Challenging the Western Lens:
Female Genital Cutting and the Complex Intersection of Human Rights and Cultural Meaning

by
Aaralyn Ledridge

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Thesis Committee:

Dr. Ida Fadzillah Leggett, Thesis Director

Dr. Mary A. Evins, Thesis Committee Chair

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APPROVED:

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Dr. Ida Fadzillah Leggett, Thesis Director
Professor, Department of Sociology and Anthropology

_____

Dr. Mary A. Evins, Thesis Committee Chair
Professor, University Honors College

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Abstract

Intersectionality necessitates that the Western perspective be examined on the global issue of female genital cutting (FGC), which this thesis explores, as well as its portrayal by international activists, particularly feminist activists and international aid agencies, highlighting prevalent ethnocentrism in Western discourse surrounding the practice. I argue for a shift towards transnational/postcolonial feminist and anthropological perspectives to broaden the discourse and understanding of FGC and challenge Western-centric views, especially concerning the "universal" concepts of freedom and agency. Through exploring multiple viewpoints on FGC, this thesis aims to contribute to feminist discourses and expand perspectives on FGC and similar practices often misunderstood by the West. By considering diverse perspectives, this research seeks to foster more comprehensive and culturally sensitive approaches to FGC and similar customs, ultimately promoting greater respect for cultural diversity and the intersectionality of such topics.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction: Analyzing Western Bias in Contemporary Discourses of Female Genital Cutting

Female genital cutting (FGC), also known as female circumcision or female genital mutilation, is a practice that outrages much of the world, particularly Western societies where the custom is not prevalent, normalized, or an integral piece of culture.

Generally, female genital cutting is viewed as a violation of universal human rights, which contrasts with the cultural relativistic idea that FGC is a cultural practice that should only be viewed within its own cultural context. Cultural relativism is a concept central to anthropology and holds that beliefs and practices should only be understood with their specific cultural context; "standards and values are relative to the culture from which they are derive" (Aidonjie et al. 2021, 100).

Human rights ideology, along with feminist ideology, is dominated by Western perspectives and ideas, and as a result, the long history of ethnocentrism and colonialism is still perpetuated through the debates surrounding female genital cutting. This reaction is typically in the name of human rights, especially women's rights; and as a result, people worldwide continuously advocate for the condemnation of the practice. In a traditional feminist framework, FGC is termed "mutilation" and is said to "assure female sexual inferiority, and thus her submission to males" as said by anti-FGC figure Fran Hosken (1979, 7).

This thesis explores two sides of the discourse over female genital cutting—universal human rights activism and anthropological perspectives—as well as the more recent framework of postcolonial feminism and aims to examine the several cultural

interpretations and justifications of FGC. The additional perspective of anthropologists provides a more complete and culturally sensitive understanding of FGC in its many forms and meanings, shedding light on the complexities of the practice (Abusharaf 2006; Fusaschi 2023; Mascia-Lees 2010; Whiteford & Trotter 2008). The unifying understanding of postcolonial feminism provides a more balanced interpretation of FGC and presents a framework on genuinely helping women in practicing regions (Abusharaf 2000; Ahmed 1992).

By examining the discourse through the lenses of universal human rights activism, anthropological perspectives, and multiple feminist frameworks—particularly postcolonial feminism—this thesis argues that a more thorough analysis of FGC will aid in not just understanding its effect but understanding the history and perhaps the future of FGC as well. Through understanding the cultural specificity of the different forms of FGC practiced all over the world, I argue that Western observers of this practice will also better understand their own attitudes towards their own traditions of body modification.

However, this thesis argues that this understanding of FGC needs to be balanced by a more culturally specific understanding of the practice. This ensures that the voices of the practicing communities, particularly voices of women who have undergone FGC and are often some of the practice's most vocal proponents, are uplifted and prioritized rather than overshadowed, as well as ensures the cultural contexts of each form of the practice in each community is understood (James 1998, 1040-41). To that end, I demonstrate that FGC has a long history embedded in cultural and religious traditions and ideologies, and therefore needs to be considered within that context to be accurately understood. And this is crucial because understanding the complexity of FGC and practicing cultural

sensitivity will benefit effective discourse and action surrounding the practice. One way this sensitivity and effort to understand is being practiced is in more recent feminist movements such as sectors of third-wave and postcolonial feminism which emphasize intersectionality, cultural sensitivity, agency of women—including those in practicing communities—as well as understanding the colonial legacy that has shaped cultural attitudes and power dynamics that concern FGC. These frameworks aid anthropology in providing a culturally sensitive and historic understanding of FGC and addressing how the rhetoric of activist movements concerning FGC has harmed practicing women and communities.

How Feminism Decried FGC

Feminism is at its core a social movement advocating for gender equality. However, it has undergone significant evolution over the centuries. Within these changes is a complex interplay of Western ethnocentrism and a savior mentality concerning non-Western countries. Western feminism has often projected and enforced its values onto non-Western contexts, oftentimes perpetuating colonialist attitudes. While feminism is beneficial in the thought that all women and women's oppression is connected, the traditional feminist perspective infantilizes local women and makes universalist assumptions.

Discussions with feminism highlight the importance of consent and bodily autonomy, particularly in contexts where individuals, particularly women, may face coercion to conform to beauty and cultural ideals. From a feminist perspective, body modifications are complex expressions of autonomy, agency, and identity. Procedures

like piercings, tattoos, and cosmetic surgeries are either viewed as empowering acts of self-expression and agency or argued to be the product of societal pressures as well as cultural beauty standards. At the center of these discussions is typically an autonomy-focused framework, "accounting for women's complacency with gender norms and participation in what are alleged to be practices of gender oppression in different ways" (Cesarano 2023, 650). For example, the second-wave feminist concept of "false consciousness" holds that women's choice is essentially inauthentic as they are made to believe by patriarchal forces their inferior position. Moreover, in keeping up with beauty standards as well as feminine appearance ideals, women's bodies are constantly in need of modification (Bartky 1990, 80). The overarching message is women must learn to recognize and resist the oppressive cultural norms imposed on their bodies; this is seen as the only avenue of "freeing women" from patriarchal oppression, particularly in the form in cultural body modification (Cesarano 2023).

Western feminism has historically been centered on the experiences and perspectives of women in Western societies, often neglecting the diversity, variety, and complexity of these women's experiences across the globe. Anthropologist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak critiques this ethnocentrism, highlighting how Western feminists tend to impose their own values and assumptions onto non-Western contexts without fully understanding the complexities of local cultures (Spivak 1988). This imposition can result in the erasure of indigenous feminist movements and the marginalization of non-Western voices within the broader, transnational feminist discourse. One way this is done is in the discourse surrounding the practice of female genital cutting.

The World Health Organization classifies female genital cutting into four types, varying in severity. The first form, referred to as Type I or clitoridectomy, consists of the removal of the clitoral hood and/or the clitoral glans (World Health Organization 2023). This is also commonly called *sunna*, meaning "tradition" in Arabic. Type I is the most common form of female genital cutting. Type II, also called excision, is the "partial or total removal of the clitoral glans and the labia minora; this sometimes includes the removal of the labia majora as well." Type III, called infibulation, is the most severe form of female genital cutting and typically consists of the removal of the clitoris, the labia minora, and part of the labia majora; the vulva is then sewn together, leaving a small hole for the passage of fluids (World Health Organization 2023). Western discourse of female genital cutting typically revolves around infibulation and often excludes other less severe forms; all of these forms are lumped together under the category of "mutilation." However, infibulation only accounts for 15 percent of all cases (Helzner et al. 2018, 1). Type IV contains any other "harmful procedures to the female genitalia for non-medical purposes"; the practices of pricking, piercing, or scraping the clitoris, as well as the cutting of internal genitalia, would be included in this classification (World Health Organization 2023).

Data on the prevalence of female genital cutting vary since there are not many large-scale studies, therefore much of the evidence is sourced from small studies and anecdotes. However, it is known to be mainly practiced in African communities—Africa is also where the vast majority of activism against female genital cutting is located—as well as regions in the Middle East and Asia (UNICEF Data 2023).

Efforts against female genital cutting rose during the twentieth century, typically by the hands of missionaries and colonial governments. International debate about female genital cutting has resurged in recent decades, largely due to increasing globalization: "the exponential growth of global communications and multinational corporations has been accompanied by increasingly migratory habits as immigrants, refugees, and tourists…crisscross the globe" (Walley 1997, 406). Female genital cutting has been sensationalized in transnational activism, invoking outrage, and it is often regarded as a barbaric tradition used to repress women. Activists, almost exclusively from the West, wish to eradicate the practice for this reason. Blinded by their outrage, the West does not understand—or even attempt to understand—female genital cutting in its entirety. As Shell-Duncan and Hernlund note, "the local has become a global concern" (2000, 1). A traditional cultural practice is now regarded as mutilation and a violation of human rights.

Practicing communities are viewed as a monolith, engaging in ethnocentric stereotypes—such as the "ignorant barbaric African" narrative that Van Bavel (2022) challenges—and thus making false assumptions. Boddy (2007) notes that in this discourse "power relations are seemingly subverted even as they are maintained"; while Western activists speak of sisterhood and a humanitarian "we," there is still an underlying power dynamic between the civilized and uncivilized, the developed and the underdeveloped (53).

Moreover, Western feminism has sometimes exhibited a savior mentality, viewing women in non-Western countries as passive victims in need of rescue by their Western counterparts. This attitude reflects colonialist tendencies, wherein Western feminists position themselves as superior agents of change, in turn disregarding the

agency and autonomy of women in non-Western societies (Mohanty 1988). Anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod critiques such narratives, arguing that they perpetuate negative stereotypes of non-Western women as oppressed and in need of liberation by Western intervention (Abu-Lughod 2002).

Traditional feminism often overlooks the complexities of non-Western contexts which is clearly exhibited in the discourse that has surrounded female genital cutting for decades. The movement has historically exhibited ethnocentrism as well as a savior mentality, perpetuating harmful stereotypes and approaches toward non-Western communities and cultural practices. Instead of imposing Western ideals, feminist must critically examine these dynamics and adopt a more inclusive and culturally sensitive approach to global gender equality.

Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality illuminates how women's experiences are influenced by intersecting systems of oppression. In non-Western settings, this intersectionality demands a nuanced understanding of how gender intersects with cultural, political, and economic factors. Central to this approach is recognizing the agency and diversity of women worldwide. True feminist movements must empower women within their cultural contexts, rather than imposing external values. Only through such recognition can we foster genuine equity and empowerment across all communities.

CHAPTER II

The Perpetuation of Western Attitudes in Transnational Activism

The restriction of female genital cutting is typically celebrated as the "enlightenment" of non-Western societies, the liberation of their women from the shackles of tradition. Van Bavel (2022) notes that during an interview with an employee from an organization targeting FGC, its representative said, "We try to enlighten [the local community] about the health effects, but they are just stubborn. They love this culture so much. They refuse to change, even when they know how it can harm their girls" (3754). The failure to confront this imposition of different cultural values and concepts, as well as the ignorance often practiced in efforts against FGC, results in the perpetuation of ethnocentric ideas and actions that have historically harmed non-Western groups by trying to instill Western norms and standards into their culture. But is this just cultural imperialism—another form of colonialism, which we have sought to reverse?

This concern about cultural imposition is why many people, particularly anthropologists, argue for a cultural relativist perspective on FGC: people's beliefs or practices should be understood within their sociocultural context. Unbiased understanding requires avoiding the judgment of another's culture by the standard of one's own, and in doing so, evading ethnocentric assumptions and stereotypes. A significant criticism of much of the existing literature on FGC is that it largely "overlooks the cultural, political, and historical contexts of the various types of genital cutting performed by different actors in widely varying contexts" (Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2000, 19). A monolith is made out of FGC and practicing cultures, such as novelist Alice

Walker (1992) who writes about generalized FGC practices in a generalized, fictionalized African culture. Anthropologists such as Ellen Gruenbaum (1996) contend that the role of anthropologists in the discourse surrounding FGC is to provide cultural and historical perspectives and analyses as to why the practice continues as well as provide forces of change in various cultural contexts (457).

For example, so much of the literature and studies that concern FGC is focused on finding the "meaning" of the practice. So many answers are given: marriageability, female premarital chastity, fertility, tradition, cultural identity, personhood (Fusaschi 2023; Silverman 2004 428-29; World Health Organization 2011). The diverse range of explanations reflects the heterogeneity of the practice itself as well as the many differing perspectives on the female body and sexuality, particularly the female orgasm. Bell (2005) argues that sexuality cannot be reduced solely to anatomy and physiology; cultural values and beliefs are a component as well. Therefore, we cannot take Western understandings of sexuality as biological fact and apply them to FGC, a practice outside of Western culture. The misunderstandings and assumptions surrounding the female body is just one facet of FGC in which cultural context is necessary in order to obtain a complete and accurate understanding of the practice and its respective societies.

On the matter of sexual pleasure, there is also the issue of judging female pleasure and orgasm in non-Western societies by Western standards. Joyce Russell-Robinson notes these standards are likely based on Masters' and Johnson's model of female sexual pleasure "which places the clitoris at the center of female sexual response and orgasm" (1997, 55). Drawing from this model, we would assume that the partial or complete removal of the clitoris would have effects on orgasm, making it more difficult or even

impossible to reach an orgasm. Masters' and Johnson's model used solely American subjects, meaning this could not be applicable to African women which would largely dissipate the assumption that the sole motivation behind the procedure is sexual repression. Russell-Robinson states that "sexual response is more than physiology, as it has clear cultural and epistemological dimensions" (1997, 55). So, there is virtually no way to compare American female pleasure and orgasm to African female pleasure and orgasm, and therefore one cannot use the American standards for these terms in the context of African FGC.

Russel-Robinson also calls out the additional hypocrisy of Western activists, arguing that if we should question FGC, we should also be questioning plastic surgeries, like breast augmentation and rhinoplasty as well as procedures like clitoral piercings; surgeries that birthing people undergo, like episiotomies and Cesarean-sections; as well as male circumcision (Russell-Robinson 1997, 55). Another stark comparison can be made to the increasingly popular labiaplasty which is often performed to meet Western cultural standards of what a vulva should look like. Labiaplasty is, at its core, female genital cutting. Some of these procedures or surgeries are performed for different reasons, such as medical necessity, and not used as a rite of passage in Western culture. However, like FGC, some are performed or desired for aesthetic reasons, or for cleanliness in the case of male circumcision. However, each one of these surgeries, including circumcision, should only be performed on consenting individuals who are at the maturity to make such decisions. Something could also be said for the overuse of episiotomies and C-sections, but these are (usually) not pressured cultural rites of passage like FGC often is. On a similar note, what is known as the "husband stitch" is yet another example of procedures

on female genitalia, often performed on nonconsenting people, that is practiced in Western societies but goes unnoticed in talks surrounding FGC. These examples further display Westerners' hypocrisy surrounding this issue. However, while 'unnecessary mutilation' is certainly an issue that should be addressed more in Western countries, that does not mean that we should completely ignore the issue of FGC in African or other non-Western societies purely because related issues are a problem in Western societies.

Transnational discussions of female genital are almost exclusively founded on Western ideas of cultures and customs—deeply intertwined with ethnocentrism, or judging other cultures by the standards and customs of one's own culture. Western activists against the custom typically do not attempt to understand the issue in its entirety, consequently making prejudiced assumptions that result in the perpetuation of harmful and often false claims and arguments that engage in negative stereotypes, such as the "ignorant, barbaric African."

These ideas then infiltrate reformations proposed and implemented to eradicate the practice. This often results in ineffective programs that may likely be harmful to the affected peoples and their culture; it could also magnify their distrust of Western "help" that has history dating back to the age of colonialism. Western domination of discourse and activism against female circumcision has deeply influenced popular notions of and approaches to the practice, and subsequently negatively affected practicing cultures. This is seen in Leila Ahmed's concept of 'colonial feminism' which sees these aspects of nationalism, ethnocentrism, and cultural development in the feminist movement; Much of feminism holds a selective concern for minority women's oppression and argues that "progress for women could be achieved only through abandoning the native culture"

(Ahmed 1992, 244). One of the reasons that African/Muslim women are confused about the Western—typically feminist—obsession with female circumcision or veiling, is that there are several much more pressing and "important" issues that Western countries have played a part in causing or exacerbating. Why are they only concerned with "saving" non-Western women from what they deem barbaric practices?

Though the surge of activism against female genital cutting is generally thought to have begun during second-wave feminism (L. Thomas 2000, 2003)—which focused on the legal, economic, and social rights of women—Westerners actually became aware of the practice during colonialism (Abu-Lughod 2002; Abusharaf 2006; Gruenbaum 2005; Van Bavel 2022a) and then, Western obsession with female circumcision rose during the 1920s with first-wave feminism (Boddy 2007). Like today, Western feminists of both eras were speaking out for the women who they deemed to be oppressed and voiceless, hoping to eradicate the “barbaric” practice of female genital cutting. Their efforts were not met with success as the practice persevered. In the 1970s, the sensationalization of female circumcision was initiated with feminism’s second surge; this era and its effects on the subject of female genital cutting are seen in current discourse and activism surrounding the practice. In detailing the history of opposition to FGC, Janice Boddy (2007) notes that the popular ideologies of both these areas were intertwined with their feminism’s concerns about female genital cutting. The first wave of feminism emphasized infibulation’s negative effects on childbirth which reflected the idea that womanhood was connected to childrearing and the womb (Boddy 2007, 36). When the practice was rediscovered in second-wave feminism, there was a focus on the excision of the clitoris and its effect on sexual fulfillment, reflecting the rise of the idea of the clitoris

as crucial to female sexual pleasure (Boddy 2007, 36; Mascia-Lees 2010)). Western concerns of FGC have historically been related to the current circulating cultural attitudes. The effort to end FGC is almost exclusively focused on the procedure itself and how it relates to the popular humanitarian ideologies; the lives and hardships of the affected women are not prioritized or even taken into account at times.

Eradicating FGC is still, at least partially, viewed as a part of the fight for sexual liberation of women. During this fight for sexual liberation—particularly with the publication of works like *The Hite Report* and *Our Bodies Ourselves* (Hite 1976; Boston Women's Health Book Collective 1973)—universalistic assumptions about female pleasure and orgasm were made popular: the clitoris is thought of as a fundamental component of the female orgasm, and anyone who does not fit this clitoral model is "accused of ignorance and false consciousness" (Bell 2005, 134). Though it is the predominant idea, human sexuality cannot be reduced to anatomy and physiology; cultural beliefs and values are important components as well. Both the generalization of female sexual pleasure and the overemphasis of the effects of FGC led to misconstrued ideas that completely ignore the effects culture can have on biology and biological processes like sexual pleasure (Bell 2005; Dettwyler 1994). Another example is the prevailing idea that FGC is done solely for the purpose of enhancing male sexual satisfaction or to repress a woman's sexuality; however, while there are likely elements of these motives in practices of the custom, FGC is most often seen in its practicing cultures as a rite of passage in which one becomes a woman and is associated with purity, fertility, and the advancement of one's social status (Silverman 2004, 429). But because the subject of FGC as well as the female body is seen through a Western feminist or

humanitarian lens, the practice seemingly cannot be understood any other way than as a barbaric tool of patriarchal oppression.

The discourse surrounding the custom is deeply intertwined with ethnocentric and long-rejected concepts of social evolution, namely the division between the civilized West and the barbaric non-Western societies that are waiting to be enlightened (Gruenbaum 2005; Shell-Duncan & Hernlund 2000). Boddy (2007) notes that in this discourse "power relations are seemingly subverted even as they are maintained;" while Western activists speak of sisterhood and a humanitarian "we," there is still an underlying power dynamic between the civilized and uncivilized, the developed and the underdeveloped (53). The failure to confront the harmful ideas and dynamics of the Western lens results in the perpetuation of ethnocentric ideas and actions that have historically harmed non-Western groups by trying to instill Western standards into their culture. These justifications were made from Western colonization and are now being made for Western intervention and control of female circumcision and their respective societies. In the same perspective, affected women are seen as passive, voiceless victims in need of being saved by Western intervention (Abu-Lughod 2003; Ahmed 1992; Mascia-Lees 2010). Not only does this infantilization and dismissal of non-Western women ignore the women who advocate for female genital cutting and/or are practitioners of it, but it also disregards the women who oppose the practice and are actively—and successfully—changing it within their communities.

What is missing from the conversation is the voices of these societies, especially the affected women, both either advocating or resisting (Abusharaf 2006; Mahmood 2001). When they are present, they are often overshadowed, and their concerns or beliefs

are misconstrued, trivialized, and dismissed (Mascia-Lees 2010; Russel-Robinson 1997; Shell-Duncan 2008). Western voices dominate the discourse, and because of this, "indigenous explanations for genital cutting are presented out of context, simplified, and hyperbolized, then dismissed as irrational or based on superstition" (Boddy 2007, 53). This is additionally related to generalizations of female pleasure as noted before. Non-Western perspectives that differ from the current Western view are not taken seriously; they are reduced to a lack of knowledge or awareness, something to be fixed in accordance with Western standards.

The exclusions of non-Western perspectives is a problem within international agencies as well. Organizations like the World Health Organization and the United Nations (UN) have attempted to play a role in ameliorating female genital cutting (Darby 2016, 155; Bell 2005), but issues with ethnocentrism, ignoring the cultural aspects of the issue, and not prioritizing the affected women and cultures are prevalent in their efforts. The World Health Organization, for example, condemns FGC as a public health issue; however, WHO also opposes measures to ensure the practice is being done safely in order to minimize health risk, such as medicalization of the practice, claiming this undermines the efforts to eradicate female genital cutting (World Health Organization 2022a). Like many, WHO takes the "zero-tolerance" approach to the practice, which means it advocates for the complete eradication of the practice and is against alternative ameliorations such as the medicalization of the practice or less severe forms such as Type IV forms, even though this has been proven to be unsuccessful and cause more harm (Darby 2016).

Kenya is most often pointed to as a model in its fight against female genital cutting as the prevalence of FGC saw a decline from 32 percent to 21 percent in nine years, from 2003 to 2014 (Van Bavel 2022a, 3743). The effort to end the practice in Kenya, as in virtually all African countries, began with colonial officials and missionaries attempting to eradicate the "barbaric" practice through "law, education, and exclusion from church membership and privileges" (Van Bavel 2022a, 3743). FGC was just one of many African rites and rituals that were suppressed during the time of colonialism. Through the rise of second-wave feminism in the 1970s as well as the 1990s in which FGC was classified as a human rights violation in the 1993 Vienna World Conference on Human Rights, opposition of and activism against the custom has substantially grown (Sullivan 1994, 152; Van Bavel 2022a).

Kenya's prime achievement against FGC is the Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation Act of 2011, also called the "Anti-FGM Act" (Kenya Law Reports). This legislation is significantly more extensive than most national laws against FGC. Van Bavel (2022b) notes that Kenya's Anti-FGM Act outlaws the performance of FGC, as well as outlawing:

> procuring, aiding and abetting the practice of FGM; procuring a person to perform FGM in another country; allowing the use of premises for FGM; the possession of tools and equipment for the purposes of FGM; failure to report awareness of FGM to a law enforcement officer…and the use of derogatory or abusive language against a woman for having not undergone FGM or against a man for marrying or supporting that woman. (Van Bavel 2022b, 2)

This legislation completely criminalizes FGC regardless of age or consent. It was celebrated transnationally by anti-FGC activists and organizations. The Anti-FGM Act was proposed by two Kenyan women who were from communities that practiced FGC

and wished for stricter legislation against the practice following their own struggles evading it. They were supported by both Kenyan politicians and activists as well as organizations and activists outside of Kenya and/or Africa (Van Bavel 2022a).

Though the Anti-FGM Act was initiated by Kenyan women, it is still accused by opponents such as Dr. Tato Kamau of engaging in cultural imperialism as an attempt to instill Western values on Kenyan society. Cultural imperialism is one argument by Dr. Tato Kamau's case to overturn the Anti-FGM Act, one of the most prominent opponents to this law; additionally, she argues that the act infringes on women's cultural rights, their right to healthcare, as well as to gender equality (Van Bavel 2022b). Making the cultural relativist argument, she states that all cultures are equally valid; one cannot be superior to another; and that communities should be able to practice their culture as they see fit without outside intervention or imposition (Van Bavel 2022b, 9-11).

The debate of female genital cutting typically takes the form of cultural relativism vs. universalism, so enacting the ideology of cultural relativism is typical in fighting or criticizing efforts taken against FGC. However, Kamau goes beyond this, using "anti-FGM" language in her arguments of healthcare and gender equality against the criminalization of medicalized FGC. She claims that this forces women to attain the procedure in poor and unsafe conditions, therefore denying their right to quality healthcare. Challenging the popular notion that FGC perpetuates gender inequality, Kamau argues that the Anti-FGM Act discriminates against women due to the fact that it criminalizes female genital cutting while male genital cutting (circumcision) is legal and unrestricted (Van Bavel 2022b, 9-10). In most Kenyan society, female and male circumcision are typically viewed as complementary customs and carry the same

meaning as rites of passage that mark the transition into adulthood; while in Western society, the restriction of female—but not male—circumcision seems like a given since male circumcision is normalized and FGC is labeled as mutilation and an expression of patriarchal domination repressing female sexuality. This distinction makes evident the influences of Western thought within this legislation.

Although Kamau had a strong case against the Anti-FGM Act, she did not succeed in overturning it. One of the claims the judges make is that Kamau wrongly assumes that all women above the age of eighteen are consenting to FGC. They argue that due to "societal pressures," women are "as vulnerable as children" (Van Bavel 2022b, 11). Not only is this a blatantly obvious example of the infantilization of women, but it also perpetuates the further infantilization of African women and thus the view that African women need to be "saved" from FGC—from their culture. While there may be some truth to the judges' claims of coercion and pressures to be circumcised, the solution is not criminalizing the practice as a whole. For example, Kenyan women, as well as women in most societies, face societal pressures to get married, but the solution to that is not legislating a complete ban on marriage. These solutions undermine Kenyan women's agency and their right to choose.

The reactions to the Anti-FGM Act and other similar efforts play out in various ways within practicing communities. Though some have abandoned FGC, it has never and will never be completely eradicated with the sole solution of legislation because the custom is such an integral piece of the social fabric of many Kenyan groups. In Van Bavel's (2022a) fieldwork, one of the Kenyan women he interviewed said, "not being circumcised means you don't exist, that you are actually dead" (3749). In reaction to

legislation like the Anti-FGM Act, some choose to practice less severe forms—such as Type IV forms—and oftentimes, the custom goes underground to evade prosecution. In doing so, the rituals and the ceremonies that typically accompany FGC are lost in fear of being caught. However, as Van Bavel (2022a) shows, some families have taken advantage of this secrecy to "stage" the custom; they pretend their daughters have been cut, thereby gaining the societal benefits that result from FGC. That is what is important: the status. The actual cutting is symbolic of this, and in turn giving them more respect and freedom, allowing them to be married, and allowing them to belong.

"Outsider" efforts seem focused on finding the ultimate strategy to ending FGC, a one-size-fits-all that can be implemented successfully in every practicing community. But this does not exist. As Graamans et al. (2019a) found in their study, due to the diverse variations of the ritual spanning numerous practicing groups as well as how the practice has changed over time, "an implemented intervention that works one day will not necessarily work in the future" This means that any amelioration must be tailored to each community and continuously reevaluated to ensure its endurance and effectiveness. Another aspect that Graamans et al. (2019a) found to be important is the participation and involvement of the community in the discussion and execution of solutions and programs—something that many ameliorations fail to do. This is often why Western strategies fail to be effective: they focus on the physical act of cutting and do not prioritize the communities. A popular strategy is that of Rhoda Howard who advocates for legislation allowing women to "opt out of traditional practices" and education programs, rather than an outright ban (Donnelly 1984, 418-19). While Howard's strategy rightly attempts to protect women's cultural rights and their agency to choose; the

education programs she argues for raise the issue of cultural imperialism. Many organizations have tried to implement these awareness campaigns, and while they might play a hand in the decrease of the practice, they are not as effective as they appear.

Many of these organizations and programs possess elements of ethnocentrism and savior mentality. An employee from an organization targeting FGC told Van Bavel (2022a), "We try to enlighten them about the health effects, but they are just stubborn. They love this culture so much. They refuse to change, even when they know how it can harm their girls" (3754). This exemplifies what needs to be fixed in the efforts surrounding FGC. As noted earlier, Western activists typically think of Africans as needing to be saved from themselves, perpetuating negative stereotypes, like the ignorant, barbaric society, which have historically been used to justify colonization and various forms of oppression; this also contributes to Africans' distrust of Western intervention. Additionally, the way outsiders target female circumcision leaves affected women feeling like they must defend their culture as a whole, even if they are not necessarily defending female circumcision.

This all goes to show that any discussion or ameliorations surrounding female genital cutting must prioritize the practicing communities, particularly the women within them, as well as taking into account the sociocultural context of FGC in each group. Ameliorating the practice starts with eliminating the Western bias of discourse, practicing cultural relativity in avoiding ethnocentric assumptions and stereotypes from being perpetuated, and rather than speak over them or on behalf of them, giving affected women a place to speak for themselves.

Examining How Negative Stereotypes are Reinforced through Popular Media

In today's era of unprecedented media, information is available more than ever, with older forms of media, like newspapers, magazines, and television as well as newer forms like social media. The rise of social media has aided in transforming the landscape of activism and social movements, including transnational feminism. With these platforms, people from all over the world can connect, share ideas and opinions, and influence others. This interconnectedness has fueled the globalization of social issues, shining a spotlight on topics that were once confined to local discussions. Global feminism and activism have grown to an even more prominent force, leveraging various media platforms to advocate for gender equality and challenge entrenched social norms across the globe. Among these is the discourse surrounding FGC and its intersection with mainstream feminism. Social media has provided an extremely large collection of information that can be accessed globally. It provides diverse views that shape its users' opinions as well as perceptions of a multitude of topics, including FGC and feminism.

Popular media as well as news media play a significant part in determining what the important social issues are for the public (McQuail 1979; Strömberg 2001). With FGC being such a complex practice in both the procedure as well as its ritual and cultural aspects, the media gets to decide how FGC is characterized, portrayed and defined by the general public, including how its causes, its effects, its moral concerns, and suggested solutions. Analyzing popular and news media can provide insight on how FGC is defined and perceived by the public, particularly by Western audiences. It offers an avenue in examining how dominant ideologies and concepts—which are typically of Western

nature—are intertwined with how FGC is perceived and how these can influence the narrative surrounding FGC and feminism.

In conducting an analysis of how FGC is portrayed and represented in the media, particularly within feminist and activist ideology, using anthropological frameworks is essential for a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics. Cultural relativism, which is a tenet of anthropological thought, provides a lens to examine practices like FGC within its specific cultural contexts rather than through external judgements and ethnocentric ideology.

The portrayal of FGC in popular media reflects the mainstream perception of the practice, including many inaccuracies and misconceptions, such as the disproportionate focus on infibulation. It is noted that the common themes in discussions and media concerning FGC are comparing FGC to male circumcision—both likening and differentiating, categorizing FGC as a harmful and unethical practice, arguing FGC is a normal tradition, emphasis of religion and culture as a motive, related gender equality issues, and a call for education and/or cultural relativism to change or cope with the practice (Wondwossen and Konkle 2020). A significant amount of the stigma expressed in these comments were toward the practice itself (33 percent), the parents of the affected girls (20 percent), practicing cultures (21 percent), or religions of the practicing communities (9 percent) (Wondwossen & Konkle 2020). Because the main centuries-long debate concerning FGC has argued why the practice is done and what should be done to stop it, there is no "unified notion of what 'accurate' coverage would look like" (Sobel 2015, 388). There is an extreme variation of responses to FGC and how the practice is perceived and discussed about. However, it is consistently portrayed as a

problematic issue. Sobel notes that in her research, she found that FGC is most often framed in relation to culture; while human rights frameworks were present, they were not as prevalent (2015). There is a very Western-centric view of FGC that oversimplifies the "issue" as well as the "solution;" this is seen in the prevalent suggested remedies of policy changes and education (Darby 2016; Van Bavel 2022b).

There is a heavy use of ethnocentric language used. For example, FGC is often called a "barbaric practice" such as in television shows, Instagram posts, and YouTube videos as well as their comment sections (Wondwossen and Konkle 2020; SBS Insight 2013). This language, reminiscent of colonial-era ideals, is used to frame FGC as a savage practice with a non-Western cultural basis which often presents non-Western culture in a monolithic lens. In their study of comments on YouTube videos concerning FGC, Wondwossen and Konkle (2020) found that the tone was overall significantly negative. They also note the charged language in what the practice is called; those opting to call the practice "circumcision" or "cutting" argue the term "mutilation" is derogatory and stigmatizing (Wondwossen and Konkle 2020, 7). There was also a large proportion of politically charged posts: blaming conservatives for FGC continuation, blaming liberals, blaming feminist for imposing on anti-FGC campaigns (Wondwossen and Konkle 2020, 9).

SBS Insight, an Australian talk show that showcases discussions on various topics, had an episode (2013) on female genital cutting. It included experts in various aspects of FGC both in practicing countries and Australia as well as women who have undergone the procedure: Ubah Abdullahi from Somalia who underwent infibulation at 6 years old and Fuambai Ahmadu who had grown up in the United States and made the

decision at 21 to go back to Sierra Leone and undergo a clitoridectomy. There is a comparison between Ubah and Fuambai's experiences with FGC. Ubah agrees with the term mutilation and says the experience was traumatizing, leaving her with lifelong consequences; while Fuambai celebrates her circumcision and says it makes her feel empowered as a woman. Among the audience are figures such Juliana Nkrumah who founded an FGC awareness campaign, doctors who have treated affected women and girls, a lawyer with expertise in Australian law concerning FGC, and scholars who have studied FGC and its practicing communities. The discussion included many different perspectives that explored the complexities of FGC. On the topic of the practice and the significance of its cultural basis, notable moment comes from Juliana Nkrumah who says, "When you separate the procedure from the cultural milieu, that is mutilation and that is violence against women; when we place it within its cultural milieu, that is a completely different practice" (SBS Insight 2013, 17:38-17:46).

FGC is portrayed in short-lived B plots on numerous television shows. In these select shows, they all showcase FGC in the form of infibulation, perpetuating the disproportionate and inaccurate focus on infibulation—the most extreme form of female genital cutting—rather than the less extreme and more common forms of excision and clitoridectomy. In the second episode of the second season of "The Good Doctor," titled "Middle Ground," the affected woman has undergone infibulation and experiences extreme pain until she undergoes a complete vaginal reconstruction. The episode only lightly touches on the cultural motives of the practice or why it is celebrated in practicing cultures, rather focusing on the motive of making the girl desirable for marriage and the extreme medical consequences of the cutting (Shore 2018). In the sixth episode of the

sixth season of “Call the Midwife,” the affected woman has also undergone infibulation and the difficulties that infibulation is believed to cause for childbirth are portrayed as well as a patriarchal dominance in FGC and its associated cultures (H. Thomas 2017). In the seventh season of “Orange is the New Black,” an Egyptian woman, Shani, underwent infibulation at age twelve; through her relationship with another woman, Nicky, the difficulties and pain during sexual intimacy are portrayed (Kohan 2019). These shows often perpetuate negative and incorrect stereotypes of FGC, miseducating their audiences which contribute to the Western sensationalization and outrage over the practice.

The framing of FGC in the media transforms it into a story and subsequently creates the ability to dictate how the public as well as policy makers understand and react to the practice. Analyzing the media coverage of FGC sheds further light on the inconsistencies and variation in the coverage and in turn how it is presented to the Western audience. This analysis aids in acknowledging the complexities of the practice and the difficulties in the global handling of FGC which can help in retiring the ethnocentrism and ignorance common in transnational discussion of FGC.

Western feminism and global activism have played significant roles in shaping discourse and efforts concerning FGC. However, these contributions have often resulted in harmful outcomes due to the globalization of social issues, particularly through various forms of media. Western feminism oftentimes approaches FGC through a lens reminiscent of cultural imperialism, viewing it solely as a form of oppression that needs to be eradicated without considering the cultural contexts in which it occurs. This approach can alienate communities where FGC is practiced, leading to resistance and backlash against efforts to address the issue. Furthermore, the portrayal of FGC in

Western media often perpetuates sensationalized and stigmatizing narratives, further deepening misconceptions and stereotypes surrounding the practice.

The rise of social media has amplified selective voices and subsequently shaping public opinion and perceptions as well as influencing policy discussions. While social media platforms provide spaces of activism and awareness-raising, they can also contribute to the spread of misinformation and reinforce harmful stereotypes. The rapid dissemination of information through social media can sometimes prioritize sensationalism over nuanced understanding, leading to oversimplified and over polarized discussions.

The globalization of social issues like female genital cutting through various forms of media has both positive and negative implications. While they can be beneficial in spreading awareness and information on various topics, they also have the potential to perpetuate harmful discourse and reinforce existing power imbalances. Moving forward, it is crucial for Western feminism and global activism to engage with FGC as well as similar cultural practices, rituals, and body modifications in a culturally sensitive and nuanced manner, prioritizing the voices and agency of affected communities.

CHAPTER III

How Postcolonial Feminist Lens Frames Western Understanding of FGC

There is a rising wave in third-wave feminism that focuses on challenging traditional norms of women's sexuality. This sect has merged into what some call fourth-wave feminism or postcolonial feminism and has critiqued Western feminist FGC discourse in a similar fashion to anthropologists (Abusharaf 2006; hooks 1994; Yu 2009). This sector of feminist scholars argue that traditional Western feminism ignores hierarchies among women, reproduces ethnocentric and racist narratives that infantilize women in practicing regions by deeming them passive and in need of intervention, and reduces the narrative of FGC into one based on Western concepts of freedom, equality, and autonomy (Njambi 2009).

Abu-Lughod (2002) argues that feminism is viewed as a Western construction, and, through feminism, the dichotomy of the West and East has been perpetuated and underlies ideals and solutions—whether consciously or subconsciously. This foundation of colonial ideals pushes the idea that Western feminists are enlightened, saving their victim counterparts, which subsequently results in the idea of "being feminist means being Western" (Abu-Lughod 2002, 788). This concept typically has prevented feminist ideals from entering non-Western societies for the sake of being deemed cultural imperialism—Western ideals being pushed onto them. Using Marilyn Frye's "arrogant perception" (Frye 1983), Stanlie James (1998) describes how Western feminists distance themselves from third-world women, treating them as passive, voiceless, and in need of being saved as well as how these actions have encouraged and continue to support

colonialism (1033). More recently, many feminist scholars reject this dichotomy of Western and non-Western, extending the inclusivity and awareness of culture and context that began to rise with third-wave and postcolonial feminism. These frameworks center on the perspectives of women about their own cultural realities.

Historically, feminism largely only possesses a single idea of what a liberated woman looks like: a Western woman. There is little thought that the women whom the West is trying to save may have a different, or alternative, idea of freedom, or tools of freedom. Liberal assumptions of freedom and agency are perpetuated in transnational discussion, generalizing these notions as if they are universally understood in the same meaning. Based on the concept of intersectionality, the idea of "universal sisterhood" that has been perpetuated by feminists for decades is reductionist and ignorant of how factors such as class, race, sexuality, and religion intersect to produce various experiences and impact how oppression affects a woman's life (Gruenbaum 2005). Feminist scholar bell hooks (1984) calls this universalization "common oppression," which she argues is a "false and corrupt platform disguising and mystifying the true nature of women's varied and complex social reality" (44). The Western/liberal notion of freedom and agency is associated with the rejection of traditions and norms. This excludes women who take agency in their choice to continue tradition, who do not use their freedom to subvert norms.

The intersectionality of gender with other social categories including race, religion, and class further complicates the dynamics of Western feminism's engagement with non-Western contexts. Anthropologist Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality exhibits how the experiences of women are shaped by multiple

intersecting systems of oppression (Crenshaw 1989). Within the context of non-Western countries, this intersectionality necessitates a nuanced understanding of how gender interacts with various cultural, political, and economic factors.

An anthropological perspective reveals the Western ethnocentrism and savior mentality embedded within the history of feminism, particularly concerning non-Western countries. By critically examining these dynamics, feminists can work towards a more inclusive and culturally sensitive approach to global gender equality. Recognizing the agency and diversity of women worldwide is essential for fostering truly equitable and empowering feminist movements.

Rogaia Mustafa Abusharaf (2000), an anthropologist and feminist scholar, believes that FGC must end in order for women to obtain basic human rights; however, unlike most who take this position, she also emphasizes the need for understanding the cultural context surrounding the practice (152). Her interviews with Sudanese feminists contend that FGC is a symptom—not a cause—of patriarchal oppression in practicing communities (Abusharaf 2000, 158). Through this culturally specific lens, the Sudanese women interviewed advocate for fundamental issues of women's rights and freedom: the right to education, the right to work outside the home, the right to political participation, freedom from poverty (Abusharaf 2000, 158). Addressing these more pressing issues provides women with tools to fight their own oppression and works toward "freedom," however they may perceive it. Abusharaf (2000), extending the words of feminist scholar Elizabeth Weed, argues that "feminist knowledge and approaches to the 'woman's question' should be situated within the specific histories and conditions from which they emanate" (156).

It seems that in societies where FGC is practiced, these rites actually raise a woman's status or role rather than suppressing her. Female genital cutting marks the transition from girlhood to womanhood; just as male circumcision marks the transition to manhood. They are seen as “more” equal to men (however still not equal). She is eligible for marriage, for more freedom. Similar to Islamic veiling, FGC is seen as a “liberating invention” rather than an oppressive act (Abu-Lughod 2002, 785). Veiling has been called “portable seclusion” by anthropologist Hanna Papanek (1982) in that it “enabled women to move out of segregated living spaces while still observing the basic moral requirements of separating and protecting women from unrelated men” (Abu-Lughod 2002, 785).

Anthropologist Saba Mahmood (2001) explores human agency within these structures of subordination, challenging Western liberal assumptions about freedom and agency, and attempting to understand how women “resist the dominant male order by subverting the hegemonic meanings of cultural practices and redeploying them for their own interests and agendas” (205). Mahmood gives instances of how women assert and maintain their agency using established religious traditions within the male dominated space of religion. The women’s mosque movement seeks to reorganize life in accordance with orthodox standards that the women believe has been reduced to folklore and custom as well as distanced due to Westernization (2001, 204). This subversion of traditional and patriarchal dynamics does not fit into secular-liberal standards or ideals and therefore has been restricted and sanctioned. However, in a feminist manner, these women in movements such as the women’s mosque movement are taking leadership as women in roles that have historically and traditionally been restricted to men. In Boddy’s work in

northern Sudan, she writes about a women's *zar* cult, which is a healing cult of women who use Islamic idioms and spirit mediums (1989). Boddy terms this subversive process a "counter-hegemonic process"; women are using tools of their own oppression to assert their agency and value (1989, 5). The "counter-hegemonic process" can be seen in FGC as well; for example, many women, such as Fuambai Ahmadu featured on the FGC episode of SBS Insight (2013), view female genital cutting as women's empowerment, not only elevating their status in society but also as a coming-of-age ritual in that FGC is what makes them a woman.

Building on Foucault's work (McLaren 2012), feminist scholar Judith Butler's (1997) paradox of subjectivation argues that the means that maintain subordination are the same means that maintain self-conscious identity and agency. This encourages further exploration of how complex the concept of freedom is and how agency cannot be simplified as synonymous with resistance. Foucault and Butler's work is also particularly significant in the context of FGC, in "drawing our attention to the specific ways in which one performs a certain number of operations on one's thoughts, body, conduct, and ways of being, in order to 'attain a certain kind of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality' in accord with a particular discursive tradition" (Mahmood 2001, 210). Past perspectives of gender have emphasized the foundation of biological systems and cultural symbols; however, Butler (1997) suggests that gender is "not an inner core or static essence, but a reiterated enactment of norms, ones that produce, retroactively, the appearance of gender as an abiding interior depth" (14). She argues that gender is a performance; it is a "doing." This can be seen in the practice of female genital cutting as well as other rites of passage and gendered coming-of-age rituals.

In the liberal notion of freedom, there is an association with individual autonomy; for an individual or action to be free, it must be completely of their own free will instead of by instruction of tradition or coercion (Christman 1991). The universalization of this concept is where the issue with FGC lies; in the Western liberal lens, which influences much of feminist ideology, FGC is never an act of freedom or agency due to the fact that it is in line with the cultural traditions of the practicing society (Mahmood 2001). Freedom and agency are historically and culturally specific. What may be viewed as passive and docile from a progressivist or feminist perspective might actually be a form of agency and "must be understood in the context of the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment" (Mahmood 2001, 212).

The common thread through both anthropological as well as postcolonial feminist frameworks is the call for intersectionality. This concept challenges traditional assumptions made by the West and avoids the oversimplification of complex communities and practices, rather showcasing oppression as much more complex than previously thought. Factors like race, gender, class, culture, and region all interconnect in variables that produce an individual's life experiences. A monolith cannot be made of oppression just as it cannot be made of non-Western practices, non-Western communities, non-Western women.

CHAPTER IV

Conclusion: Reevaluating FGC in a Culturally Relative Lens

In an article published recently, the New York Times focuses on Gambian women's attempts to repeal an anti-FGC law and bring it back as a legalized practice (Maclean 2024). Such a recent example of undoing decades of anti-FGC efforts in Gambia demonstrates how important it is to understand the multiple interpretations of the practice of FGC, as well as the culturally-specific situations in which it is practiced. In the complex discourse surrounding female genital cutting, there are many factors that influence and impact the perception and treatment of the practice, including religious beliefs, Western-centric influence, feminist perspectives, as well as the conflict between tradition and "progress." These harmful factors often lead to negative and inaccurate assumptions and stereotypes of the practice.

Human rights activists as well as feminists become outraged by the practice based on their own ethnocentrism and failure to fully understand the complexity of FGC. This results in ineffective ameliorations and the perpetuation of ideology and discourse that harms practicing communities, such as the infantilization of minority women as well as the minimization and erasure of their voices and agency.

FGC requires approaches that acknowledge the intersections of multiple factors including gender, age, socio-economic background, culture, religion, and institutional barriers. In these frameworks of third-wave and postcolonial feminism as well as anthropological frameworks, the profound emphasis on context is a constant. Context matters. Context is crucial to the understanding of not only FGC but all cultural customs

and traditions, particularly those that are not fully understood by outsiders. Multiple perspectives on FGC aid in broadening feminist discourses and the mainstream perspectives on FGC and on other practices have not been fully understood by the West.

Recognizing diverse perspectives, empowering women in their religious and cultural contexts, and fostering constructive dialogues that take into account global perspectives and local realities decenter Western colonial overlay of thought. Holistic and culturally sensitive approaches to FGC require respecting practicing women's agency, exploring the historical and cultural specifics of the practice, and engaging local communities if we are to achieve complete understanding and lasting change.

The definition of culture that every anthropology undergraduate learns is that of Edward Burnett Tylor's: "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities acquired by man as a member of society" (1871). Historically, culture has been viewed by scholars such as anthropologists and sociologists in a monolithic lens, almost completely determining the characteristics and personality of its members.

Since the days of Tylor, anthropology has shifted from the static and homogenous portrayal of culture to a more dynamic and specific concept; however, the remnants of Tylor's definition underlie much of global discourse, such as in the subject of female genital cutting. The concept of intersectionality combats this simple and harmful notion of viewing individuals as basically products of their culture in both modern anthropological and postcolonial feminist frameworks. It emphasizes the variation within cultures and within communities and promotes the agency of individuals as *producers* of culture. However, even through so much variation, we are all connected,

and as noted in the concept of intersectionality, all forms of oppression and human experience are connected. Understanding one form of oppression requires an understanding of its intersections with other systems of power and privilege. Only through an approach can we truly address cultural practices in a manner that respects the agency and autonomy of individuals while confronting broader systems of inequality and inequality.

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