

In Thailand's Muslim south, authorities turn a blind eye to FGM

From the [fatwa until 2009](#) requiring the cutting of all Muslim women.

Malaysia's fatwa has put health workers in an awkward position. As women increasingly give birth in hospitals, mothers looking for a safe way to cut their female babies are essentially asking doctors to break WHO guidelines.

To reduce the prevalence of FGM in Malaysia, Saira Shameem, who works for the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) in Kuala Lumpur, is working with health authorities to make the practice symbolic, with a routine alcohol swab performed by obstetricians at birth. "What the fatwa does not do, is it does not specify what the procedure should be," she says, "that allows us an avenue to define the procedure in a non-invasive, non-harmful manner and shift the practice accordingly."

Dr Patimoh Umasa is one of the only female doctors in Yala, where she runs a small clinic on the edge of the city's Muslim quarter. She knows the WHO guidelines, and doesn't believe what she does directly contravenes them. "If it is done by a doctor and they are using the right technique, then never mind," she says. "It's just a little. Just an incision, no excision."

But doctors such as Nawal Nour, director of the Global Women's Health Centre at Harvard Medical School, believes a "right technique" does not exist. "There are girls who suffer short and long-term consequences, even from type IV," she says. "The clitoris on a baby girl is tiny, and in error, cutters can remove it completely. Also botched jobs can lead to

haemorrhage, infection, sepsis and death.”

Back in Pattani, Peung, 33, has gathered her family together to watch her eight-month-old daughter, Mia, being cut by her mother-in-law, who is sterilising a pair of nail scissors with alcohol. Peung is pleased her daughter is now “complete”, but she isn’t sure why.

“I don’t know what the benefit is behind it, but I believe there must be one. I know the prophet said it is desirable for the husband when women are cut. Actually in Islam we believe that women have more desire than men, so there must be something to control the women, give them humility and modesty – and this could be one way to do it. Maybe in the future the scientists will find out and then we will know the benefit. All the girls here in the south do it.”