

The Evolution of Feminist Thought About Female Genital Cutting

Sociologists for Women in Society Fact Sheet

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The term “female genital cutting” refers to a set of permanent, sometimes extensive, and often debilitating physical changes to female genitalia. These can include removal of the external clitoris and the fusing of the anterior vulva. The World Health Organization estimates that 100 million women or more in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia have undergone FGC. Usually performed at or before puberty, the degree of consent, health consequences, and the conditions of the procedure (how hygienic the environment, specialized the tools, and skilled the practitioner) vary tremendously. Because of the wide variety of practices, I use the plural acronym: FGCs.

Over the past thirty years, FGCs have become an iconic example of women’s oppression. Within the feminist academy, they are a hotly debated issue that often inflames the divide between feminists who emphasize solidarity among women and those who argue that feminist discourse that does not take into account how women differ—e.g., by race, nation, and class—can be, itself, oppressive to women. Understanding feminist conflict about the practice is important for academics, but also for teachers who are educating a new round of feminists, and activists who are working for social justice.

In this fact sheet I trace the evolution of feminist thought about FGCs. First, beginning with Fran Hosken, I discuss early academic engagement with FGCs. Next, I summarize the postcolonial critique of this engagement that turned attention away from FGCs themselves to the Western feminist discourse about FGCs. I then discuss the ongoing conversation. And, finally, I offer four areas of inquiry of particular interest to feminist sociologists that have been enriched by scholars who write about FGCs.

The current wave of feminist interest in FGCs began in 1976 when Fran Hosken began writing about them in her newsletter, *Women’s International Network News*.

Driven by ideas of “global sisterhood,” the notion that women around the world are united by patriarchy, Hosken’s goal was to inspire opposition and support for eradication efforts.

- To this end she coined the term “female genital mutilation” (FGM) to replace the term “female circumcision.”
- Hosken published dozens of essays and articles and four editions of her book, *The Hosken Report*, making her name synonymous with anti-FGC activism.
- Other work that shaped early knowledge of FGC was heavily influenced by Hosken. Collectively, this literature defined “female genital mutilation” as a disfiguring genital cutting procedure that happens to women in Africa.

Hosken and her contemporaries mobilized a generation of Western feminists.

Some scholars framed FGCs as an extreme example of violence against women, signifying the presence of an especially barbaric form of patriarchy.

- Terms like “horror,” “brutal,” “cruel,” “torture,” and “inhuman” were used to describe FGC.
- Women (and sometimes men) in communities that practice FGCs were sometimes characterized as cruel, ignorant, or helpless.

Other scholars, in response, framed the practices as a form of patriarchal oppression that was unfamiliar, but not uniquely barbaric.

- Their work included attempts to mediate anticipated ethnocentrism in readers. Anthropologists, for example, offered empirical evidence that FGCs were culturally meaningful, even “lov[ing],” in context. Others offered institutional and structural explanations for why FGCs were often a rational choice.
- These scholars argued in favor of alliance between Western and non-Western women instead of top-down, transnational intervention by the West.

Beginning in earnest in the 1990s, a postcolonial critique of the early literature turned attention away from FGCs themselves to the academic discourse about FGCs.

Part of a more general correction to Western feminist theory occurring contemporaneously, postcolonial scholars critiqued Western feminist “anti-FGM discourse” for ignoring hierarchies among women and, therefore, reproducing racist and imperialist narratives. Critics argued that:

- The term “female genital mutilation,” in defining all versions of the practice as disfiguring, disallows thoughtful consideration in favor of uncompromising and judgmental condemnation that is both insensitive and counterproductive. These critics advocate returning to the term “female circumcision” or to “female genital cutting,” which they felt was more purely descriptive.
- Western “anti-FGM discourse” demonizes and infantilizes people in communities that practice FGCs and, in doing so, affirms a false hierarchical binary between the West and the rest. The discourse, it was argued, erased the many similarities between “their” practices and “ours” and the fact that both women in FGC-practicing and non-practicing communities are subject to patriarchal oppression.
- The binary also erases the autonomy of African women and the fact that African women were already engaged in anti-FGC activism, positioning members of FGC-practicing communities as objects of intervention, not subjects in their own right.

FGCs play a distinct role in the ongoing discussion about feminist scholarship and activism across borders.

Postcolonial critics worry that feminists who object to FGCs are complicit with imperialist narratives, while feminists who object to FGCs want to be able to do so without incurring the imperialist label. Still others try to theorize us out of what some have called a “battle” at an “impasse.”

- Scholars argue that the postcolonial critique privileges cultural identities over gender solidarity. FGCs, from this perspective, are exactly the kind of gendered oppression that is unacceptably depoliticized by this approach.
- Further, some scholars believe that there is a point beyond which suspending judgment for moral or analytical purposes is unacceptable. They use FGCs to argue against cultural relativism in theory and cultural pluralism in practice.
- Others, however, argue that Western feminists should defer to women living in communities that practice FGCs who have a long tradition of anti-FGC activism; a few say that Western feminists should not be involved in FGC-related scholarship or activism at all.
- Scholars have responded by reconceptualizing culture as fractured, uneven, and negotiated. From this perspective, there is room for individuals both within and outside of

a culture to agitate for change and, thus, opportunities for feminist alliance across cultures.

Sociologists have come late to this discussion. Here I discuss four active areas of inquiry relevant to feminist sociologists that have been enriched by the involvement of scholars who write about FGCs.

Girls' and women's choices to undergo FGCs have called into question simplistic formulations of notions such as freedom, choice, and autonomy.

Reminiscent of debates over veiling and prostitution, scholars are questioning whether the choice to undergo genital cutting can only and should always be seen as non-autonomous.

- Two scholars who made the choice to undergo genital cutting as young adults challenge the idea that choosing genital cutting always indicates oppression.
 - Njambi (2004), who was born and raised in Kenya, reports that she threatened her Catholic parents that she would “run away from home and drop out of school” before they would allow her to be circumcised at age 16.
 - Ahmadu (2000), of the Kono in Sierra Leone, offers a more conflicted story of her own circumcision, yet she still argues that there is no conflict between being an educated woman and being in favor of the practices.
- In at least one instance girls have participated in organized defiance of authority figures in order to practice FGCs. Thomas (2000) analyzes a rebellion in British-controlled Kenya in 1956 in which that thousands of girls defied a ban against circumcision by purchasing razor blades and excising each other.

Some scholars have found it useful to compare and contrast FGCs with other genital cutting practices.

- Davis (2002) compares FGCs to labiaplasty. Both practices reflect the requirement that women conform to cultural expectations for their bodies, by knife if necessary. Most Westerners, however, have an ambivalent or apathetic response to labiaplasty, but are strongly opposed to FGCs. Davis argues that the differential evaluation of these two practices can be explained by their measurement with “entirely different yardsticks” infused with racial, national, and global hierarchies (p. 21).
- Njambi (2004) makes an argument in favor of the social construction of the body. Bringing FGCs into dialogue with several U.S. practices, she argues that notions of the “natural” and the “normal” body are culturally and historically contingent and that the framing of FGCs as “mutilation” instead of “enhancement” is based on the use of a Western lens.
- Bell (2005) argues that the fact that Americans are largely indifferent towards male genital cutting, but express outrage toward FGCs needs to be explained. To this end she discusses, among other points, how the social construction of female sexuality as fragile and male sexuality as robust makes it seem as if men's sexualities can withstand bodily alteration, but women's cannot.

Scholars have also used FGCs to think through the social construction of sexuality.

Western feminists' strong negative reaction to FGCs can be attributed, in part, to a culturally and historically contingent definition of liberation.

- Clitoridectomy appears to be a particularly horrendous form of women's oppression because U.S. feminists emphasize women's right to clitoral orgasm as one measure of women's liberation.
- In the meantime, for many women who are part of communities where cutting occurs, FGCs are far from their most challenging problem. Some resent Westerners who focus on sex while ignoring widespread poverty and disease (often a direct result of contemporary and historical Western exploitation).

Listening to women who have undergone genital cutting has also complicated our understanding of sexual pleasure.

- Many women with various types of genital cutting, including infibulation, report experiencing sexual desire, pleasure, and orgasm.
- Whether and which kinds of genital cutting practices actually eliminate sexual pleasure and orgasm is hotly debated.

Studying the abandonment of FGCs has contributed to our understanding of social change.

Boyle's (2002) book length project examines the diffusion of state-level anti-FGC policies in the 1990s.

- She argues that the case of FGCs supports a neoinstitutional understanding of globalization as a top-down process. Change resulted from a Western consensus that pressured nation-states to enact laws that often contradicted the desires of local populations.

Coming from a more social psychological perspective, Mackie (1996) theorized that both footbinding and FGCs were "self-enforcing conventions" that persisted because of collective commitment to the practices.

- He showed that footbinding ended when community members promised each other not to bind their daughters and to marry their sons to women who had not been bound. Mackie argued that a similar public shift in collective commitment would be required for the abandonment of FGCs.
- Today, successful abandonment efforts support his theory. The most well-known example of abandonment was accomplished by an organization working in Senegal called Tostan.
 - In 1997, encouraged by TOSTAN to set their own goals, women in Malicounda Bambara decided that they wanted to abandon FGC and made a public, collective commitment to do so.
 - Follow up studies confirm that approval and incidence of FGCs has decreased significantly and, according to TOSTAN, the approach has been used successfully in almost half of the villages in Senegal and in five other African countries.
- In contrast to the above examples, research by Leonard (2000) reminds us that social change is not always unidirectional, predictable, or instigated for purposes of gaining or preserving privilege. She tells of a "fad" for genital cutting in the 1980s. Against their parent's will and their community's norms, girls in Southern Chad began adopting the practice of genital cutting.

Activist Oriented E-Resources

Equality Now: www.equalitynow.org
FGC Network : www.fgmnetwork.org
FORWARD: www.forwarduk.org.uk

TOSTAN: www.tostan.org
VDAY: www.vday.org
World Health Organization: www.who.int

Further Reading

Fran Hosken and Other Early Influential Scholarship

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Examples of the Postcolonial Critique

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