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The Female Circumcision Controversy: An Anthropological Perspective

Ellen Gruenbaum

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Female circumcision is a highly contested “tradition” practiced in many parts of the world, particularly Africa. International human rights campaigns

refer to the practice as “female genital mutilation” (FGM) and seek to eliminate it; its practitioners tend to defend it even after it has been declared illegal. Within this charged environment, Ellen Gruenbaum has undertaken the difficult task of examining the controversy from a more culturally sensitive perspective based on her years of fieldwork in Sudan.

In many respects, her attempt to present the issue’s multiple sides is successful. Using ethnographic description, she explores the range of factors giving this practice its importance, from socioeconomic to aesthetic, while also suggesting why and how there are more appropriate means to alter, reduce, and eradicate the practice.

In accordance with her list of influencing factors, Gruenbaum thematically divides her chapters into such sections as “patriarchy,” “marriage and morality,” and “ethnicity.” However, the ethnographic passages within are crucial to the book, because they show the humanity of those involved and help explain the contexts and circumstances of women’s lives outside their objectified status as “victims of tradition.” Also noteworthy is her support of advocacy for change, using ethnography to promote activism that is sensitive to and respectful of the needs of those affected. She repeatedly emphasizes the need to address poverty and women’s basic needs as more effective means to move forward, rather than focusing on circumcision in isolation.

In a somewhat clinical but useful introduction, Gruenbaum defines types of “female genital cutting” and such key issues as religion, femininity, and identity, to be addressed in the book in order to move “beyond simplistic condemnation.” Though she argues that “patriarchy” is too simple an explanation for female circumcision, Gruenbaum’s first chapter nonetheless suggests that this practice is, at the very least, strongly influenced by it. This is particularly true in terms of women’s dependence on marriage and circumcision for their social status and economic security.

The next three chapters’ rich ethnographic description provides a better understanding of some Sudanese women’s experiences. In chapter 2, “Ritual and Meaning,” Gruenbaum explores why circumcision is important to particular communities, including religion (often based on certain interpretations of Islam, Christianity, or animism), gender identity (by removing “masculine” parts to “feminize” a girl), and ideals of beauty. Her comparisons with similar rituals in western traditions (male and female circumcision in Christianity and Judaism, the aesthetics of body piercing) help contextualize the practice. Also of note is her matter-of-fact description of a circumcision ceremony, which avoids sensationalism but alerts us to the health risks and

complications that girls may be subjected to as a result of the tremendous alteration to their bodies.

In chapter 3, "Marriage and Morality," Gruenbaum discusses the social importance of marriage, particularly the significance of a girl's virginity and "honor," and the role that circumcision plays as a marker of both. Interestingly, she notes that circumcision does not necessarily prevent pre-marital sex and the kind of sexual control that is attributed to it in terms of reducing promiscuity. She mentions how economic insecurity raises women's dependency on marriage, and that in cases where marriage costs were rising, "anything that might add a barrier to marriage – such as having taken the risk not to circumcise ... would certainly be unwise, and parents knew that." At the same time, she provides examples of families who advocate changes in how circumcision is performed. An interesting phenomenon is that changes are being sparked by health education, migration experiences, and interpretations of Islam that reject this practice. She notes that while the importance of marriage is unlikely to decline, it is at least possible to begin to separate it from circumcision.

In chapter 4, "Ethnicity," she provides a detailed ethnographic description of two tribal groups with whom she has worked since the 1970s, the Zabarma and the Kenana, who have differing female circumcision practices. When families from each moved to an irrigation scheme as tenant farmers, the higher class Kenana's traditions and practices influenced the Zabarma. However, particularly in the case of circumcision, Gruenbaum notes that through their religious and ethnic discourse, Zabarma women resisted Kenana social pressure to infibulate (a severer form of circumcision).

Gruenbaum continues her discussion of these two groups in chapter 6 by looking at how development projects and economic development affect women and men differently. On the one hand, they provided increased educational opportunities for women, which can help reduce the incidence or severity of female circumcision. On the other hand, however, tenancy arrangements for irrigation projects in Sudan gave men more control over household revenue, thereby undercutting women's independent incomes. Much of the chapter focuses on polygamy, however, which as she admits, does not have a direct correlation to circumcision. Nevertheless, the higher incomes generated by development projects enables more men to engage in polygamy, which indirectly increases the pressure on women to please husbands – which may include circumcision.

In addition to health risks, circumcision is often condemned on the basis that it denies women sexual pleasure. Unlike other chapters that look

at why it is practiced, chapter 5 is a more general exploration of sexuality's meaning and whether circumcision destroys a woman's sexual response. Though at times tedious, the chapter dares to ask important questions. Gruenbaum comments that it is "inappropriate to conclude that there is a uniform effect on sexuality, not only because of the variation in what is altered [by circumcision], but also because of the complexity of erotic response."

The final two chapters look forward. While the previous chapters had a more "cultural relativist" perspective, mostly presenting the views of those practicing circumcision, chapters 7 and 8 advocate reforming and eventually eradicating the practice. Gruenbaum discusses such recent positive influences as Islamist discourses denouncing such practices as "cultural"; the innovations of individual health practitioners who are showing alternate, less harmful forms of cutting; the introduction of alternative rites (in Kenya); and the international human rights and women's rights movements. All of these have contributed toward changing attitudes. In the final chapter, she emphasizes an important point that is clearly directed to a more western activist audience: the need to understand such practices more holistically, in the context of poverty and women's health. Punitive measures such as legislation, she notes, have not curbed the practice, whereas public health education has had a greater impact.

At times, it appears ironic that Gruenbaum advocates placing the issue in a larger context and yet focuses on this debate in isolation. However, it is understandable that to reach her audience – those who are teaching or are involved in advocacy, particularly in the West – it was necessary to focus on circumcision alone. Overall, the book provides substantial ethnographic description, which is helpful in contextualizing the issue. It can be used by anyone teaching or discussing the practice. It also can be a critical advocacy tool to look at more culturally sensitive alternative strategies. Continued contextualization of such practices as female circumcision, both in research and in advocacy, will go a long way toward promoting reform and will engage more constructively those who are the most affected.

Gul Joya Jafri, Policy Analyst
Multiculturalism Program
Department of Canadian Heritage
Ottawa, Canada