

Female genital mutilation becomes less common in Egypt

- 17:22 18 August 2011 by [Wendy Zukerman](#)

After a decade of failed attempts to stop [female genital mutilation](#) (FGM) – or female circumcision – in Egypt, the practice is finally becoming less common.

In 1996 the Egyptian government banned FGM in hospitals – but because licensed practitioners were still allowed to perform the surgery elsewhere, it continued. A 2006 survey of 3730 Egyptian girls, conducted by Mohamed Bedaiwy of the Cleveland Clinic Foundation in Ohio and colleagues, found that [85 per cent of the girls](#) had been subjected to FGM since the ban. In June 2007, the government banned FGM altogether.

To see if the new law has made a difference, Salah Rasheed at Sohag University in Egypt, a member of Bedaiwy's team, asked 4150 girls and women aged between 5 and 25 years if and when they had undergone FGM. Interviewing them between 2008 and 2010, he found that, overall, 89 per cent of the females had been subjected to FGM in their lifetime, with the procedure typically being conducted on girls of 8. Annual rates seemed to have dropped following the complete ban, however: around 11.5 per cent had undergone the procedure in 2005, but the proportion dropped to 8 per cent for 2007 and 7.7 per cent in 2009 – the latest year considered in the survey.

The annual incidence had begun to fall before the law was introduced, however. [Ben Mathews](#), a lawyer specialising in public health and children's rights at the Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane, Australia, says discussion of the topic and general awareness surrounding the issue would "probably have catalysed the decline in FGM".

"It is important not to expect the impact to be too dramatic and sudden," says Mathews. "Beliefs can be very entrenched and difficult to alter."

Religion or pretence?

Rasheed and his colleagues also interviewed the girls' parents. Forty-four per cent said they subjected their daughters to FGM to comply with religious beliefs – although Rasheed points out that FGM is not in fact a requirement of either Christianity or Islam.

In the neighbouring region of southern Israel, meanwhile, the practice of FGM has virtually disappeared from two Bedouin communities. So said [Robert Belmaker](#) of Ben Gurion University of the Negev in Beersheva, Israel, at the [World Conference of Asian Psychiatry](#) in Melbourne, Australia, earlier this month.

Fifteen years ago Belmaker found that FGM was commonly performed in the communities. But a gynaecological examination and oral questionnaire of 132 women under 30 in 2009 revealed that [none had undergone the procedure](#).

According to Belmaker, although the Bedouin communities are not integrated into mainstream Israeli society, they have become increasingly westernised since Israel's independence in 1948, which explains the change. "Social change is possible," he says.

Journal reference: *International Journal of Gynecology & Obstetrics*, DOI: 10.1016/j.ijgo.2011.02.003