

## **Combating Female Circumcision**

**Author:** [Azeez Mahmoud](#)

Activist describes challenges facing those trying to end the controversial practice in Iraqi Kurdistan. I became an activist to stop female genital mutilation last year after reading a shocking survey from a secondary school in Rania, a town in Sulaimaniyah province. Every single one of the girls in the school reported that their genitals had been cut.

Female genital mutilation is an epidemic in northern Iraq, particularly in remote and rural areas. In villages, it is a common practice frequently carried out in unsanitary conditions by women without medical training. They slice the clitoris of a young girl, spreading ashes on the cut to numb the pain.

Through my work with Wadi, an international rights organisation campaigning against the practice in Iraqi Kurdistan, I have travelled to 84 towns and villages to raise awareness about the harmful effects of female genital mutilation.

Wadi estimates that more than 60 per cent of women in Iraqi Kurdistan have been circumcised. The highest rates are in Erbil, a mostly rural region that runs along the Iranian border.

The practice pre-dates Islam yet is defended as a cultural and religious tradition, a type of Islamic ritual.

But I believe that female genital mutilation is the same as any other type of physical violence against women, and that it leaves lifelong psychological scars.

I visit the villages three times a week to raise awareness about the practice, and constantly hear horror stories from the women I meet.

One 30-year-old woman told me that, at the age of eight, she and her nine friends were lured to a house from where they were told they would be taken clothes shopping.

The woman said the girls were instead grabbed by other women from the village, their mouths stuffed with cloths so their screams could not be heard. She said they were taken to an elderly lady who, her hands shaking, cut them with a dirty razor.

The woman who recounted the story said she refuses to circumcise her girls, but convincing others to stop the practice is not easy.

While younger women are vocal in their opposition to female circumcision, older ones have told us we are spreading immorality and defaming Islam.

Women are circumcised in the name of Islam, even though the practice is not sanctioned by the religion. Village lore says that food prepared by women who are not circumcised is not Halal because they have not

followed Islam.

A documentary we show to women in villages includes two mullahs who state that the practice is not Islamic; and a doctor who speaks of the health problems it can cause.

Once taboo to discuss, female genital mutilation is increasingly aired publicly after the local press began covering the issue. In addition to Wadi's work on the ground in villages, a television advertising campaign has also helped raise awareness.

But lawmakers have been hesitant to debate the issue in parliament, stalling legislation that would make female circumcision a crime.

Under the proposed law, those found guilty of carrying out the practice would face between five months to 15 years in prison. The parents of the victim could also face prosecution.

Foreign organisations such as Wadi are taking the lead against female circumcision, but it is difficult to persuade a majority-Muslim community to stop a practice seen as a religious ritual.

It is important for the parliament to pass legislation punishing those who circumcise women. The proposed law has not moved forward, even though 14,000 people signed a letter supporting a ban on the custom.

The government could also push religious leaders and the ministries of health and education to raise awareness.

Mobilising public opinion against female genital mutilation will have an even bigger impact than legislation. Unless the public's mindset about the issue changes, a new law will achieve little.

Azeez Mahmoud, an IWPR-trained journalist, helps Wadi's mobile teams educate women about female genital mutilation. She is based in Sulaimaniyah.

**Location:** Iraqi Kurdistan  
Iraq

---

**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/combating-female-circumcision>