

**Illiberal Liberalism:
How to Explain the Clash of
Western Feminism and Female Genital Circumcision**

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Abstract

This article aims to show how Western liberal thinking has in large part shaped the negative discourse regarding the practice of female genital cutting, or FGC, without giving adequate space to the facts and opinions owned by the actual cultures that practice it. While Western feminism is certainly justified in exercising its beliefs within its own domain, the application of Western thought to non-Western cultures skews not only the practice and meaning behind it, but also the entire basis for what is considered morally “right.” By investigating some of the major points of contention surrounding the FGC debate, this paper brings to light the importance of embracing third-wave or intersectional feminism as the most appropriate avenue to discuss issues regarding diverse cultural groups.

Western (second-wave) feminism has fought so hard for “universal” rights because it has genuinely believed in them; Western feminists really have viewed themselves as the “good guys,” as Shweder notes (2002). Although I will make clear in this paper that I find much of Western liberal feminist thought problematic when blindly applied to non-Western cultures, I acknowledge that ultimately, Western feminists *are* trying to be, well, “good.” The fight for human rights has been so important because feminists sincerely believe women across the globe can have better lives if only they could have access to the same basic rights enjoyed in the West. However, these rights are only central to well-being in the West, not necessarily in other parts of the world. As anthropologists like Menon (2013) and Ahmadu (2000) point out, women in various contexts are indeed already experiencing high-levels of well-being and self-fulfillment. By providing crucial information on the meaning-making systems of non-Western women and refocusing the discussion on well-being rather than rights, multicultural feminists enable the conversation on women’s rights to truly move forward, as there certainly still do exist numerous gender-based social challenges the world over. To answer Susan Okin’s question: No, multiculturalism isn’t bad for women, but Western feminism might be.

Female genital cutting or circumcision (FGC) has become perhaps one of the trendiest international human rights campaigns Western feminist NGO’s have embraced. When awareness of this largely African practice came to the forefront of American media in the 1980’s, the presentation of the information was so skewed that it would not have been surprising if even the African women who endorse the practice would have had second thoughts about it. Focusing on extreme cases and variously framing FGC as mutilation, child abuse, and the physical and psychological oppression of women, Western media excitedly latched onto the narrow and incomplete picture feminists drew (Shweder 2002; Shweder 2013; Ahmadu 2000).

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Why was—and is—it such a sensational topic, though? If both feminism and human rights can be traced back to Enlightenment ideals, an intellectual movement that encouraged rational thinking grounded in the validity of each human mind, Western intellectuals' response seems almost counterintuitive. Not only would one expect a demand for more detailed information, but also an inquisition into the cultural systems—in other words, the reasoning—that propagated FGC. However, this is the precipice upon which imperial liberal/Western/feminist thought freezes, as even “rational” thought is not free from cultural influence. Using a specifically Western individualistic moral system influenced by second-wave feminism to guide the justification of human (women's) rights, feminists do not even question whether they themselves are wrong; they cannot be, according to their own world views. And if FGC is dissonant with their world views, then FGC must be wrong.

Right to Bodily Integrity

The first right that is violated through FGC is the right to bodily or physical integrity, as phrased through the terms “mutilation” and “abuse.” An idea contemporary anti-male circumcision activists have also embraced (Shweder 2013; Royal Dutch Medical Association Report 2010), violation of this right assumes that the human body's “natural” state is the unaltered one (Ahmadu 2000). The way a human is born is the way a human should remain, and any alterations to this are deemed shocking, violating, and, well, unnatural. As Ahmadu (2000) points out, though, “natural” is a loaded, culturally defined word. While Western thought might define it as the status quo upon birth of the body, some cultures that practice FGC view it as a state to aspire to or, alternately, as a state that is unappealing and that must be cultivated and changed to become more civilized, aesthetically appealing, and human.

Interestingly, the aesthetic argument has also been overlooked by the West, a hypocritical oversight in an age of breast augmentation and vaginal rejuvenations. Here, liberal feminists might argue that the difference is choice: Women in the West choose to undergo certain body modification procedures, while women in Africa and in certain Islamic communities are forced to undergo them. This sort of reasoning is flawed on multiple levels.

First, most African girls and women *do* choose to undergo FGC. Although they admit they are nervous before the procedure, the celebration and initiation into their communities of womanhood that follows more than outweighs the fear they may feel (Ahmadu 2009).

Secondly, by taking the women's pre-procedural fear out of context and using it as “proof” that the circumcision is traumatizing, Western feminists entirely misunderstand a major aspect of FGC in many African communities, as the fear is often part of the initiation ceremony itself, inducting the girl into the realm of womanhood.

Finally, by ignoring the voices of the women themselves who undergo FGC, Western feminists are themselves oppressors. So vigilant in their quest to “free” women from “oppressive” practices, feminists do not see that their own actions belittle the choices of these women and treat them as unthinking victims for whom the West must speak. If the argument is made that African women are so entrenched within oppressive, abusive patriarchal systems that they themselves do not see what is happening to them, could not

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the same be said of those women in Hollywood who undergo breast surgeries, nose surgeries, even eye surgeries to “improve” their appearances according to industry norms?

Importantly, girls are *not* given a choice regarding FGC in particular Islamic traditions. However, the mere valorization of choice as a “universally desirable moral good” (Menon 2013) is indicative of just how strongly and firmly imperial liberal values steer the ship of universal human rights. Not only is individual choice inherently seen as superior to communal submission, but to highlight just how relative this supposedly universal human right of choice is, we can look to how the majority of the West has come to view child vaccinations. Imagine a crying child being held down by her mother and a nurse while a third person injects her with a vaccine. Now juxtapose this image with that of a crying child being laid down while her mother sits next to her and a third person performs a minor genital surgery on her that will heal within a day. In both cases, the adults present are making a choice regarding the physical state of the child. In both cases, the adults make this choice because they believe it will benefit the overall wellbeing of the child. And in both cases, the adults impose their own cultural viewpoints and priorities onto the situation, and in turn, the child (Shweder 2015).

Right to Sexual Pleasure

The second major right Western feminists see FGC violating is the right to sexual pleasure. The Western cultural context of this right is in some ways even more blindly embraced than the right to bodily integrity despite—or perhaps because—the former only gaining “right” status during the 1960’s. As part of the sexual revolution, second-wave feminists celebrated the clitoris as a means to sexual pleasure independent of men, pregnancy, children, and marriage. It became a symbol of women’s ownership over their own bodies, an issue that had concerned women in the West for centuries. Upon hearing stories that forced cliterectomies were being performed on women in Africa to control women’s sexuality, Western feminists likely felt a particular empathy for the African women as they had been subject to symbolic cliterectomies by their own patriarchal culture for so long. However, while it might be true that a number of African communities engage in forced circumcisions as a mode of sexual control of women (Abusharaf 2000), this is simply not true of the majority.

Not only do the majority of women who engage in circumcision rituals do so out of choice, but they often do it believing it will increase sexual gratification and access to their vaginas and uteruses, key parts of being a real woman in their world views (Ahmadu 2000). Furthermore, the important *Hastings Center Report* (2012), the Morison et al (2001) prevalence of morbidities study, and various field reports (Shweder 2002) of circumcised women confirming they enjoyed sex and were capable of orgasm seem to entirely refute the Western feminist claim. As Shweder (2013) and Ahmadu (2009) have noted, though, these factual reports are ignored. Again, we are left asking why people who adhere to liberal, rational principles would not pay attention to what they claim to be fighting for: the truth.

Rights Can Be Wrong

This (il)liberal feminist rationale that ignores non-Western truths has also been used in attempts to “empower” women living within social systems in India and Africa that encourage domesticity, strictly divided gender roles, or both; specifically, in the temple

town of Bhubaneswar in eastern India and the Maasai tribal community in Kenya. Usha Menon's work (2002; 2013) has insightfully captured the gross misunderstanding by Western feminists of the lived experiences of family-oriented Hindu women in Orissa. Working from the cultural context of second-wave feminism, it makes sense that Western feminists would value a woman's independence from family, maternity, and the home as a means to self-empowerment and therefore a potentially more fulfilled life. Again, though, this reasoning can only make sense *within* a Western socio-cultural-historical-economical-political context. Trying to cram this ideological foot into another culture's glass slipper is truly the stuff of a Western liberal fairytale of universal women's rights.

As Shweder, Minow, and Markus (2002) note, many nations today, including some non-Western countries, classify themselves as liberal democracies. However, why is it that Western democracies—the U.S. especially—have been so active in trying to spread their own political and social ideologies of tolerance and individual freedom to other parts of the world? Is there something peculiar to American liberal democracy that encourages its adherents to engage—and at times over-engage—in Walzer's "weak regime" of international society? The First Amendment offers a legally sanctioned call for tolerance of different religions, ethnicities, and a host of other individual differences that might exist between two Americans; that is, within the nation-state/immigrant society that is America itself. Even though this call for tolerance is far from simple, it at least guarantees a space for socio-political discussion of difference within American legal culture. A major point of argument within this space has been where the line should be drawn between private and public realms and what falls within the jurisdiction of (n)either. Typically, although "there is no coercion of individuals. . . pressure to assimilate to the dominant nation, at least with regard to public practices, has been fairly common," and "privacy a condition of toleration" (Walzer 1997, p. 26). In the U.S., education and religious practices, among other things, have both been variously awarded "private" status, thereby providing a precedent for toleration of non-normative lifestyles within the population, even if this toleration waxes and wanes depending upon the particulars of each case.

It seems less debate surrounds non-normative (i.e., non "American") practices on a global international scale. From an American liberal perspective, practices such as circumcising a young teenage girl or encouraging a woman to put her husband's needs before her own evoke almost instinctual responses of being morally wrong. In addition to the sheer effect of sensationalization of gender issues Minow (2002) points to, it is also a combined effect of cultural misunderstanding with a mutated enthusiasm for "universal" human rights. Shweder (2002) quite accurately labels this phenomenon as imperial liberalism, or "the general attitude that it is desirable for us to spread and enforce our liberal conceptions and ideals for the good life in all corners of society and throughout the world" (p. 235). Of course, the immediate question becomes: What makes the "good life" good? While calling for "principles of autonomy, individualism, and equality" (Shweder 2002, p. 235) as "good" rulers of our own public American institutions is fine, it is less obvious why we should encourage others living in different communities, different countries, different cultures to embrace the same moral rulers.

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In a grand double invasion of privacy, Western¹ feminism in particular has spearheaded movements to eradicate “local and private” (Minow 2002, p. 252) practices in other parts of the world in the name of universal human rights. While Western feminism’s arguments against certain cultural practices in parts of India and Africa are logical, they are often only logical within the particular ethical framework of American individualism. The solution to this confusion of cultural norms is to allow more room for the public-private distinction in international society rather than handing the reigns over entirely to international law concerning broad human rights that the West itself has had a heavy hand in forming. While human rights campaigns espouse the best interests of all peoples, these campaigns are usually run or heavily influenced by Western thought; “the general human rights matrix” is “properly termed Western and liberal” because it “has roots in and is marked by the European Enlightenment, an intellectual enterprise that above all consecrated individual liberty” (Lam 2002, p. 279). Importantly, there are divisions even within Western feminist thought, and it “is neither singular nor homogenous in its goals, interests, or analyses” (Mohanty 1991, p. 52) Still, there is a general unifying spirit of individual rights that pervades it, especially when set against contrasting belief systems and world views.

The feminist and sexual revolution of the 1960’s-70’s was undoubtedly an impressive cultural event that changed the course of American—and global—history by allowing the voices of women to enter spheres that they had previously been excluded from. However, this revolution has largely only benefitted a particular group of women, even within the United States; namely, middle and upper class White women. If second-wave feminism was not fully applicable to the society it arose from, it is even less so to a global community of women. Upholding its tradition of sociocultural tunnel-vision, Western feminism has today become even more problematic than it originally was for women who do not identify as “White American.” By insisting on a “chimerical global sisterhood,” Western feminism has embraced the values of individual rights and liberalism at the cost of recognizing the actual experiences of the women it purports to help (Lam 2002, p. 280). As Maivan Clech Lam says,

Liberal feminism too often devalues. . . the ties to their sociocultural communities that most women in the world continue to prize and nurture. The imperialistic legacy of the West for its part habituates Westerners to a status of hegemony—including a hegemony of truth—vis-à-vis persons in the South. This unexamined habit of power, as much as ingrained habits of thought, impels Western feminists to brandish their particular understanding of the subordination of women as the universal understanding. (2002, p. 280)

In its attempts to combat female circumcision and various systems of gender organization, this imperial feminism’s hegemony of truth often paradoxically acts to *lessen* women’s power, autonomy, and voice within their respective contexts. Practices that might well be construed as anti-feminist and oppressive in certain world views are in fact integral to women’s identities and agency in others.

In the case of female circumcision discussed above, it becomes clear that Western feminists often unknowingly violate their own tenets of liberalism by attempting to impose their views on completely different moral systems. Feminist misunderstanding arises when attempts are made to intervene in the acts of women participating in un-American or non-

¹ Although Western feminism can also refer to feminist movements in Europe, I use “Western” as interchangeable with “American” in this context due to the fact that first- and second-wave feminism has been largely rooted in American ideas and social movements.

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Western cultures. Rather than loudly fight against “un-feminist” practices, it would behoove Western feminists to instead quietly listen to *why* those practices are enacted in the first place. After all, social injustice rooted in patriarchy still exists in both Western and non-Western cultures, so the most productive way to truly improve the well-being of individuals would be to let those individuals speak for themselves; feminists should listen to all women, not just the ones with whom they agree. It is only then that we might come together as a global community to both genuinely help women in need but also sincerely respect and support women as thinking, free-willed individuals regardless of cultural practices.

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