot defend themselves, understand some activities or express informed consent. Unfortunately, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which is one of the most important documents supporting children’s rights, has not defined ‘violence’ and only mentions examples in Article 9. However, one of the most important keywords for the definition of ‘violence’ is the use of force.

This research, by representing memories narrated by the participants, unveils the importance of the issue of violence, as it happens in a variety of ways before, during and after circumcision.

According to Paragraph 3 of Article 24 of the Convention, the member countries are required to take all necessary and appropriate measures to eliminate traditional and superstitious treatment methods regarding children’s health. Article 39 of the Convention also emphasises the importance of the parties to take all necessary measures to accelerate the physical and mental recovery and social adjustment of a child who has been the victim of neglect, exploitation, abuse, torture or other violent, inhumane and degrading acts or war. This process of recovery and return to society must take place in an environment that promotes health, self-reliance and respect for the child.

A point that should not be overlooked in this regard is the concept of childhood based on international definitions and documents. According to Article 1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, every person under the age of 18 is considered a child, regardless of where they live and what their religion, race and nationality are. The signatory governments of the Convention have committed to guaranteeing the physical and mental health of children and fighting against any harm to them. According to the Convention and other human-rights documents, examples of violence against children are the same everywhere in the world, and child-rights activists have named circumcision as one of them.

### 9. FIELD RESEARCH FINDINGS

According to this research (conducted in 2021), which used a qualitative methodology and was based on targeted interviews with circumcised Iranians living in or outside of the country, 60% of the subjects were circumcised at the age of five or younger. The frequency distribution of the study subjects, according to age at circumcision, is displayed in Chart 1 below.

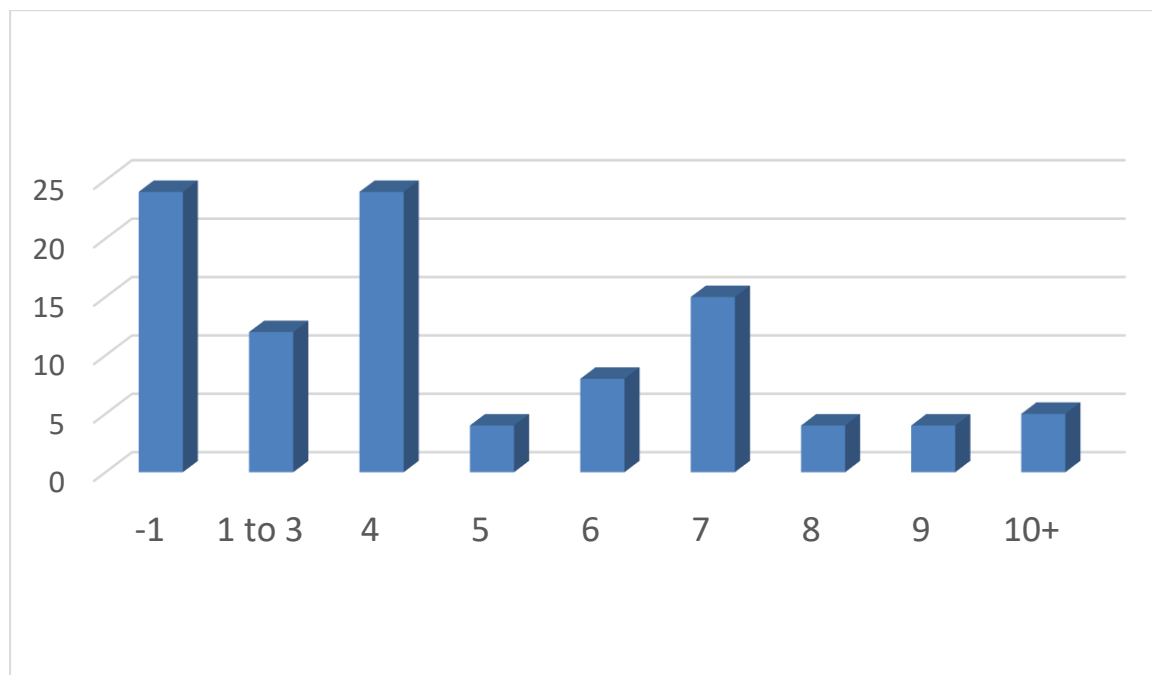


Chart 1: Chart 1: Age of Boys at Time of Circumcision - Percentage of Research Population  
Based on the responses to the question, ‘Where have you had your circumcision?’ 36% of them had their circumcisions performed at a hospital, 24% at home, 20% in a private physician’s office, 12% in



a clinic, and roughly 8% in unidentified locations.

About 50% of all people who circumcised their children had it performed at or before the age of six months.

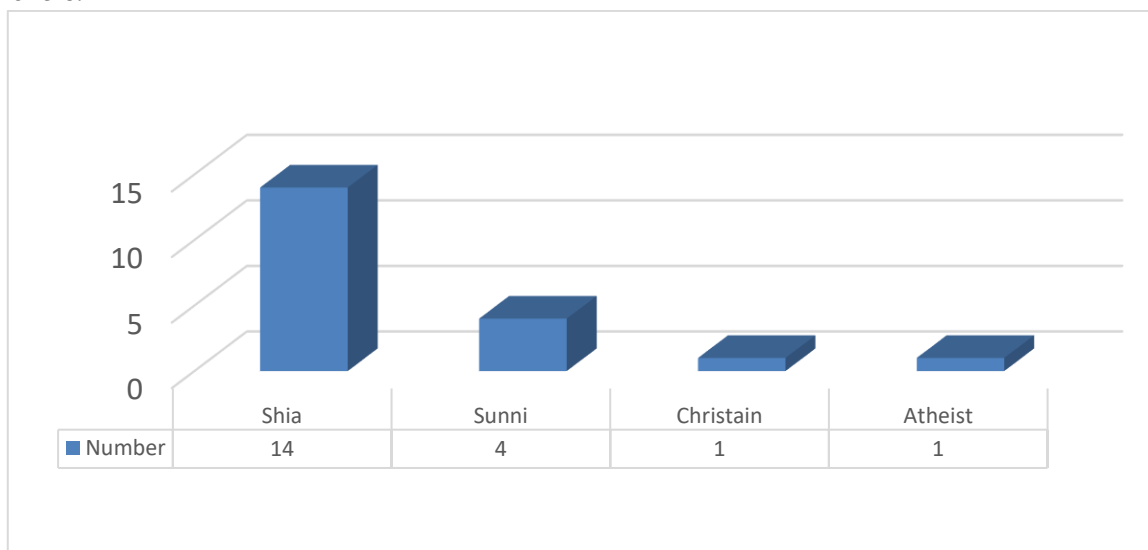


Chart 2: Frequency of male circumcision among the research population, according to religion

We asked study participants, ‘Are you in agreement with circumcision?’ The results showed that almost 80% of respondents were willing to undertake circumcision.

Only 50% of respondents, according to the study’s findings, claimed to have circumcised their child, with almost half of them not having done so. But when asked if they were planning to circumcise their child, around 55% of those respondents reacted favourably, while about 45% of them said no. Only one participant in this study’s interviews claimed to know someone who had not undergone circumcision.

### 10. CONCLUSION

As one of the oldest surgical interventions in the world, circumcision was first practised in ancient Egypt and was then included in the Abrahamic religions. The Jewish followers of the time saw this practice as a sign that a person was adopting the Jewish faith. Although there is no explicit mention of circumcision in the Qur’an, according to the traditions and hadiths, Muslim adherents have carried on this custom by imitating the Jewish religion. The crucial difference is that, while the majority of Islamic religious authorities believe that circumcision is the responsibility of the individual and not his parents, certain Jewish adherents do not believe it to be obligatory. They claim that it may be put off until puberty or, more generally, until the person’s death.

At young ages, when they cannot make choices and make decisions for themselves, children have religion imposed on them by circumcision. By circumcising their children, religious parents put them on a path that was not their choice, and this is contrary to the child’s right to freedom and choice of religion, which is addressed in Article 14 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, by which all nations, including Iran, have vowed to abide.

Touching the child’s most private body part is another crucial consideration. The child owns the sexual organs of his body, and circumcising a child without his consent or permission is against Article 16 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. According to the Law on the Protection of Children and Adolescents, any kind of harassment of children and adolescents that causes physical or mental harm to them is prohibited.

The traditional and religious pressures in relation to this practice can be removed or lessened by relying on international treaties like the Convention on the Rights of the Child and domestic legal provisions like the Law on the Protection of Children and Adolescents. These provisions will aid politicians and lawmakers in acting more carefully and in paying attention to the boundaries of



tradition, religion and causing harm to children.

Statesmen and legislators have the most important responsibility in matters like circumcision because they can reduce the potential harms of practices like it by enacting comprehensive and preventive laws at the macro level. This is because circumcision is directly related to the health of people's bodies and souls. Any change or amendment to the country's laws aimed at reducing this damage is a positive step forward. The demand for legal rights and punishment of their contravention can also be a step forward. Certainly, different points of view, both those who support and those who oppose circumcision, should be considered when changing and amending the law, and, by aggregating them, laws whose main purpose is to ensure people's health should be passed. It should be noted that, even though the law cannot be effective on its own, because of the culture it helps to create, it can be effective over time and lead society toward a more humane course.

Although the issue of male circumcision and sexual mutilation is not specifically addressed in national and international documents and laws, there has long been a fight against any violence against children that jeopardises their physical and mental health. According to Article 19 of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, member states must take all necessary legislative, executive, social and educational measures to safeguard children from all types of physical and psychological abuse. The first sentence of Article 14 states that governments must 'respect the right of the child to freedom of thought, belief and religion.' No child may be arbitrarily interfered with in private affairs, as stated in Article 16 of the Convention. The common theme among all of these points of view is that circumcision is a form of violence against children and can result in complications, injuries and other negative effects.

The results of this research indicate that societies with strong religious traditions and religious hegemony are the ones most likely to practise circumcision. As those who practise circumcision receive support from religion and tradition, public awareness of the risks and negative effects has not increased. Because the free exchange of information is not yet a reality in Iran, society is currently dealing with a wave of intense media attention on the advantages of circumcision, while receiving less information on its disadvantages. In such a society, where the voices of those who support circumcision and those who gain from it are much louder than those who oppose it, it is very difficult and time-consuming to change and correct attitudes. However, we can hope that enlightenment and awareness efforts will be successful because the younger generation can look at and read about issues in novel ways and reject conventional stereotypes. By harnessing this potential, efforts and the process of change can be accelerated to steer society in a direction that gives children freedom, authority and agency. Activists, non-governmental organisations and civil society have the potential for significant impact in this regard. They should try to break taboos by aiming directly at violations of children's rights. Their demands to responsible institutions, statesmen and legislators can lead to the adoption of laws to protect children and for the free dissemination of information.

## 11. ACTION PLAN

Female genital mutilation/cutting ('FGM/C') can serve as a model for how to battle male circumcision. Social activists, women's rights advocates and other civil organisations could educate people about male circumcision in addition to fighting FGM/C. The International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation, observed annually on 6 February, could be changed to the International Day of Zero Tolerance for Genital Mutilation, as a first step. In addition, civil- and women's-rights activists could fight against the mutilation of boys and girls and launch campaigns against these practices.

The Ministry of Health, as the official body for health care in the country, must consider different viewpoints, including those in support and those in opposition, as long as an official position has not been taken by the international bodies and the highest judicial authorities to prohibit or permit this practice. The authority that the Ministry of Health officially gives to this practice and the licences it issues for the establishment of circumcision clinics are clear indicators that there is no free



circulation of information. The policy of the Ministry of Health should be that the general public get complete and comprehensive access to correct and honest medical information to make informed decisions about the circumcision of their children. The Health and Treatment Commission of the Iranian Parliament can also demand this from the Ministry of Health.

The Iranian Welfare Organisation is the main custodian of children's rights in the country and should intervene in line with international health standards, which include the health of the soul and the body. It could also provide counselling and health services to parents, following the opinions of experts and specialists to find ways to reduce the harms and complications of circumcision. Providing comprehensive information about circumcision, emphasising children's rights, and making efforts towards public enlightenment can be defined as the duties of this organisation.

Scientific and academic associations must address this issue and analyse it from different perspectives. If research is performed using scientific methods, study results can be given to legislators and statesmen as executive charters. Organising scientific seminars and conferences and compiling articles, research and theses on the topic of circumcision from medical, psychological, social and legal points of view are among the actions that can be taken and prepare society to face this issue scientifically, apart from any prejudice.

Social activists and advocates for children's rights in particular should think about their powerful roles in educating the public and raising awareness. Realising that, sometimes, laws - even those that are preventative and deterrent - fall behind society's understandings, they should step forward and bring this issue out of the shadows for discussion.

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