

# Female Genital Cutting in Africa: The West and the Politics of 'Empowerment'

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AMY KNOX, MAR 19 2021

Female Genital Cutting (FGC), “the partial or total removal of the external genitalia, or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons” (Berg and Denison 2013:837), has become the symbol par excellence of patriarchal power for Western feminists and development organisations (Gosselin 1996 Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2000). While no monolithic explanation for its existence will suffice, a common thread has to do with making women more marriageable: by preserving family honor by keeping women chaste, attenuating women’s sexual response, and granting them the moral right to fertility (Afifi 2009 Akintunde 2010 Toubia and Sharief 2003). Due to a perceived lack of meaningful choice regarding decisions of their own bodies, women who are subjected to the practice are considered in Western development discourse to be overwhelming disempowered, that is: oppressed by the way in which unequal, gendered power relations presently shape their choices, opportunities, and well-being (Kabeer 2011 Mosedale 2005). Empowerment, in the view of those who coined and popularised the term (Moser 1989 Sen and Grown 1987), can thus be understood as a key mechanism for challenging such power relations in favour of women’s rights, and “gaining greater control over the sources of power” (Batiwala 1994:130 Kabeer 1994 Rowlands 1995).

However, while empowerment currently holds a prominent place within the gender equality agendas of academics, international institutions and development organisations – the term has become increasingly vague and malleable with regards to what constitutes empowerment and how this might be achieved (Batiwala 2007 Cornwall and Brock 2005 Cornwall and Rivas 2015 Parpart et al 2002). This paper thus takes FGC as an object of analysis, in order to address the critical opportunities and challenges presented by the appropriation of empowerment within international development, when mobilising a pursuit of “the common goal of protecting ‘female bodies’ from ‘harm’” (Njambi 2004:281). In order to approach this task, this essay will first detail the practice of FGC in Africa and situate it within its wider Western development context.

### Female Genital Cutting/Mutilation in Africa

Internationally, FGC is referred to as female genital ‘mutilation’ to reflect the extremity of the practice. The United Nations (2020) estimates that FGM has been performed on 200 million girls alive today, and in Africa as many as 3 million girls are at risk of being cut every year. There is evidence of FGC in 28 African countries, and figures suggest a prevalence of more than 70% in Burkina Faso, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Guinea, Mali, Mauretania, Northern Sudan, and Somalia (UNICEF 2020). The practice is commonly subdivided into three primary types, as depicted in table 1.

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<b>Type 1: Clitoridectomy</b>	Partial or total removal of the clitoris (a small sensitive part of the female genitals) and/or in very rare cases only, the prepuce (the fold of skin surrounding the clitoris)
<b>Type 2: Excision</b>	Partial or total removal of the clitoris and the labia minora, with or without excision of the labia majora (the labia are the 'lips' that surround the vagina)
<b>Type 3: Infibulation</b>	Narrowing of the vaginal opening through the creation of a covering seal. The seal is formed by cutting and repositioning the inner, or outer, labia, with or without removal of the clitoris
<b>Type 4: Other</b>	All other harmful procedures to the female genitalia for non-medical purposes e.g. pricking, piercing, incising, scraping or cauterizing the genital area

*Table 1: Classifications of female genital cutting. Source: World Health Organization (2008).*

The age at which girls undergo FGC varies substantially across countries and groups, but it generally occurs between infancy and late adolescence (Dalal et al 2010). The international norm against FGC emphasises the harmful consequence of the practice in several arenas:

FGM is recognized internationally as a violation of the human rights of girls and women. It reflects deep-rooted inequality between the sexes and constitutes an extreme form of discrimination against women. It is nearly always carried out on minors and is a violation of the rights of children. The practice also violates a person's rights to health, security and physical integrity, the right to be free from torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, and the right to life when the procedure results in death.

World Health Organization (2014:1).

Many governments in Africa, including Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Senegal, and Togo, have taken steps to curb the practice of FGC by criminalising it through statutory law (Ako and Akweongo 2009 Finke 2006 Leye et al 2007 Rahman and Toubia 2000). However, broad development history has shown that in isolation, a universalist stance embodied in legislation is at best ineffective, and at worst fundamentally *disempowering* (Cornwall and Brock 2005). In the case of FGC, the gulf between what Western feminists identify as ritualised child abuse and gender-based violence, and what the Africans in question view as a revered rite belonging to the domain of Africanity, ultimately prevented the effectiveness of top-down approaches in changing the minds of communities who practice FGC (Breitung 1996 Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2000). Wade (2011) notes the Western 'anti-FGM' campaigning discourse has at times strengthened the resolve of communities to continue cutting, by way of resisting culturally imperialist narratives. To be clear, it is a culturally imperialist narrative in which FGC is portrayed as indisputable evidence of African women as voiceless and passive victims: whose sexual and reproductive potential is controlled by 'barbaric' men, and whose genitals are mutilated in silence and without protest (James 1994 Kalev 2004 Okin 1998 Tripp 2002).

In short, confrontational programmes that do not take into consideration the complexities and the context of FGC have achieved little apart from alienate communities and revive animus regarding Western ethnocentrism, racism and cultural colonialism (Mgbako et al 2010). For Ako and Akweongo (2009), FGC therefore provides a key example

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of the importance of grassroots feminist organising as a means of redressing the structures of power, in order to depart from a one-size-fits-all 'global sisterhood' and 'universal patriarchy', towards engaging directly with target groups and expressing sensitivity to community concerns.

## **Mainstream Development: Empowerment as a Neo-liberal Approach**

As a result of state-level failures in redressing the gendered power relations at the heart of cultures themselves (Coomaraswamy 2002 Cornwall et al 2007 McEwan 2005), notions of 'empowering women' have gained a foothold in key statements from the WHO and United Nations regarding FGC. However, in keeping with the dominance of the neo-liberal ideology and its consumerist core, the version of empowerment that has historically been popularised by these organisations places emphasis on the self-optimising individual (Batiwala 2007 Cornwall 2016 Cornwall and Rivas 2015 Mohan and Hickey 2000). Within the interagency report 'Eliminating Female Genital Mutilation', the WHO (2008:15) states that "programmes which foster women's economic empowerment are likely to contribute to progress as they can provide incentives to change the patterns of traditional behaviour", a notion underpinned by the belief that "gainful employment empowers women in various spheres of their lives, influencing sexual and reproductive health choices". Such an approach to empowerment predicts that by improving women's access to material resources, and thereby reducing their dependence on male family members and marriage, the 'patriarchal risk' and uncertainty attendant on women's dependent status will be reduced: providing them with greater incentives to challenge, rather than comply with, FGC (Cain et al 1979 Kandiyoti 1988). While improving women's access to material resources is a valid goal in itself, in the pursuit of eliminating FGC it is problematic on several accounts.

For academics such as Bebbington et al (2007) and Cornwall (2016), it is significant that while the term empowerment has emerged within the domains of policy and practice, it has little resonance with more theoretical debates about power. Rather, this conceptualisation of empowerment is based on a harmony model of power: implying that "the empowerment of the powerless could be achieved within the existing social order, without any significant negative effects upon the power of the powerful" (Mohan and Hickey 2000:457). With the malleable body as the subject of culture and the product of power, this circumstance serves as a powerful reminder of Cornwall and Rivas' (2015) sentiment, that economically 'empowered' women are problematically shown in mainstream development narratives as succeeding the very power relations (or society, or social norms) of which they are formed, and reified on the 'cut' female body (Harcourt 2009).

As Kabeer (2005b) contends, it is not only the strength of their material stake in the kinship system that has kept women locked into a subordinate position, there also exists strong ideological factors. Several academics have displayed that women's own perceptions of FGC are shaped by the ideology which supports the oppression they face (see Coomaraswamy 2002 Finke 2006 Harcourt 2009), a level of power 'over' Syded (2010) proclaims is the most difficult for outsiders to reach. Moreover, if FGC is ingrained within the social relationships that construct women's sense of self and social identity within their communities, it is likely to be ingrained within women's gendered subjectivities (Kabeer 2011): "the very stuff that consciousness is made of" (Kandiyoti 1987: 335). To assume a connection between individual economic empowerment and collective structural change ultimately ignores such complex relations.

## **Alternative Development: Empowerment as a Consciousness-Raising Approach**

Despite the flaws in mainstream development approach to 'empowerment' and FGC, there is evidence of NGO's mobilising the term related to its original use: as a radical approach concerned with transforming power relations in favour of women's rights (Cornwall and Whitehead 2007). For Batiwala (1994), the process of empowerment involves, first, women recognising the ideology that legitimises male domination and understanding how it perpetuates their oppression. Undeniably, women subjected to FGC have more to overcome in order to attain autonomy and agency than others, for they must mobilize "extraordinary introspective and volitional powers" to figure out their authentic wants and to act on their own desires (Meyers 2000:479). A way out of this conundrum can be found in the writings of Kabeer (1999 2005a 2011), who proposes that in contexts where women's notions of selfhood and social identity are formed through highly unequal and largely taken-for-granted gendered relationships, it is possible to obtain a reflexive distance from those relationships in order to recognise and articulate what they

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consider to be unjust. This notion of empowerment 'within' becomes pertinent when considering Meyers (2000) understanding of FGC, which highlights that patriarchal cultures practicing FGC selectively nurture and stifle women's agency and autonomy skills, shielding FGC from the exercise of such.

In the case of FGC, empowerment programmes should thus accommodate an opportunity to extend the range of application of agency and autonomy, or as Cornwall (2007:234) terms it "renegotiating and re-imagining the boundaries of the possible", through access to a new body of ideas and information in order to determine women's 'real' and authentic desires and meaningful choices (Batiwala 1994 Charmes and Wieringa 2003 Kabeer 1999). Meyers' (2000) reading of the FGC literature concluded that non-formal education is the 'least controversial' and most effective approach to augmenting women's consciousness regarding the practice, provided this involves grassroots participation in conceiving the aims of educational initiatives and in devising educational presentations and materials. Obiora (1997:361) similarly notes that "education for critical consciousness" and "emancipatory education" can juxtapose women's commitment to female cutting with their awareness of traumatic outcomes, their own sexual impairment and reduced fertility. Programmes that have demonstrated success in promoting abandonment of FGC are most importantly non-judgemental and non-coercive, in contrast to the aforementioned anti-FGM campaigns (Mackie 2000 Yount 2002 Hayford 2005).

Monkman et al (2007), for example, cite the widespread success of an NGO (Tostan) non-formal education 'community empowerment programme' (CEP), first employed in 6 villages in Mali wherein FGC is practiced by over 90% of the population. The Tostan approach to empowerment is a participatory model that enables people to identify and address their own problems individually (power within) and collectively (power with), through a systematic process of critically examining life conditions; constructing awareness of contextual and influential factors; and planning and implementing change (see Easton et al 2002 Diop and Askew 2009 Monkman et al 2007).

The use of innovative pedagogical techniques inspired by African traditions and local knowledge reduced 'rote learning' and also endeavoured to mobilise individual's introspection, empathy and imagination skills (Diop and Askew 2009). For example, facilitators invited participants to explore their feelings about their health and sexuality – their sufferings, their frustrations, their disappointments, as well as their pleasures – and to sift through the possible meanings of these stirrings through poetry and story-telling (Meyer 2000). Conducted over a period of 3 years, Tostan's model of empowerment was an unfolding, iterative process of engagement that enabled women, alongside the inclusion of men, to work together effectively to bring about change in their lives (Cornwall 2007).

A key point to note here is the fundamental role of collective vision and action (power with) in the aim of mobilising political will and attaining social transformation, as it is only through this means will women be able to maximise their own ends without the constraints of social norms (Kabeer 1999 Stromquist 1995). Several academics have evidenced that the social risks involved for non-conformists involve rejection as a marriage partner; shame and stigmatisation; as well as a loss of social position, honour and protection, resulting in a whole family's exclusion in the community (Ahlbery et al 2004 Berg et al 2013 Johnsdotter et al 2009 Lightfoot-Klein 1989). Therefore, group declarations seem essential to support decisions and to move from "insight to action" (Rowlands 1997:15): as they are in essence a declaration of a new social order that no longer accepts the practice of cutting girls genitals (Toubia and Sharief 2003).

Diop and Askew (2009) report that Malian women (and men) who had participated in Tostan's programme collectively decided that they wanted to end the practice of FGC, initiating a series of public discussions to extend and reinforce acceptance of that goal throughout their villages, which led to the Malicounda Bambara public declaration to end FGC in 1997. Since 1997, 3,791 communities in Senegal, 364 in Guinea, 37 in Gambia, 14 in Somalia, and 23 in Burkina Faso have followed the village of Malicounda Bambara in declaring an end to the practice of FGC through Tostan's programme (Mgbako et al 2010). For Monkman et al (2007), this displays that when FGC is characterised as a cultural (and not evil) practice, when it is framed holistically in relation to health and human rights, and when communities are granted ownership of the process and left to choose their own issues of concern, the elimination of this practice comes to the fore.

## **Empowerment: A Universal Notion or a Western-centric Development Practice?**

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Despite clear differences in understanding and outlook, the neoliberal and consciousness-raising models of empowerment outlined thus far share a number of problematic, Western assumptions that emerge when analysing the practice of female genital cutting (Leve 2007 Hickel 2014). These assumptions require deconstruction. To begin, both perceive empowerment as a unilinear progression towards a predefined goal whereby developmental subjects become 'conscious' agents, whether this is expressed through economic dependence or by seeking to overturn existing hierarchies. Empowerment theories have a tendency to reduce human subjectivity to the idea of a "conscious agent-subject having the capacity and the desire to move in a singular historical direction": that of increasing self-empowerment and decreasing pain (Asad 2003:79 Meyers 2000). In the case of FGC, working from such essentialisms inherently ignores the role of pain as a social relationship, in the words of Asad (2003:85): "pain is more than something unpleasant and external that impinges on someone. It is part of what conditions action and experience".

In contrast to Western societies in which pain is to be eliminated through medical management, severe physical pain is normative and positively valued, an "embodied referent supporting a woman's sense of who and what she is" (Boddy 1998:104). Finke (2006) found in the case of Kenya that the pain involved in FGC makes the shared memory more profound; lends the process to significance; gives the girls a sense of identity; and engenders a life-long feeling of solidarity among a particular age group. As Harcourt (2009) notes, talk about the actual experiences of pain, pleasure, strain, sexuality and health is rare in development reports and programs, often smoothed away in instructive medical description, yet the embodied experience of girls and women arguably should be at the core of what it means to understand the process of empowerment and what this imposes upon them. Analysis of women's position must therefore be based on the realities of their lives rather than on a generalised assumption that they lack scientific knowledge of health and wellbeing, as deeply culturally specific resonances of both science and FGC render such a verdict facile (Boddy 1998 Leve 2007).

Secondly, simply 'challenging patriarchal power relations' and 'empowering women' in response to FGC may be oversimplifying a complex situation derived from multiple factors at multiple levels, for understandings of constraint and dominated consciousness are useful but insufficient to comprehend the "intricacies of power relations and their continuous reproduction and transformation" (Boddy 1998:97). For Ogundipe-Leslie (1994:251), Western feminism is guilty of over-privileging African women's "coital and conjugal sites" with the totality of gender relations directs empowerment to a particular, sexualised set of relationships so emblematic of their subordination that other male-female, and indeed female-female in the case of FGC, do not make it into view (Cornwall and Rivas 2015). The issue is not so much how men oppress women, but how a system of gender asymmetric values and constraints is internalised by both with their active participation (Abusharaf 2001 Boddy 1998 Toubia and Sharief 2003). Studies conducted by Toubia and Sharief (2003), Draege (2007) and Johnson (2007) found that in many societies, older women who have themselves been cut become gatekeepers of the practice and beneficiaries of the social order, they alone authorise and perform the operations and ensure their daughters 'benefit' from the same social marker and cultural ethos.

FGC thus illustrates that for development there exists analytical importance of gender and power as a constitutive element of all social relationships (Scott 1989 Wieringa 1998), affirming one generation of women's authority over another through dictating their daughters autonomy and agency before they have the choice, in some cases wholly unrelated to Western feminist ideas of patriarchal oppression. It can be suggested that the dissonance between idealised representations of African women's solidarity and the complex realities of their intergenerational relationships provides a set of tensions that the empowerment approach appears to struggle to contend with (Cornwall et al 2007). As such, they serve to exemplify "the problem of treating 'communities' as ungendered units and 'community participation' as an unambiguous step toward enhanced equality" (Agarwal 1997:1374 Sarin and Saarthi 1996).

Lastly, while both approaches conceive empowerment as a 'subjective' transformation, the result of this transformation is viewed to be concrete forms of action that reflect each models 'objective reality', i.e. the 'natural', unquestionable, uncut body (Body 1998 Njambi 2004). For several academics this involves applying inappropriate culturally specific conceptions of female liberation, indebted to presupposing a homogenous conception of the free, autonomous and authentic self that is far from universal (Braun 2009 Kabeer 2011 Syded 2010). This is made

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evident in the absence of reference to choice in the WHO's (2008) definition of 'FGM', arguably reflecting doubts there is any basis for ascribing agency to women whose cultures mandate cutting, or as Allotey et al (2004) note, to avoid undermining the illegality and immorality of 'FGM' as a criminal act, even for women who now reside in the West. However, women who undergo female genital *cosmetic* surgery in Western societies remain to be viewed as the 'hyper-responsible self': making individualised choices, removed from any contextual constraints, and free from the influence of cultural norms and expectations (see Baker 2006 Braun 2009 Lipman 1999 Rose 1999).

Yet, post-colonial feminist literature provides ample evidence that many African women exercise efficient agency with respect to FGC, both as accommodators and resisters (Njambi 2004 Meyers 2000). In the case of Sudan wherein the clitoris is associated with the masculinity of the penis, Abusharaf (2001) found that cutting is believed to endow women with an ability to exert self-control and power above men, to take charge of their natural desires and to display restraint over their sexuality. While this sexuality does not conform to Western assumptions associated with the politicisation of clitoral orgasms for women that occurred in the 1960's (Hetherington 1997 Parker 1995), for Talle (2008) and Gruenbaum (2006), the 'flat patch of skin' created through infibulation thus speaks volumes to the specificity of cultural constructions of femininity, gender and womanhood. Altogether, such views highlight that binary approaches pitting consciousness against unconsciousness, agency against alienation; subjectivity against subalternity; and personal choice against personal constrain; are profoundly embedded within a Euro-American construct of empowerment (Leve 2007).

## Conclusion: the Future of Empowerment in Eliminating FGC in Africa

In moving towards a conclusion, it has been made clear throughout this essay that the empowerment process may take a diversity of pathways, but for which there is rarely the kind of shortcuts envisaged by the proponents of empowerment-lite (Cornwall 2007). What this ultimately reveals is there is no 'one-shot' magic-bullet route to women's empowerment with regards to FGC, such as providing women with access to credit, enhanced incomes, or land titles as development organisations have historically depicted it (Batiwala 2007 Bebbington et al 2007 Cornwall and Brock 2005 Moore 2001). We are, therefore, interested in transformative forms of empowerment, resonating with the work of Rowlands (1995), Kabeer (1999) and Batiwala (1994), that do not simply address immediate inequalities but are used to initiate longer-term processes of change in the structures of patriarchy. On the other hand, it has also been displayed that implicit in both neo-liberal and consciousness-raising empowerment approaches are a number of Western assumptions that look to the uniform unfolding of an autonomous human consciousness. Yet in the case of FGC, in which motivations are all at once material, ideological, embodied and spiritual, such a universal value is particularly unlikely to have the same purchase in all contexts (Kabeer 2011).

It is important to note here that conflating 'Western feminism', 'imperialism' and opposition to FGCs need not undermine cross-cultural grassroots abandonment efforts (Davis 2004 Gruenbaum 2001 James 1998). To understand what women need, and how to best align transnationally in productive ways arguably requires a willingness to abandon preconceived notions about what liberation for women looks like, in order to truly endorse empowerment's claim to relativism (Hickel 2014 Wade 2011). This calls for enquiring more deeply into and working with women's own sources of strength, solace and security, rather than reading FGC through a set of Western and institutionalised lenses that bring only one dimension of gendered power, agency, autonomy, subjectivity and consciousness into focus (Cornwall 2007). For Syded (2010), this dynamic approach is more likely to produce an effectual empowerment strategy, and is premised on the recognition that the concerned women must have the final agency to determine the kind and extent of empowerment they would like to pursue.

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