

REVIEW ARTICLE

Female Genital Cutting: A Sociological Analysis

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Elizabeth Heger Boyle, *Female Genital Cutting: Cultural Conflict in the Global Community* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

ABSTRACT *This is a strictly sociological analysis of institutional conflict using female genital cutting as a case study. There is very little information about the practice of FGC itself or the local contexts in which it occurs. The interaction of nation-states with the international system in the face of conflict is the subject of the analysis. The conclusions are based on analysing international strategies, national policies, and data from nationally administered Demographic and Health Surveys in Egypt, Kenya, Mali, Niger, and Sudan. The sociological approach focuses on parallels between institutional behaviour at the international, national, and local level rather than specific meanings or local contexts.*

The routine, permanent modification of children's genitals occurs throughout the world in a wide variety of unrelated contexts. While an unbiased application of human rights principles finds this to be categorically problematic, only certain practices have been widely identified as violating the rights of the children upon which they are performed: those affecting non-Western females. A variety of international governmental and non-governmental organisations have taken actions aimed at eradicating these practices, and several national governments have adopted policies against or legislation prohibiting any such practice. Elizabeth Heger Boyle uses sociological techniques to examine the role of institutional actors at the individual, national, and international levels in *Female Genital Cutting: Cultural Conflict in the Global Community*. It is important to note the author's caveat that 'this book is not so much about FGC [female genital cutting] as about the international, national, and individual responses to the practice' (p. 20). This book is a good source for sociological tools to analyse the ways national governments

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negotiate the conflicting demands of their citizenry and the international community, but it is not a very good source of information about the various FGC practices. Boyle, who is not an ethnographer, offers very little substantive discussion of the local meanings and contexts for FGC, although her extensive bibliography references a good deal of material that does. Boyle discusses the role of human rights perspectives in the various campaigns against FGC, but she does not address the content of those debates. She also fails to sufficiently address the increasingly important question of why only certain (female) childhood genital surgeries represent a human rights concern to the international community, while other (male) childhood genital surgeries are categorically allowed to continue without comment. These omissions are not necessarily deficiencies, because this book is about institutional conflict in the international political system; FGC is simply the case study. This makes the title somewhat misleading: as the author herself notes, this book is not really about FGC. Instead, it uses a particular social scientific theory to analyse the relationship between national autonomy and international standards in an attempt to explain the apparent contradiction presented by national policies that do not reflect local practices. This book is more relevant to the general theorisation of universal human rights principles than to those that specifically address childhood genital modifications, but even that relevance must be extrapolated from the distinctly sociological content.

Boyle maps the factors that influence national governments to adopt policies that reflect international standards over local concerns, using FGC in Egypt, Kenya, Mali, Niger, and Sudan as examples. The opposition of states to FGC, even when a majority of citizens in these states practise it, is the contradiction that Boyle uses as a point of entry for her inquiry. The broader relevance of that inquiry is to globalisation, specifically the fact that 'national policymaking does not simply mirror local values or conflicts', but also reflects pressure to conform to international standards (p. 2). Boyle's understanding of globalisation is based on sociological neo-institutionalism, an analytical perspective that focuses on the homogenising influence of historically derived principles institutionalised in the international community. Boyle emphasises the importance of looking at the individual level, the local or on-the-ground level, as well as at the national and international levels, the levels of policy, so to speak, but her analysis is much more effective when considering the behaviour of institutional, rather than individual actors. The neo-institutional model is especially appropriate because FGC itself operates as an institution in the communities where it is practised. According to Boyle, the potential for institutional change occurs when institutions with conflicting principles encounter one another. The book takes an admittedly top-down approach to the practice, relying on sociological methods like analysis of survey data to gauge local positions on the issue of FGC, and local responses to international campaigns and national policy making. At times, Boyle's emphasis on the constructed nature of all nation-states obscures the particular historical influences that inform the experience of postcolonial states. The sociological quest for predictive models of institutional interaction tends to overlook the role that historic relationships play in establishing patterns of cultural hegemony.

The chapter 'Understanding Female Genital Cutting' relies on some uncomfortably broad generalisations about FGC, especially an extremely reductive model of historical diffusion of the practice from a single source of origin. A collective generalisation of this extent artificially imposes relational significance to distinct practices performed in unrelated social and cultural contexts, while simultaneously overlooking female genital

cutting that occurs in non-African settings. Boyle's contention that FGC usually occurs in one of two broad contexts, either Islamic or as a 'rite of passage' similarly risks implying connections between unrelated practices (p. 30). Forms of Islamic practice vary quite widely, and while Islamic justifications for FGC do occur, not every Islamic group that practises FGC does so for Islamic reasons. Ethnographic reports reveal significant dissimilarities between the meanings associated with FGC in different communities; different rites of passage mean different things to people in various societies. Overly reductive categories are pervasive in discussions of FGC, and the international campaign against FGC that is partly the topic of this book is premised on reductive generalisations about the practice, making the absence of a critical discussion of that tendency in this volume especially notable. The exception is Boyle's discussion of risks and complications, which recognises that certain risks are only associated with certain types of procedure. Likewise, common assumptions about the negative sexual and psychological effects of FGC are effectively refuted with ethnographic sources. Overall, though, the explanations offered in this chapter are uncomfortably general and reductive.

Chapter Three, 'The Evolution of Debates over Female Genital Cutting', frames the debate in terms of conflict between universal human rights and national sovereign autonomy, and therein lies the book's significance and value. Debates around FGC are commonly framed in term of human rights versus cultural rights, and the focus of this book on national sovereignty rather than cultural autonomy moves the scholarly discussion of FGC in an important direction. The focus throughout is on various kinds of institutions and the factors that affect the ways in which institutions respond to conflict. Several excellent discussions of the constructed nature of both nation-states and national sovereignty result from this focus on institutions. Chapter Four, 'International Mobilization', identifies the factors that predict how various institutional actors will behave regarding FGC: the more involved with the system of national sovereignty they are, the more conservative their calls for intervention to halt FGC. Chapter Five, 'The Diffusion of National Policies against Female Genital Cutting', moves away from a discussion of FGC itself, and towards an investigation of the contradiction that FGC is being used to interrogate: 'Nation-states are to act independently while simultaneously aspiring to identical goals and ultimately doing all the same things' (p. 81). The strength of this book is its analysis of this contradiction; the treatment of FGC itself is its primary weakness.

The final chapters on individual responses and frame resonance analysis of reasons for opposition to FGC provide the most interesting discussions of the ways in which international human rights discourse has influenced the awareness of people at the local level. Boyle identifies human rights as one of the 'master frames' of meaning within which international mobilisation has occurred (p. 138). Initial international opposition to FGC was premised on medical sequelae and the risks inherent, but by the 1990s the focus had shifted to FGC as a human rights violation. When framed as a human rights violation, there is no acceptable justification for continuation of the practice, while the frame of medical risk does not provide a basis for opposing medicalised procedures or those that involve relatively simple modifications with correspondingly low risks. The extent of the procedure and the presence or absence of risk become immaterial when genital integrity is constructed as a human right. Boyle mentions that women's rights are a specific focus, but stops short of taking up the fascinating question of why the same human rights challenge has not been made to infant male genital cutting in the United States and Britain, which is widely acknowledged to be a medicalised cultural practice.

Boyle's analysis identified certain correlates between the 'norm carriers' of media and college education, and individual exposure to the international anti-FGC campaign. A positive association emerged between exposure to these norm carriers and the likelihood that a woman had not circumcised her daughter. A similar association was identified between opposition to the continuation of the practice and 'factors associated with national modernity . . . urban dwelling and electricity' (p. 134). Overall, the level of development in a country proved to be the greatest single predictor that women would oppose FGC. As interesting as this information is, the analysis is predicated on the assumption that individual attitudes are accurately represented by nationally administered Demographic and Health Surveys. Recent ethnographic studies, including those cited by Boyle to refute assumptions about the negative effects of FGC on sexuality, reveal tremendous complexity in individual attitudes and responses to FGC. Humans are capable of creating personally coherent beliefs and behaviours that include apparently contradictory elements and actions. A survey questionnaire that asks whether people support the continuation of the practice cannot account for the kind of attitudinal complexity that characterises local responses to the various social, cultural, and political pressures related to FGC. Boyle's claim that 'despite the sensitivity of the questions, there was no evidence that women refused to answer or that the results were biased in favor of particular responses' is especially suspect (p. 121). Simply mentioning that all of the nations in the analysis had been subject to historic colonisation does not relieve the DHS data from the implications of that fact. Boyle amply demonstrates that postcolonial national governments are beholden less to their own populations than to the international system dominated by former colonial powers, and acknowledges that people at the local level are aware of the international anti-FGC campaign and its pressure on African nations. The real possibility that this situation would lead individuals to provide the kinds of responses to national surveys that they think the government wants to hear is dismissed by Boyle with the reassurance that the surveys used local languages and terminologies. Boyle's contention about the quality of the data would be much more convincing if she included the kinds of evidence that she did not find to support her claim for the veracity of the survey data.

This book offers a strong sociological analysis of institutional interaction around a controversial issue. The criticism of this volume can be extended to reflect the shortcomings of this particular sociological approach, namely an insufficient consideration of postcolonial hegemony in the interest of identifying rules that govern the operation of all institutions, whichever side of a power differential on which they happen to find themselves. The interaction of competing systems of meaning is discussed in relatively neutral terms that largely overlook the experience of domination and resistance that frequently characterises the encounter between international standards (and the national governments that they are responsible for constructing) and local practices. The conceptualisations of human rights and individual rights, and even of medical risk, that are the basis for international responses to FGC are all products of the same tradition of Western intellectualism that justified colonialism, facilitated the creation of postcolonial nation-states, and currently enforces the primacy of the international system. Any discussion of FGC, especially one that focuses on African forms of genital cutting to the exclusion of any others, should include a much more serious consideration of this context than does Boyle.

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