

ECWR UPDATE

A monthly update on ECWR's activities and the status of women in Egypt



Photo: 12-year-old Bodour Shaker died June 21 undergoing female genital mutilation.

Dear Friends,

We at ECWR were deeply saddened by the news of the death of Bodour Shaker this month after having been circumcised by a doctor in a private clinic in El Minya. The practice of FGM, which is dangerous both physically and psychologically, has barely decreased in prevalence over the past years and still remains as high as 95.8%, despite the large number and high profile of government and NGO projects working to stop the practice.

It's clear that much needs to be done in order to design a more effective approach. ECWR carried out a small scale study of perceptions and practice in our target area in the rural areas and slums of North Giza and North Cairo. We strongly urge all institutions and organizations working on FGM to join together to study, analyze and strategize about how to effectively tackle FGM in Egypt.

Over the next months, ECWR with the assistance of the Population Council, will be collecting and publishing data on FGM abandonment projects currently operating in Egypt and providing them as part of an online directory at www.stopfgmc.org. Please visit our website to learn more, www.ecwronline.org, or email us at ecwr@link.net with questions or information on FGM related activities or events.

Sincerely,

Nehad Abu El Komsan

ECWR Chair

Girl Dies Undergoing FGM, Ministry Announces Stricter Ban

On June 28, the **Egyptian Ministry of Health issued a ban on all forms of female genital mutilation.** The same day, the governor of the Minya province announced the forced closure of 36 unlicensed private clinics in Minya.

These actions came in the wake of the death of **Buduor Ahmed Shaker, a 12-year-old girl who died on June 21, while being circumcised in a private clinic** in the village of Maghagha. Buduor's death renewed the Egyptian government's interest in the topic of female genital mutilation.

Buduor's mother told an ECWR staff member that because the autopsy showed that Budour's death was the result of medical error, the doctor who performed the circumcision offered her 15,000 LE to sign a statement saying that Budour died of natural causes. Buduor's mother also said that Mushira Khatab, Director of the National Council for Childhood and Motherhood, offered to match that amount if Budour's mother went public with the story. When ECWR spoke with Budour's mother, she indicated that she would not accept either offer.

Three days after Budour's death, the **Egyptian government's official arbiter of Islamic law, Grand Mufti Ali Gomaa, declared that female genital cutting is forbidden by Islam** and should be legally prohibited. A few days later, Suzanne Mubarak and the Ministry of Health announced the new ban.

ECWR applauds these officials for their bold moves against female genital mutilation. The Ministry's ban is a step forward from the current law, which allows female circumcision "if needed for medical reasons," even though world health authorities agree there is no medical indication for FGM. (Cont'd on pg. 2)

The Egyptian Center for Women's Rights

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The Egyptian Center for Women's Rights

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Women Lead Sit-In, Get Some Back-Pay

ECWR applauds the female workers of the Mansoura-España textile factory in the Nile Delta, who this past week successfully ended a two-month sit-in at the factory to demand unpaid raises and bonuses and save their jobs and the factory from liquidation.

Mansoura-España Garment Company produces low-cost textiles, particularly woven clothing, mostly under contracts with Western retail companies. It employs 284 workers, 75% of whom are female. **Monthly salaries at the factory range from LE 75 – LE 250 (13 USD – 44 USD).** Overtime is forced at a compensation rate of only 50PT (8¢ in USD) per hour. In 1999, the factory stopped providing “social raises,” annual salary increases that allow workers to cope with inflation; this loss was particularly painful given the huge spikes in inflation in Egypt over the past few years. The company also stopped paying May Day (Labor Day) grants in 1999.

On April 21, 2007, 150 employees began a sit-in, refusing to leave the factory for any reason. Women with families, husbands, and children to care for led the effort, risking their job security and sleeping under the same roof as their male colleagues every night for two months (a difficult decision for the women to break cultural and religious norms). The women persevered in spite of threats to liquidate the company, sacking decrees, and even the reporting of men and women's names to the police.

On June 16, management fired five women and one man, a trade unionist, accusing them of agitating for a strike. Their names were reported to the police and they were interrogated, but they refused to leave the factory, even after interrogation.

Sixty-eight days after the women and men began their continuous sit-in, the management of Mansoura-España, representatives of the workers, and the Egyptian Labor Ministry reached an agreement regarding the years 2006 and 2007. All employees received LE 110 (19 USD) in back-grants, social raises of at least LE 30 (5 USD), a guarantee against liquidation of the



Workers sitting-in at Mansoura-España on May 9, 2007.

Photo by Hossam el-Hamamly, <http://arabist.net/arabawy>

factory, and a committee to continue discussion of demands related to pre-2006 back-pay. The six previously fired employees were reinstated, and a promise was made to not penalize any worker who participated in the action.

Workers disbanded on June 21, after receiving their May salaries and a written statement from management confirming that the workers left the factory in good condition. They resumed their regular work on June 23.

ECWR invites its supporters to remember the women at Mansoura-España when making consumer choices, and to support fair trade in Egypt and the Arab region.

Government Bans FGM (cont'd from pg. 1)

Doctors and families currently use the permitted exception to justify performing any circumcision, reasoning that the procedure is needed to control female sexuality, or because the external female genitalia are unhygienic or may grow into a penis.

The announcement of a ban on female circumcision, however, is not enough to protect the millions of Egyptian women who undergo genital mutilation each year. **The Egyptian government must make this ban permanent by promulgating a law that criminalizes female genital mutilation and committing resources to the enforcement of this law.**

ECWR calls on Suzanne Mubarak and the Ministry of Health to continue their efforts, using their influence to bring an end to the practice of female genital mutilation in Egypt.

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A Timeline of FGM in Egypt

500 B.C.E.: Although the precise origins of FGM are not known, it is believed that the practice originated in Africa as far back as the fifth century B.C.E. and took place in ancient Egypt.

1928: Great Egyptian surgeons Salah Moussa and Ali Pasha Ibrahim state at a medical conference in Cairo that female circumcision is not recommended, that they never performed it, and did not lecture their students about it.

1949: The Egyptian Fatwa Committee (EFC) decided that it is not a sin to reject female circumcision

1951: The EFC stated that female circumcision is desirable because it curbs "nature" (i.e. sexual drive among women). It stated that medical concerns over the practice are irrelevant.

1959: With Ministerial Decree #74, the Minister of Health prohibits performing FGM in government health facilities. This decree, however, allows doctors to perform "a partial type of female circumcision" in private clinics and doesn't address traditional circumcisers.

1981: The Sheikh of Al-Azhar (the oldest, most highly regarded Islamic university and main religious institution in Egypt) stated that parents must follow the lessons of Mohammed and not listen to medical authorities because the latter often change their minds. Parents must do their duty and have their daughters circumcised.

1994: After public outcry over a CNN television broadcast of the procedure performed on a nine year old girl by a barber, the Minister of Health decrees that the procedure should be performed one day per week at government facilities but only by trained medical personnel and only if they failed to persuade the parents against it.

1996: The Minister of Health imposes a ban on female circumcision in both public and private facilities. This ban includes an exception "for cases who need it, as decided by the head of the gynecological department of a hospital."

1997: The Court of Cassation (the highest appeals court) upholds the Ministry's ban.

2003: Bishop Moussa, assistant to Coptic Pope Shenouda III, announce "female circumcision is rejected totally by Christianity" and is "a harmful habit that should be attacked vigorously" by religious leaders and the media.

June 24, 2007: Egypt's Grand Mufti announces that female circumcision is forbidden by Islam.

June 28, 2007: The Ministry of Health attempts to eliminate the exception created in the 1996 ban by declaring a total ban on FGM

What is FGM?

Common names: female circumcision, female genital mutilation, female genital cutting, *kebifad* (literally, "cutting of skin")

The Four Types of FGM:

Type I: excision of the prepuce, and often part or all of the clitoris (also known as sunna, "traditional," circumcision).

Type II: excision of the clitoris and part or all of the labia minora.

Type III: excision of part or all of the external genitalia and narrowing of the vaginal opening (also known as infibulation).

Type IV: several procedures can fall under this category, including: cauterization by burning of the clitoris and surrounding tissue; scraping of tissue surrounding the vaginal orifice; cutting of the vagina; introduction of corrosive substances into the vagina to tighten or narrow it.

Prevalence of FGM in Egypt Today

A 2005 survey found that **95.8% of ever-married Egyptian women** between the ages of 15 and 49 had been circumcised.

Reasons for the practice:

- 60.8% of women age 15-49 believe that circumcision is required by religious precepts.
- Many believe that removal of the clitoris will reduce the female sex drive, thereby protecting the propriety and morality of the girl who is circumcised.
- Many believe that female genitalia are ugly and, if not removed, the clitoris will continue to grow and eventually grow into a penis.

In Egypt, **FGM is predominately conducted on girls of reproductive age (10-14)**, but is sometimes performed on children as young as three.

Medical Dangers of FGM

All types of FGM can cause life-threatening complications, such as hemorrhage, infection, urinary retention, sepsis, shock, and death. Other risks include pain, cysts, painful intercourse, and increased rates of infertility, child mortality, maternal mortality and childbirth complications.

FGM & Religious Texts

According to the official reading of Muslim theologians, **circumcision is not mentioned in the Quran.**

Egypt's Coptic Christian leader Pope Shenouda has said **the Christian Bible does not demand or even mention female circumcision.**

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\$200 Million USD Can't Buy Human Rights in Egypt

The United States House of Representatives voted to attach three conditions to \$200 million USD of the \$1.3 billion USD in military aid for Egypt in the coming year. The conditions were: (1) improve Egypt's human rights record in connection to police abuse; (2) increase the independence of the Egyptian judiciary; and (3) detect and destroy the smuggling tunnels from Egypt to Gaza. The Egyptian government flatly refused, preferring to lose \$200 million USD from their biggest source of funding than to concede to the conditions.

In talks with U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Egypt's Foreign Minister Ahmed Abul-Gheit expressed Egypt's reservations as stemming from a desire to be a completely independent government, free from interference from any party.

The aid bill in question must still pass the U.S. Senate. News sources report that the Senate's version of the bill has no conditions attached to any of the \$1.3 billion USD in military aid.

ECWR Activities Update



Legal Empowerment & Aid: ECWR's Legal Aid and Empowerment program continues to provide direct legal services to women in need. Additionally, a roundtable discussion on rape is planned for the near future. Incidents of rape in Egypt, particularly of young girls 11-15 appear to be increasing and are gaining significant media attention.

Making Our Streets Safer for Everyone: Our campaign against sexual harassment continues to attract valuable media attention. Recent media highlights include TV features on a number of very popular shows (El Beit Beitak, Ana we Nes, and others on local and satellite channels) and high print coverage (El Masry El Youm, El Dostour, Al Ahram, El Fagr and many other newspapers, websites and magazines). We are currently conducting an evaluation of the campaign's effectiveness to use in planning the next steps of the campaign.

Women in Democratic Transition: ECWR mobilized twenty monitors in the June 11 Shura Council elections. The monitors witnessed ballot stuffing, denials of voting rights, and low voter turnout. Press releases on the election are on our website at www.ecwronline.org. 11 female candidates ran in the elections from a field of 665. Only 1 woman, an NDP candidate, was elected to office. Women have had more success gaining seats through appointment than election. (Of 264 total members, 176 are elected and the president appoints 88.) On June 21, 2007, President Mubarak appointed 9 more women. These recent changes bring the total number of women on the Shura Council to 20—1 elected, and 19 appointed. 221 men sit on the Council.

Regional Media Task Force: ECWR helped publicize the recent tragedy in El Minya to increase awareness of the dangers of FGM and the Grand Mufti's declaration that Islam prohibits FGM. The Ministry of Health's ban, the Mufti's declaration, and increased awareness are important steps in decreasing the 85-95% prevalence rate of FGM in Egypt.

For more information about our activities, please visit www.ecwronline.org.

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