Young Swedish Somali Women and the Issue of Female Circumcision

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Naming the practices

**Female circumcision**

- Female genital mutilation (FGM)
- Female genital cutting (FGC)
WHO Definition and Typology

Female genital mutilation comprises all procedures involving partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons.

**Type I** — Partial or total removal of the clitoris and/or the prepuce (*clitoridectomy*).

**Type II** — Partial or total removal of the clitoris and the labia minora, with or without excision of the labia majora (*excision*).

**Type III** — Narrowing of the vaginal orifice with creation of a covering seal by cutting and appositioning the labia minora and/or the labia majora, with or without excision of the clitoris (*infibulation*).

**Type IV** — All other harmful procedures to the female genitalia for non-medical purposes, for example: pricking, piercing, incising, scraping and cauterization.

WHO (2008)
Normal genitals

Type III, infibulation (pharaonic circumcision)
The map illustrates the geographical distribution of female genital mutilation (FGM) across Africa and the Middle East. Colors on the map represent different levels of FGM prevalence:

- Dark brown: Areas where most women are infibulated.
- Orange: Circumcision and excision widespread in some groups.
- Light brown: Some cases reported.
- Gray: Circumcision practiced by some Muslim population groups (the shading in Pakistan and India represents Bohra Muslims, not exact location).

The map highlights regions with varying degrees of FGM prevalence, emphasizing the need for awareness and intervention to address this critical health issue globally.
Age at procedures

Newborns

Toddlers

Young girls

Preadolescent girls

Adolescent girls

During pregnancy/delivery

A female sphere
Motives behind FGC … vary with local context

**Somalia:**
- religious purity
- moral purity
- cleanliness, aesthetics
- social pressure

**Kikuyu, Kenya:**
- to achieve adult status
- trial of womanhood (optional)

**Jola, Senegal:**
- within initiation rite
- to enhance fertility (symbolic level)
Female Circumcision in Diaspora

Somalis in Sweden
Female circumcision among Swedish Somalis

**Motive in Somalia**
An experience of being circumcised as the "normal" and "natural" state

**Change in Sweden**
The "normality"/"naturalness" of the state becomes questioned living in exile

**Motive in Somalia**
A conviction that Islam demands circumcision

**Change in Sweden**
In encounters with other Muslims (especially Muslim Arabs) not circumcising their daughters reflects upon Islam and circumcision

**Motive in Somalia**
A fear that the daughter will be rejected at marriage

**Change in Sweden**
Changed marital patterns: Nowadays young people know each other before marriage. Future husbands can be found among Somalis who have grown up in western exile

**Motive in Somalia**
The fact that practically all other girls are circumcised which leaves an uncircumcised girl exposed to stigmatization

**Change in Sweden**
In Swedish girls are generally not circumcised. If circumcised, the girl would be the one deviating from most of her peers

**Motive in Somalia**
A social context where female circumcision is widely accepted and not counteracted by authorities

**Change in Sweden**
A deep fear of Swedish social authorities and the risk of losing custody of the children
Court awards damages after genital mutilation test

Uppsala Municipality has been ordered to pay 60,000 kronor ($8,400) to the family of a girl of Somali origin who was forced to undergo an examination to check whether she had been circumcised.

21 April 2010
Two arrested for genital mutilation

STOCKHOLM. A man and a woman – both in their 30s – have been arrested by Attunda court, suspected of serious genital mutilation of their 3-year-old daughter.

The Swedish News Agency
August 19, 2012
We need to strike the right balance between prosecution and prevention, and be careful not to give way to discriminatory procedures.
Referral procedures
Female Circumcision and Sexuality
Studies on Female Circumcision & Sexuality

- Shandall (1967)
- Assaad (1980)
- El Dareer (1982)
- Megafu (1983)
- Badawi (1989)
- Knudsen (1994)
- Adinma (1997)
- Odoi (1997)
- Ahmadu (2000)
- El-Defrawi, et al. (2001)
- Morison (2001)
- Okonofua, et al. (2002)
- Stewart (2002)
- Thabet & Thabet (2003)
- Osinowo & Taiwo (2003)
- Catania, et al. (2007)
- Ahmadu (2007)
- Dopico (2007)
- Johansen (2007)
- Elnashar et al. (2007)
- Alsibiani & Rouzi (2010)
- Esho (2012)
Difficulties in studying sexual outcomes

OPERATIONALIZATION

To define and delimit a concept in order to measure it quantitatively

How can we operationalize sexual desire, pleasure, climax, satisfaction, or sexual problems?
Western “Mutilation” Discourse
SJ: - You said it makes you feel disabled?

L: - Yes, I would say, hundred percent. And you know, the guts to try it takes a lot. It’s very hard for a Somali girl just to say, “I would like to get married for enjoyment.” The moment she wants to have children is the moment when she gets married. . . . Since we were young we have been told, “forget that side of you, it’s gone.”
- They told us in school! “It’s tragic, you won’t feel much, since they cut it away.” And I thought, “What? What’s the point of marrying then?” Lots of girls think like that now. That there is really no point being with a man. Since they cut away the pleasure.
Western “Mutilation” Discourse

- A year ago there was an interview with Waris Dirie, about her book, that she was circumcised, and why, and her views. And in that interview she said that the girl can never enjoy it, that all her pleasure has been cut away. And all the girls were extremely shocked. So... that book, and that interview... First, the westerners say... and then a Somali woman comes along and says... so your self respect and your self esteem ... we were simply devastated.
Body shame/body concerns undermine possibilities to enjoy sex
(Sanchez & Kiefer 2007)

Negative view of genital appearance is devastating to sexual well-being
(Schick et al. 2008)
Conclusions

- Female circumcision is a practice undergoing cultural change

- At suspicion of an FGM case, the right medical specialist should do the assessment

- Concerned young girls and women, and their families, must be treated with respect and consideration
Thank you

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POLICE REPORTS N: 46

EXCLUDED POLICE REPORTS N: 13

POLICE INVESTIGATIONS OF SUSPECTED CUTTING N: 33

POLICE INVESTIGATIONS CLOSED NO GENITAL EXAMINATION N: 13

POLICE INVESTIGATIONS INCLUDED GENITAL EXAMINATION N: 20

GENITAL EXAMINATION SHOWED NO CUTTING N: 11

GENITAL EXAMINATION SHOWED CUTTING N: 9

POLICE INVESTIGATIONS CLOSED N: 7

CASES IN COURT N: 2

SWEDEN 1982 – 2010
2006

- Swedish Somali woman, 43 years

- 3 years in prison for
  - female genital mutilation
    'sunna' (type II) in Somalia at age 11
  - gross violation of integrity
    - physical abuse
    - genital examinations at home
A Swedish Somali 41-year-old man sentenced to two years in prison for alleged circumcision of his daughter.

“Popular notions of FGC affecting real people’s lives: The case of Ali Elmi Hayow in Sweden”.

A few examples of operationalizations:

- *Sexual intercourse* – *how often?*

- *Initiate sex* – *how often?*

Mainly about cultural expectations or about genital tissue?
The Human Sexual Response Model

Originally from
Masters and Johnson, 1966
Critiques of the 
*Human Sexual Response Model*

- In focus are GENITALS, not people
  - (genital) physiology over-emphasized, at the expense of psychological, social and cultural aspects of significance for outcome
Alternative Approaches

SEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS

Communication  
Intimacy

SEXUAL SELF CONCEPT

Body Image  
Sexual Esteem  
Sexual Self Schema

SEXUAL FUNCTIONING

Sexual Response Cycle:
- Desire
- Arousal/excitement
- Orgasm

(Cleary & Hegarty, 2011)
Custom decrees that a Sudanese woman remain totally passive during the sex act. She must act like a “block of wood” and participate in no way whatsoever. Sudanese men confirm that in nearly all cases she does just that. Sexual pleasure is considered to be entirely a male prerogative, and if it is felt by women, it is felt in secret. Nearly all women interviewed reported that showing sexual interest and pleasure openly is “extremely shameful.” […] Sexually, the woman must exhibit an unnatural immobility. She is not required to be sexually active, “like an animal.” Only passive behavior will enable her to fulfill the demand for modesty imposed on her. If the woman has an orgasm, she tries to not show it, and if she is unable to control her reaction, she denies that it was brought on by sexual ecstasy.

(Lightfoot-Klein, 1989a:89)
Ssenga [father’s sister] teaches the girl specific utterances and techniques appropriate during intercourse. Traditionally, women are taught to not only desire sex but to also lead an active sex life. A woman is expected to reach orgasm several times before the man and respond throughout intercourse with vigorous body movement.

A man is evaluated by women according to the length of time coitus is maintained before his orgasm (about thirty minutes is typical). A too-rapid male ejaculation is likely to evoke female anger and comparison with, for example, a ‘hen’ (enkoko) who, of course, has rapid coitus. A second erection soon after orgasm is also expected of men.

(Kilbride & Kilbride, 1990, i Njambi, 2004:297)
Some Quantitative Studies on Female Circumcision and Sexuality

Sexual function (max points 36):
- Circumcised women: 2.1 points lower than uncut women (Alsibiani & Rouzi, 2010)

Sexual function (max points 280)
- Circumcised women: 17.5 points lower (Osinowo & Taiwo, 2003)

Sexual problems:
- Circumcised women: 69.5%
- Uncircumcised women: 63.7% (Elnashar et al, 2007)