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CONTESTED NORMS

*The human rights discourse against female genital cutting
and its impact on local realities*

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Abstract

Simultaneously representing a most personal experience, a cultural custom, and a field of global ideological debate, female genital cutting (FGC) continues to fascinate scholars' and human rights activists' attention. As a practice that interferes with a woman's physical integrity on mere cultural grounds, leading to a permanent change in her most intimate organ, it is by many considered a fundamental human rights violation. However, despite committed international eradication efforts it remains to be widely practiced. Starting from the discrepancy between the earnestness of the anti-FGC movement and the ritual's persistent continuation, this thesis aims at critically analysing the strategy and the rhetoric of the international human rights regime as it tries to counteract the practice. What arguments does it use to delegitimise FGC? How do local realities react to externally imposed change? What perils does a legal top-down approach potentially invoke? In exploring these questions, the case of FGC serves as an insightful example for testing the universality of human rights. Case studies have shown that a radically condemning approach with a straightforward criminalisation of the practice often proves counterproductive and reinforces FGC as a form of protest against western intervention. Only through culturally sensitive and community-led projects that provoke a locally grown transformation of the social norms in which FGC is rooted, change seems to be possible and sustainable.

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