

Researching Harmful Cultural Practices: Values and limits of an intersectional perspective

Withaecx, Sophie

Published in:
Researching Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting

Publication date:
2018

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Withaecx, S. (2018). Researching Harmful Cultural Practices: Values and limits of an intersectional perspective. In E. Leye, & G. Coene (Eds.), *Researching Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting : Proceedings of the 2nd International Academic Seminar of MAP-FGM Project* (pp. 113-118). Brussels: VUBPRESS.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

**Researching
Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting**
Proceedings of the 2nd International Academic Seminar
of MAP-FGM Project

Els Leye & Gily Coene (eds.)



This publication has been produced with the financial support of the EU. The contents of the publication reflect the authors' views only. The EC is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.

Cover design: Meer wit
Book design: www.intertext.be

© 2017 VUBPRESS Brussels University Press
VUBPRESS is an imprint of ASP nv
(Academic and Scientific Publishers nv)
Keizerslaan 34
B-1000 Brussel
Tel. + 32 (0)2 289 26 52
Fax + 32 (0)2 289 26 19
e-mail: info@vubpress.be
www.vubpress.be

ISBN 978 90 5718 707 0
NUR 890 / 740
Legal Deposit D/2017/11.161/097

All rights reserved. No parts of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior written permission of the publisher.

Contents

Preface	9
<i>Karin Vanderkerken, Vice Rector Research Policy, Vrije Universiteit Brussel</i>	
Voorwoord	11
<i>Karin Vanderkerken, Vice Rector Onderzoeksbeleid, Vrije Universiteit Brussel</i>	
Introduction	13
<i>Els Leye and Gily Coene</i>	
Introductie	15
<i>Els Leye en Gily Coene</i>	
Changes in Intergenerational Attitudes to Female Genital Cutting in Nigeria: Lessons Learnt from Qualitative and Quantitative Analyses of Primary and Secondary Data	17
<i>Gbadebo Babatunde M.</i>	
Engaging Communities to Implement Behaviour Change to End FGM in the EU: Lessons from the REPLACE Project	23
<i>Hazel Barrett</i>	
Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) after immigration to Sweden	29
<i>Vanja Berggren</i>	
'What works?': effectiveness of interventions to end female genital mutilation/cutting	37
<i>Tammary Esbo</i>	

Researching female genital mutilation in Western countries of asylum: a case study of Syria <i>Diana Geraci and Jacqueline Mulders</i>	45
FGM surveys on Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices in the Gambia <i>Adriana Kaplan Marcusán</i>	51
Prevalence and associated factors of female genital cutting among young – adult females in Jijjiga district, Eastern Ethiopia: a cross-sectional mixed study <i>Kidanu G</i>	57
Female genital mutilation and migration in Mali. Do return migrants transfer social norms? <i>Sandrine Mesplé-Somps</i>	65
Studying Compliance with the Human Rights Framework in relation to Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting in Senegal: A Research Methodology <i>Annemarie Middelburg</i>	69
Exploring the associations between FGM/C and early/child marriage: a review of the evidence <i>Karumbi J. & Muteshi Jacinta</i>	75
Organising Focus Groups: process and logistics <i>Siobán O'Brien Green</i>	85
Men, religion and FGM in Belgium, the Netherlands and the UK: a mixed methods study <i>Sarah O'Neill and Fabienne Richard</i>	91
Consideration on the use and interpretation of survey data on FGM/C <i>Bettina Shell-Duncan</i>	99
The association between women's social status and the medicalisation of female genital cutting in Egypt <i>Nina Van Eekert, Els Leye and Sarah Van de Velde</i>	107

Researching Harmful Cultural Practices: Values and limits of an intersectional perspective <i>Sophie Withaecx</i>	113
Extrapolation model in estimating the prevalence of FGM/C: The Norwegian experience <i>Mai M. Ziyada</i>	119
Contributor Profiles	123
List of figures and tables	131

Researching Harmful Cultural Practices: Values and limits of an intersectional perspective

Sophie Withaecx
*Vrije Universiteit Brussel, RHEA, Centre of Expertise Gender,
Diversity and Intersectionality*
sophie.withaecx@vub.be

Introduction

For many years now, female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) has been considered as a ‘harmful cultural practice’ (HCP). This recognition implies a recategorisation from being considered as a ‘tradition’ – understood as part of a social group’s ‘culture’ and therefore deemed unchangeable – to a serious form of harm to girls’ and women’s well-being that reproduces gender inequality and impairs women’s freedom of choice and bodily integrity. The terminology of HCPs has largely been developed within commissions and conventions of the United Nations; categorising certain practices as FGM/C has been instrumental in expanding the protective force of human and women’s rights conventions towards those practices formerly shielded from intervention by naming them as part of ‘culture’ and ‘tradition’.

Nevertheless, the concept of HCP has also been subject to critiques and debates. Developed essentially within Western institutions to particularly call out non-Western practices as sexist and violent, it has been criticised for its inherent biases and the ways it might be abused to justify neo-colonial interventions and oppression in non-Western settings. Categorising FGM/C as a ‘harmful cultural practice’ may therefore serve to reproduce stereotyping and racist discourses that portray non-Western men and women as determined by ‘culture’ and as needing the intervention of ‘universal’ human rights discourse and its underlying basis of Western Enlightenment

values. As these pitfalls may also affect research on HCPs, they present important challenges for researchers studying these practices.

In this contribution, I explore how intersectionality theory may be useful for researchers studying harmful cultural practices in general and FGM/C in particular. Intersectionality, initially developed by black feminists as an emancipatory tool to theorise oppression, is characterised by its commitment towards social justice and stresses the interlocking nature of forms of oppression based on social categorisations like gender, 'race', class and sexual orientation. Therefore, it might be a useful tool for researchers who, working from a privileged position, are faced with the challenges of researching gender-based violence in contexts where this research itself may be complicit in reproducing neo-colonial representations and interventions.

Harmful Cultural Practices: Contours of the debate

Ever since its articulation and definition within UN-circles, the concept of HCP has been the subject of heated debates. The concept has gradually evolved from the 1950s onwards, when concerns about 'customary practices' that restrained the rights and well-being of women and girls had first been expressed within UN-resolutions and commissions¹² (Longman & Bradley, 2015).

A clear definition was given in the 1995 UN Factsheet entitled 'Harmful Traditional Practices affecting the health of women and children', from which following characteristics can be inferred:

- HCP are seen as normal and even as morally good in the eyes of those practising them.
- In fact, they reproduce patriarchal oppression of women by men.
- These practices are harmful for women's and girls' mental and physical well-being.
- They persist because they are not questioned; abolition may even meet fierce resistance.

Not explicitly stated in the definition, but clear from the many descriptions of HCP, is that they are particularly associated with non-Western regions and customs. Western HCP were only taken up quite late in UN-policies after feminist criticism (Winter, Thompson, & Jeffreys, 2001).

¹² The first of these explicitly named 'customary practices' included forced marriage, child marriage and the practice of bride price and also FGM/C, which has since been the focus of much attention in UN-policies.

The attention directed toward FGM/C and the way it has been debated in UN-discourse, has been subject to controversies. One example is the influential Hosken report, credited with influencing the UN and WHO in putting the issue on the agenda, but severely criticised by Chandra Mohanty (1988) among others in her well-known critique on Western feminists' representations of 'the Third World Woman'. Her critique pointed to the pitfalls that arise when studying gender-based violence from positions of (unacknowledged) privilege, as Western scholarships on HCP reproduces representations of non-Western women as eternal and passive victims of their 'culture'. These issues are complicated by the differing views of morality involved and the difficulties that arise when exposing practices considered as 'normal' and inherently 'good' by some, but described as 'harmful', oppressive and 'bad' by others. Because: Who exactly is exposing these practices as 'harmful'? Whose voices are heard in research and which perspectives are dismissed? How does a concept like HCP – with its emphasis on 'culture' – obscure the impact of racial, economic and neo-colonial exploitation in the persistence of these practices? The discussion can therefore not be cut loose of global inequalities and the West's presumed moral superiority that infuses the discourse on HCP.

Alternative approaches try to undermine stereotypical views and neo-colonial tendencies by pointing to the universal occurrence of patriarchal oppression. From this perspective, comparisons are made with practices occurring in the West (Jeffreys, 2005; Winter et al., 2001), like the pressure of unrealistic beauty standards and the normalisation of plastic surgery. Another perspective may consist in challenging the passivity inscribed upon non-Western women, by valorising women's capacity for choice and decision-making, even in patriarchal or constraining environments (Mahmood, 2001). In the case of FGM/C for example, research by African scholars centralises African women's views and demonstrates that this practice may also be experienced as empowering for women (Abusharaf, 2001; Njambi, 2004). As this last perspective may possibly result in a form of cultural relativism, an additional perspective points to the importance of historicity, contextuality and change when understanding HCP (Esho, Van Wolputte, & Enzlin, 2011; Pedwell, 2008; Phillips, 2010). In what follows, I discuss the opportunities that an intersectional perspective may offer in the study of HCP.

What can an intersectional perspective offer?

Although the term ‘intersectionality’ has become widespread since Crenshaw first named it as such in the 1990s, the theoretical background that it refers to had already been articulated by black feminists in the 1960s and 1970s, and can even be traced back to the 19th century (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Williams-Crenshaw, 1994). Intersectionality developed out of black feminist critiques on unidimensional perspectives in both the (mostly white) feminist movement and the (mostly male) black anti-racist movement, as black feminists demonstrated how their specific experience as black women was simultaneously shaped by their gender and race. Intersectionality can be defined as a theory studying the nature and complexity of inequality by pointing out how systems of oppression (based on gender, race, class, sexual orientation, religion and other relevant categories of differentiation) interact and mutually construct each other. However, intersectionality is more than a theory, as it is essentially rooted in praxis: it is thus also ‘an analytical and political tool elaborated by less powerful social actors facing multiple minoritisations in order to confront and combat the interlocking systems of power shaping their lives’ (Bilge, 2013)

Choo & Ferree point to three important characteristics that distinguish intersectional research projects from ‘mainstream’ research (Choo & Ferree, 2010)

A first defining characteristic is the inclusion of marginalised perspectives. This implies ‘giving voice’ to (multiply) marginalised groups and making their experiences visible. Secondly, intersectional research is process-centred and explores how different structures of domination interact. This means for example ‘asking the other question’ in order to examine which categories of social differentiation are relevant and how exactly they relate to each other. Thirdly, intersectional research implies an integrative view, in which no a priori primacy is given to one structure of domination above any other.

When applied in studying FGM/C, this means for example decentring culture, whose impact is strongly stressed by the term HCP itself. However, an exaggerated focus on culture contributes highly to the stereotyping of non-Western others as determined by culture and tradition (Phillips, 2010; Withaecx & Coene, 2011). Applying an intersectional analysis would result in an examination of the impact of less obvious power differences – like age, class and sexual orientation for example – that may prove essential in understanding how and why some categories of women are heavily invested in the reproduction of FGM. It would also shed light on the impact of (neo)colonial oppression in the genesis and reproduction of these practices, and might even

reveal the complicity of anti-FGM/C discourses in perpetuating the practice (Esho et al., 2011).

For individual researchers working on HCP, the following ‘intersectional checklist’ may be useful when reflecting on the impact of privilege on their work:

1. Is my research doing more than just portraying black women and describing ‘their’ habits? How does my research unveil the workings of systems of oppression that are responsible for their marginalised position? And how may my research itself be complicit in reproducing inequality; in the ways my respondents are represented and how my findings are represented, and how these may or may not empower the individuals and communities I have studied?
2. Does my research disproportionately focus on one or a limited number of structures of domination (culture, ethnicity, etc.) at the expense of other meaningful factors that might provide insight in the phenomenon at hand?
3. How do gender, race, class, age, heteronormativity... interact in specific manifestations of FGM/C?
4. ...

Asking such questions, creates the opportunity to recognise the impact of privilege inherent in conducting research on marginalised communities and to explore more profoundly how HCPs are shaped in concrete historical and political contexts.

While intersectionality thus provides a useful lens for studying HCP, there are also some limits. Intersectionality remains a concept that emerged in the global North. In order to avoid a new form of academic imperialism, it should be recognised that concepts cannot always be unproblematically ‘transplanted’ in other contexts, and that scholars working in other contexts could equally provide useful concepts that could inform research. Intersectionality may also focus too much on the stability of categories instead of on the underlying dynamics that have created them and may be too oblivious to transnational dimensions of social inequality (Dhawan & do Mar Castro Varela, 2016; Puar, 2012).

Despite these limits, it is clear that intersectionality could provide useful perspectives and innovative insights when studying HCP. Nevertheless, more important than the label itself, is the rationale behind it: a commitment to social justice, a close examination of the simultaneous impact of different forms of oppression in shaping gender-based violence, and a recognition of how privilege impacts upon our position as researchers and on our research itself.

References

- Abusharaf, R. M. (2001). Virtuous cuts: Female genital circumcision in an African ontology. *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 12(1), 112–140.
- Bilge, S. (2013). Intersectionality undone: Saving Intersectionality from Feminist Intersectionality Studies. *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, 10(2), 405–424.
- Choo, H. Y., & Ferree, M. M. (2010). Practicing Intersectionality in Sociological Research: A Critical Analysis of Inclusions, Interactions, and Institutions in the Study of Inequalities. *Sociological Theory*, 28(2), 129–149.
- Collins, P. H., & Bilge, S. (2016). *Intersectionality*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Dhawan, N., & do Mar Castro Varela, M. (2016). “What difference does difference make?": Diversity, intersectionality and transnational feminist politics. *Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women’s and Gender Studies*, 16, 9–43.
- Esho, T., Van Wolputte, S., & Enzlin, P. (2011). The socio-cultural-symbolic nexus in the perpetuation of female genital cutting: a critical review of existing discourses. *Afrika Focus*, 24(2), 53–70.
- Jeffreys, S. (2005). *Beauty and misogyny. Harmful cultural practices in the West*. London: Routledge.
- Longman, C., & Bradley, T. (2015). Interrogating the concept of “Harmful Cultural Practices.” In C. Longman & T. Bradley (Eds.), *Interrogating harmful cultural practices. Gender, culture and coercion* (pp. 11–30). Farnham: Ashgate.
- Mahmood, S. (2001). Feminist Theory, Embodiment and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival. *Cultural Anthropology*, 16(2), 202–236.
- Mohanty, C. (1988). Under Western Eyes: feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. *Feminist Review*, 30, 65–88.
- Njambi, W. N. (2004). Dualisms and female bodies in representations of African female circumcision: A feminist critique. *Feminist Theory*, 5(3), 281–303.
- Pedwell, C. (2008). Weaving relational webs: Theorizing cultural difference and embodied practice. *Feminist Theory*, 9(1), 87–107.
- Phillips, A. (2010). *Gender & Culture*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Puar, J. K. (2012). “I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess”: Becoming-Intersectional in Assemblage Theory. *philoSOPHIA*, 2(1), 49–66.
- UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. (1995). Factsheet n°23 Harmful traditional practices affecting the health of women and children.
- Williams-Crenshaw, K. (1994). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of colour. In M. Fineman & R. Mykieliuk (Eds.), *The public nature of private violence* (pp. 93–118). New York: Routledge.
- Winter, B., Thompson, D., & Jeffreys, S. (2001). The UN approach to harmful traditional practices. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 4(1), 72–94.
- Withaecx, S., & Coene, G. (2011). Voorbij de tegenstelling tussen vrouwenrechten en cultuur. Pleidooi voor een cultuursensitieve benadering van eerge relateerd geweld. *Tijdschrift Voor Genderstudies*, 14(1), 7–19.