“The Ethics of ‘Dealing With’ Female Genital Cutting”

By

Barbara Nicole Bailey

**A thesis submitted to
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In partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of**

Masters of Arts

Department of Sociology and Anthropology

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to examine the ethical and political issues involved in Western women “dealing with” the issue of “female genital cutting” (FGC). This is an historical examination, that is, I explore the initial Western (primarily feminist) condemnations of FGC: condemnations later criticized as ethnocentric, sensationalistic portrayals of complex and culturally meaningful practices. Many non-Western critiques pointed out that legal campaigns to eradicate FGC often failed, even “backfired,” eliminating one means whereby Third World women obtained prestige, often resulting in charges being laid against women - individuals belonging to the very group they sought to protect from FGC. This thesis discusses how we might build and develop a more “respectful” means of discussing and transforming cultural practices such as FGC. The main emphasis, however, is on the need to step back, acknowledge Third World women’s ownership of the issue, and let them take the lead.

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Chapter One: Introduction

I have been interested in the topic of Female Genital Cutting (FGC)¹ for several years. In fact, FGC was the topic of my Honours Research Paper several years ago.² When I first learned about the existence and consequences of FGC, I had a visceral reaction: I was horrified. Initially, my position with regard to the practice was one of strict condemnation, and I argued that FGC should be eradicated as quickly as possible, through legal and other institutional avenues. I considered FGC to be a violation of the basic human rights of women and girls. I shared the position held by Gunning (1992: 190), who recounts her initial approach regarding FGC: “I thought my right to criticize derived from my own feminist perspective. Female genital surgeries were just one particular cultural example of patriarchal control over women. Surely as a feminist I had a right, and perhaps a duty to critique the practice.”

I found that my views were further reflected in various feminist works addressing FGC, such as Mary Daly’s chapter in *Gyn/Ecology*, Fran Hosken’s *The Hosken Report*, Morgan and Steinem’s article in *Ms. Magazine* (1980), Hashe and Silver’s work in *Canadian Woman Studies* (1994), and Alice Walker’s book and film, *Warrior Marks* (1993). These writings, as well as mainstream media attention about FGC, mirrored my own position with regard to the practice.

1 In this thesis I use the term “Female Genital Cutting (FGC).” Other terms in use include female circumcision, female genital mutilation (FGM), female genital operations (FGO) and female Genital Surgeries (FGS). In Chapter Two I use the term female genital mutilation (FGM) because that is the term used by the authors discussed therein. Obviously, in direct quotations I used whatever term or abbreviation used by the individual quoted. I discuss the use of various terminologies in Chapters Two and Three.

2 Though I labelled it FGM at the time.

However, over the course of several years' study and learning, I have come to appreciate that there are many complex and nuanced issues involved beyond a simple condemnation when it comes to "harmful cultural practices" (Brems 1997: 148) or "culturally challenging practices" such as FGC. I realize that "speaking out" about FGC, much less condemning it, especially as a middle class white Western feminist, is much more problematic and much less straightforward than I (or Gunning, a Black American feminist) initially realized. I am aware that, in general, anthropology and anthropologists have tended to avoid judgmental comments and commentary with regard to FGC and other practices. This is partly because of the dangers of viewing a particular custom or practice in isolation and without any regard with how it "fits in" and "makes sense" within the practicing culture. This is anthropology's "cultural relativism."

Western criticisms of FGC and calls for its eradication have been labelled ethnocentric, arrogant, sensational, imperial and, ultimately, racist. Western portrayals and graphic depictions of FGC have been labelled "misunderstandings" and completely "out of context," without any attempt to understand the historical, cultural and social contexts and meanings of FGC and its associated rituals and practices. Issues of voice, agency and authenticity have also been raised. And, of course, the relationship between the North and the South, between Northerners and Southerners, has been problematized.

These, and other, issues resonate especially for a feminist anthropology student. As an anthropology student, I am aware of how anthropology, historically, has been the study of the non-Western cultural 'other.' The West studies "the Rest," to use Sahlins' terms. Again, historically, anthropology has been "us," from the colonial powers, studying "them," in the colonies. The powerful studying the powerless. In anthropology, "we" represent "them." In addition, and relatedly, anthropology has been decried as 'the

handmaiden of colonialism' (Amadiume 1987; Asad, 1973; Goddard 1969; 1973; Gough 1967; 1968; Harrison, 1997; Huizer and Mannheim, 1979; Hymes, 1972). The American Anthropological Association's Executive Board (1947) noted how other peoples from other cultures are often tolerant of other cultures, except for the West: the West tends to be imperial, condescending, judgmental and intolerant of other cultures. The West colonized and enslaved the Rest.

Furthermore, as a student of feminism, I am aware, since de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), of how the dominant male gender defined itself ("man") as the standard or norm, and defined "woman" as the opposite or 'other' gender: the *second* sex. In both of these dichotomies (West/Rest and Male/Female), one pole is more highly valued than the other pole, which is often seen as deficient, "less than" or "lacking." Thus, the West and the male are seen as dominant, standard, and normal, while the non-West and the female is seen, in contrast, as subordinate, deviant, abnormal. In a parallel with "the second sex" is the West's use of the terms "First World" and "Third World."

In addition, these dichotomies clearly give agency and subjectivity to the more "valued" pole. The "opposite" becomes an object, without agency. And the "other" also becomes "homogenized."

In an ironic twist, Western feminism (largely a product of Western middle-class white women) has been in turn accused of being ethnocentric, condescending, arrogant, imperial, and racist, treating 'Third world women' as an 'other' to Western women and feminists. The accusation by Third World women and others, is that Western feminism ignored "other" women yet spoke as if they were speaking of a universal female essence shared by all women. Patriarchy itself was seen as a transhistorical and transcultural universal. In this, Western feminists were 'falsely universalizing' from

their own particular knowledges, experiences, perspectives, or biases. Specifically, when Western feminists *did* deal with “other” women (women of other classes, races, ethnicities, cultures), it was argued, they did so without really knowing those other women. And they *misinterpreted* and *misunderstood* women of other classes, races and cultures. (Amadiume 1987; Mohanty 1991 a and b; Bhavnani and Coulson 1986; Johnson-Odim 1991; Bulbeck 1998).

Mohanty (1991b), for example, claims that Western anthropologists and feminists *assume* that they know about “Third World women” *before* they even start their studies and projects. And they *homogenize* all Third World women, ignoring or denying that there are differences of class, race, ethnicity, region, religion, and others, between women in the Third World, as there are in the West. This homogeneous view of “the Third World woman” is also perceived as the opposite of their (Western feminist) self-image: If Western feminists are knowledgeable, strong and aware, then Third World women are seen as ignorant and weak (and in need of education and leadership). This view of Third World women also denies them subjectivity and denies them any agency: they are objects. As were, of course, previously, all women and the non-West.

Specifically, many Western (often feminist) condemnations of Third World “harmful cultural practices” (Brems 1997: 148) seen as manifestations of a “universal patriarchy,” such as *sati*, Chinese footbinding, child betrothal, and, of course, FGC, were themselves condemned. Westerners (often feminists) who demonized FGC were often said to be sensationalist, condemning FGC as a universal manifestation of ‘patriarchy’ without understanding, or endeavouring to understand, the meanings and importance of the practice and beliefs in the host cultures. Many were condemned in more practical terms: criticizing Third World cultural practices as ‘barbaric’ or ‘inhuman’ often lead Third World women (and others) to defend their cultures against

Western imperialism and arrogance; while attempts to legislate an end to FGC often lead to the arrest and imprisonment of women practitioners.

Further, having taken courses on women's studies, history and sexuality, I had difficulty in dismissing FGC as something affecting 'other' women in 'other' countries. This dilemma arose from the knowledge I had acquired over the course of my undergraduate education, regarding the fact that mutilations of all kinds are, and have historically been, present in our own Western cultures. I knew that Freud advocated scissoring off the clitoris for all and any 'female' ailments, such as hysteria, frigidity, and depression. This practice continued, under the guise of a variety of medical rationales, until only a few decades ago in Western countries, including the United States and Canada. Furthermore, there are practices that are currently popular here in North America and abroad, which are endured by Western women of all ages, in order to achieve or maintain an 'ideal' of female beauty.

1.0 Chapter Outline

Chapter Two will examine the initial Western (and Western feminist) outraged condemnations of FGC. I will be drawing primarily on the literature produced by prominent Western feminists, such as *The Hosken Report: Genital and Sexual Mutilation of Females* by Fran Hosken (1979), Mary Daly's chapter on FGC in her book *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (1978), Alice Walker's and Pratibha Parmar's book and video, *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women* (1993), Gloria Steinem and Robin Morgan's article in *Ms.* magazine, titled "The International Crime of Genital Mutilation" (1980), and Hashi and Silver's article in *Canadian Woman Studies* entitled "No Words Can Express: Two Voices on Female Genital Mutilation" (1994).

Chapter Three will be a critique of the materials discussed in Chapter Two. This will include charges of Western ethnocentrism, arrogance, disrespect, sensationalism, imperialism and racism (including Gunning's condemnation of what she refers to as "arrogant perception"). It will be revealed how these positions have proved to be counterproductive. The terms used will be problematized (mutilation; circumcision; others), as will the different forms of FGC and the need to avoid overgeneralizing from the most "brutal" form. The need to contextualize FGC within specific cultures, histories, etc. will be discussed. The origins and "functions" of FGC will be examined. The homogenization of Third World women's experiences and the "othering" of Third World women will also be explored. The existence of Third World concern with, and opposition to, FGC will be explored, as will issues of voice and agency. I will discuss the need for education and stressing health issues, rather than legislation. I will also discuss the need to deal with other issues that negatively affect the lives of girls and women in the South, including safe water, structural adjustment policies, and the "war on terrorism."

Chapter Four then examines what a more fruitful and respectful approach to FGC might be like. This chapter looks at the more recent and nuanced attempts at addressing FGC, by authors such as Gruenbaum (1996; 2001), Gunning (1992; 1994; 1999), Lewis (1995), Walley (1997), and James (1998), among others. This includes Gunning's notion of 'world traveling,' respect for difference, and an examination of one's own culture and one's own history, while still working to build a consensus for the eventual elimination of FGC through educational and cross-cultural campaigns, *led* by the women (and men) of the practicing cultures, and *supported by others*. I briefly examine the work of Renteln (1990), An-Na'im (1992a; 1992b; 1992c), Messer (1993) and others who attempt to go beyond the simple dichotomy between, on the one hand 'universal human rights' and, on the other hand, 'cultural relativism.' They also discuss

the possibilities of building a consensus about “universal human rights” from the ground up rather than from the top down. And these authors also call for more crosscultural (two-way) dialogues and alliances: cultures, and individuals within cultures, can and do change.

Chapter Five will contain my conclusions. Ultimately, there is no way to completely reconcile a desire to fully respect other cultures and yet to oppose “cultural practices” such as FGC, as Gunning and Lewis, among others, recognize. In this chapter, however, I discuss various ways in which I, as a Western woman, can dialogue with, and be engaged in, conversations and actions that seek a “respectful” approach to eradication.

Chapter Two: Some Western Feminist Analyses and Condemnations of FGC

2.0 Introduction

Over the course of just over two decades, Western feminists and human rights groups, among others, have been at the forefront of the international battle for the eradication of female genital mutilation (FGM).³ Western feminist writers in particular have produced a collection of influential writings, and these efforts have been central to the establishment of a powerful information campaign against FGM, advocating its immediate and total eradication. Beginning in the latter half of the 1970s, the subject of FGM was brought to the forefront of international awareness, due to the work of prominent feminist authors such as Mary Daly (1978), Gloria Steinem (1980), Fran Hosken (1979), and somewhat later, Alice Walker (1993, 1996). Though the West has been aware of, and opposed to FGM since the colonial period, “it became an issue of concern to Second Wave feminists in the United States and Europe during the 1970s” (Walley 1997: 418), and especially during the United Nations’ Decade for Women and Development (1976-85).

Conferences were organized by groups such as the World Health Organization, UNICEF and UNESCO, where FGM was comprehensively, and heatedly, discussed. The practice of FGM provoked outrage in the West, based primarily on what some may prefer to think of as “humanitarian and feminist values rather than prejudice.”⁴ Western feminists adopted a fervent stance against the continued practice of FGM, and “the issue strikes numerous nerves, as it challenges fundamental understandings of

3 In this chapter I utilize the phrase “female genital mutilation” or FGM because this is the term used by these Western writers and activists who condemn the cutting and seek its eradication. I return to the issue of “naming” in Chapter Three.

4 See Gruenbaum (1996: 455).

body, self, sexuality, family, and morality, and as it plays upon tensions relating to cultural difference, the relationship between women and ‘tradition,’ and the legacy of colonial-era depictions of gender relations in non-Western countries” (Walley 1997: 406). As Lewis (1995: 15) aptly notes, “the extreme physical consequences of FGS have led many Western feminists to conclude that they have an ethical responsibility to take personal or collective action to prevent FGS whenever possible.” This chapter primarily examines the works of leading feminists who have raised awareness, and, as will be shown in Chapter Three, controversy about FGM. This chapter is particularly vital to the development of this thesis, as it not only establishes the history of the discourse surrounding FGM, but also demonstrates the limitations and disadvantages of a forceful and uncompromising campaign of eradication, based on a West Knows Best attitude.

Popular and “influential” (Walley 1997: 418) Western critiques of FGM see it as a physically and psychologically dangerous and damaging procedure; it is condemned in strong terms. Among the most popular, influential, and often cited and quoted Western condemnations of FGM are: Fran Hosken’s *The Hosken Report: Genital and Sexual Mutilation of Females*; Alice Walker and Pratibha Parmar’s book and film, both entitled *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women*; and Mary Daly’s *Gyn/Ecology: the Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (this book contains “The Second Passage,” a section on “The Sado-Ritual Syndrome: The Re-enactment of Goddess Murder,” which contains chapters on Indian *suttee*, Chinese footbinding, and “African Genital Mutilation: The Unspeakable Atrocities”). An early article in *Ms.* magazine written by Robin Morgan and Gloria Steinem was entitled “The International Crime of Genital Mutilation”; and one in *Canadian Woman Studies* by Kowser W. Hashi and Joan Silver was entitled “No Words Can Express: Two Voices on Female Genital Mutilation.” A.M. Rosenthal editorialized in the *New York Times*

under the title “Female Genital Torture”; William Raspberry’s column in *The Washington Post* was entitled “Women and a Brutal ‘Tradition’”; and Judy Mann entitled a column in *Rocky Mountain News* “Women Launching Effort to Halt Barbaric Mutilation” (Gunning 1994: 19-20; Lewis 1995: 3; Walley 1997: 405; 431).

FGM is seen as: savage, perpetual, needless and senseless torture; terrifyingly sadistic; a crime; evil; brutal; barbaric; medieval; vicious; shocking; horrendous; butchery; insanity; archaic; cruel; shameful; demeaning; and, ultimately, as, just that: mutilation, that “no words can express.” Hosken (1993: 72) refers to “permanently damaging mutilations.” Browne (1991: 247) notes that “many Western women consider it [FGM] humiliating, oppressive, brutal, mutilating, and savage.” Daly (1978: 154) refers to FGM as “Unspeakable Atrocities,” while Hosken (1993: 4) speaks of FGM as “senseless violent attacks.”

These writers use the term female genital mutilation (rather than, e.g., female circumcision) to emphasize the physical pain and damage to health and well-being caused by the practices “and to stress what some construe as the intentional infliction of harm” (Lewis 1995: 6-7). Hosken (1993: 4) speaks specifically of “deliberate mutilation.” The girls who undergo these practices are seen as: “victims” (Hosken 1979⁵: Personal View 4; El Saadawi 1980: 69; Browne 1991: 243); whose suffering “may continue for a lifetime” (Morgan and Steinem 1980: 100).⁶

⁵ This edition of The Hosken Report is not paginated sequentially throughout. Rather, each section is paginated beginning with page one. So in the citation I provide the name of the section, except for the first section, followed by the page(s) in that section.

⁶ See also Hashi and Silver (1994: 63; 64).

The “graphic descriptions” (including diagrams, drawings and photographs) of the practices and the physical and psychological consequences “are deeply disturbing for good reason” (Lewis 1995: 12). First person accounts and/or descriptions of actual operations often involve young girls “pinned down to the floor...completely immobile,” sometimes screaming (Hashi and Silver 1994: 63).⁷ Typical Western condemnations of FGM, such as those of Daly, Hosken and Walker, depict and emphasize the lack of hygiene and anaesthesia, the dirty or blunt knife or razor blade, the suturing thorns, the screams, the blood, and, of course, the physical and psychological consequences of the practices, especially on sexuality, sexual pleasure, orgasm, pain and childbirth.

At the 1980 United Nations’ Women and Development Mid-Decade Conference in Copenhagen, Hosken “spear-headed a discussion on female circumcision” with a “graphic presentation” (Obiora 1997: 327-8), complete with photographs (Gunning 1992: 200). “It is often horror at the pain and health risks that galvanize so many Westerners to support strong and immediate action to eradicate” the practices (Lewis 1995: 12), through legal and educational means. It is worth noting that the *Ms.* Magazine article by Morgan and Steinem has, on its front page, a black and white photograph of a very scared- and terrified-looking girl. The accompanying caption reads: “The village women splash water on seven-year-old Adizetu’s wound after the excisor has performed a ritual clitoridectomy” (Morgan and Steinem 1980: 65). The article in *Canadian Woman Studies* by Hashi and Silver is accompanied by drawings of a “Normal Adolescent Vulva” and an “Infibulated Vulva” (Hashi and Silver 1994: 63).

⁷ See also Lewis (1995: 12); El Saadawi (1980: 68); Gunning (1994: 31).

2.1 Fran Hosken

One of the earliest and strongest Western voices against FGM was that of Fran Hosken, who first published *The Hosken Report: Genital and Sexual Mutilation of Females* at the end of 1978. She asserts: “For the first time this Report brings together *all* the known facts on female genital mutilation which have been concealed all over the world, especially from women” (Hosken 1993: 8, emphasis added).⁸ “Hosken is credited with presenting the bombshell that generated much of the popular awareness of the seriousness and wide prevalence of these practices” (Gruenbaum 2001: 22). Hosken “is well known among activists and scholars for her fire and sometimes for her ire” (Gruenbaum 2001: 205). She is on “a personal crusade to eliminate these practices” (Gruenbaum 2001: 205). Gruenbaum (2001: 22) notes that *The Hosken Report* “was a take-no-prisoners approach that justified even forceful external interference.” Hosken held a “radical ‘eradication now!’ position” (Gruenbaum 2001: 22). Hosken (1979: 1) asserts: “The goal of this report is to initiate action to abolish all forms of female genital and sexual mutilations, whatever purpose they are said to serve. To wipe out these evil and damaging operations, performed on female children and young women is the immediate objective that can and must be dealt with now.” She also argues that this goal can be achieved “in a short time” (Hosken 1979: 6). The concerns Hosken expresses “resonate in much of the Western feminist human rights discourse on FGS” (Lewis 1995: 11).

⁸ In the first edition of *The Hosken Report*, Hosken (1979: Personal View 16, emphasis added) had written the almost identical: “In this report, for the first time, all the facts on genital operations which have been suppressed by the patriarchy in order to continue this violation of females, are brought together.”

2.2 Mary Daly

Another early, clear and strong expression of this view appears in the writing of Mary Daly. Her book, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, contains “The Second Passage,” a section on “The Sado-Ritual Syndrome: The Re-enactment of Goddess Murder.” This section has chapters on Indian *suttee*, Chinese footbinding and “African Genital Mutilation: The Unspeakable Atrocities,” as well as European Witchburnings and American Gynecology. Daly (1978: 154) states that FGM is one manifestation of the Sado-Ritual Syndrome, “planetary patriarchy,” that is “unspeakable - incapable of being expressed in words because inexpressibly horrible.” Daly (1978: 154-5; 162) labels these practices “barbaric rituals/atrocities,” “ritualized atrocities” and “massacres” of bodies and spirits. Daly (1978: 166) includes the following “ethnographic” portrayal of FGM:

The procedures differ among different tribes, but they always follow certain rules that have been handed down, which constitute “the way it has always been done.” Thus, among the Nandi in Africa, there is a two-part horror show. The first day, stinging nettles are applied to the clitoris, so that it swells and becomes unimaginably large. The second day, an old woman chars it off with glowing coals. The mutilated girl is then sent to a convalescent hut, having been converted into property for her husband.⁹

2.3 Alice Walker

A third popular, influential and powerful, if later, Western feminist to engage with the issue of FGM is Alice Walker. “The work of African American ‘womanist’ Alice Walker, more than that of any other African American feminist, has increased the scope and urgency of the international campaign to educate and organize against FGS”

⁹ Daly cites the following source here: Felix Bryk, *Dark Rapture: The Sex-Life of the African Negro*, English version by Dr. Arthur J. Norton” (New York: Walden Publications, (1939), pp. 89-90).

(Lewis 1995: 34). Walker's widely publicized novel, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), a "fictional account of the impact of traditional female genital surgeries on one African woman and her family" (Lewis 1995: 34), "has strongly condemned the practice of female genital mutilation" (Walley 1997: 405). Walker (quoted in Lewis 1995: 34) has written elsewhere: "I believe with all my heart that there is at least one little baby girl born somewhere on the planet today who will not know the pain of genital mutilation because of my work. And that in this one instance, at least, the pen will prove mightier than the circumcisor's knife."

More recently, Walker has collaborated with Pratibha Parmar to produce a documentary film and companion volume on FGM, both entitled *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women* (1996), "garnering still more media attention in Western countries" (Walley 1997: 405) and making "the issue of FGS more accessible to a Western audience" (Lewis 1995: 34).¹⁰ In these works, "Walker expresses unequivocal opposition to the continued practice of FGS" (Lewis 1995: 34). It was felt by some that "Because of Walker's popular status as an African American womanist oracle," her efforts toward eradication held more "legitimacy" in the eyes of Africans and others, than the efforts of "other Westerners" (Lewis 1995: 34).

Walker (1993: 15-19) also discusses an incident from her childhood, when she was seven or eight. Her older brother shot an air rifle at her eye, destroying the pupil. As a result, she was permanently blind in that eye. For a long time it was painful. After caring for her the week it happened, her parents ignored the injury, referring to what had happened as 'an accident,' *Alice's* accident. Walker writes: "For a long time I felt

¹⁰ See also James (1998: 1031).

completely devalued. Unseen. Worthless. Because I had been blamed for my own injury.” It is worth noting that Walker does not let the reader know, aside from this sentence itself, how or why she was blamed for the incident. Walker “knew the injury had been intentional,” that her brother was aiming at her, although he may not have planned to shoot her in the eye. “What I had, I realized only as a consciously feminist adult, was a patriarchal wound.” As an adult, Walker (1993: 17) realizes that “I have by now turned my wound into a warrior mark.” “It was my visual mutilation that helped me ‘see’ the subject of genital mutilation” (Walker 1993: 18).

With increased international immigration, FGM is becoming an issue more recently in the North.¹¹ Attempts at eradicating these practices in the North have led many Western feminists to call for legislation making the practices illegal and punishing those responsible. (Browne 1991: 243; Winter 1994; Hughes 1995; Gunning 1999; Lewis 1995: 51-4; Lewis and Gunning 1998). Linda Weil-Curiel, a lawyer “prominent in legal battles against female genital operations in France” (Walley 1997: 420), stated: “the parents are the real culprits. They know they are going to hurt the child, and they nonetheless take the child to the excisors, to the knife...there is no excuse, ever, for such a deed” (interviewed and quoted in Walker and Parmar 1996: 265). For Hosken (1993: 54), “To mutilate a child is a criminal offense, no matter what the African

¹¹ Hosken (1993: 45) specifically states that “No reliable documentation exists that in the past or traditionally FGM was practiced outside of Africa and the Middle East...except by some Moslem groups in Malaysia and parts of Indonesia.” Hosken (1993: 289) notes that “Clitoridectomy, infibulation and circumcision have been practiced by individual men on their wives..., by pathologically jealous husbands everywhere and by male physicians who are doing genital mutilations all over the world for profit.” But “such physical means of sexual control have never been imposed by men on the entire female population of their ethnic group, tribe or society” outside Africa and the Middle East (Hosken 1993: 289). “Further, in the Western World [sic], female genital mutilations (FGM) are for the most part inventions and practices used by individual men of means who could afford devices or services to restrain female sexuality and who in this way tried to assure paternity” (Hosken 1993: 289). Hosken (1993:292-3) does acknowledge the fact that, historically, the West practiced infibulation and clitoridectomy as a “cure” for female masturbation, hysteria and to control female sexuality.

customs.” In addition, Northern governments have had to deal with women who seek asylum or refugee status for themselves and/or their minor daughters so they will not be sent home where they may be made to undergo FGM.

Also recently, and gathering increasing momentum throughout the 1990s, mainstream Western media have begun to discuss and condemn FGM in the most graphic and starkest terms. “Media accounts have included articles and op-ed pieces in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *Time* magazine, and segments aired on TV and radio news programs including *ABC World News Tonight*, *Dateline NBC*, ABC’s *Nightline*, CNN’s *Newsnight*, and National Public Radio’s (NPR) *All Things Considered*” (Walley 1997: 405). In addition, there have been *CNN Specials*, *Day One*, and *Morning Edition* episodes on FGM (Walley 1997: 431).¹²

In the *New York Times* specifically, the columnist A.M. Rosenthal “generated significant publicity” through his opinion pieces published on FGM (Gunning 1995: 3 n. 7). These columns, published in 1992 and 1993 in the *New York Times*, were entitled “Female Genital Torture,” “The Torture Continues,” and “Female Genital Mutilation” (Gunning 1995: 3). Rosenthal (cited and quoted by Walley 1997: 421) “called on the people and governments of the countries where genital operations are practiced ‘to revolt against the sexual and social insanities that allow the mutilation of half their population.’”¹³

12 See also Lewis (1995: 2-3); Gunning (1994: 19-20).

13 Here is Hosken’s (1993: 371) opinion of Rosenthal’s editorial columns: “Recently a columnist for the New York Times, Mr. A.M. Rosenthal, suddenly discovered FGM, complaining that no one was paying any attention to this ‘torture’. He presented his version of FGM though he clearly knows nothing about it. In typical male chauvinist fashion he ignored all women who have worked for years to make the issue known against enormous obstacles such as the male-dominated press represented by the New York Times.”

2.5 FGM as Evidence of Patriarchal Hatred Toward Women

These popular Western condemnations of FGM see the mutilation of women as one expression of universal global patriarchy, a global fear and resultant hatred of women, everywhere (Lewis 1995: 23; El Saadawi 1980: 69; Hosken 1979: 8; Hosken 1993: 18, 31, 63; Daly 1978: 160; Gunning 1992: 34; Gunning 1994: 18, 19; Gunning 1999: 47; James 1998: 1043). The fear is an “[i]rrational fear of female sexuality” (Hosken 1993: 10). The hatred is manifest in the conception and establishment of practices such as FGM, which are created in order to “suppress women’s sexuality, maintain their subjugation, and control their reproduction” (Hashi and Silver 1994: 62).¹⁴ Hosken (1979: Personal View 1) asserts that FGM is “more than sexual assault, more than physical torture and abuse,” but is a method used deliberately to “enslave” and “subjugate women” in order to “physically control women’s bodies, reproduction and sexuality.”¹⁵

Men everywhere share “the underlying attitudes of contempt for femaleness” (Hosken 1993: 27; also Hosken 1979: 1). Though the practices take different forms in different times and places, they are all, in essence, the same, because their objective is the same - the total, and absolute, control of women by men, the “crippling of women” (Hosken 1979: 1). These “medieval sexual assaults” are “a means to prove male sexual superiority” and to “establish the inferiority of the female sex” (Hosken 1979: 2). The clitoris, or genitalia in general, is “unclean,” “impure” and hated; it “must be destroyed” (Daly 1978: 159; Walker in Walker and Parmar 1996: 18). Hosken (1979: Personal View 13) writes: “The operations are violent sexual attacks against the bodies of

¹⁴ See also Gruenbaum (2001: 40); Hosken (1979: 2); Medical Facts and Summary 1; Dorkenoo (1994: 4).

¹⁵ Hosken more recently (1993: back of title page) states that the individual country studies “are the substance of the report, documenting the diversity and imagination with which patriarchal societies mutilate their female children to assert absolute male control.”

helpless young female children to make them the compliant chattel of men.” FGM is “forced upon” millions of young girls in Africa (Daly 1978: 156).

These writers and activists argue that the purpose of FGM is to deny women sexual desire, pleasure and/or gratification (Daly 1978: 159; Morgan and Steinem 1980: 67; El Saadawi 1980: 69; Hashi and Silver 1994: 63; Gruenbaum 2001: 66, 78; Lewis 1995: 14). The mutilation of the female body is “performed with the intention of diminishing her femaleness and sexuality” (Hosken 1979: 2). Women, after undergoing FGM, are “‘sewn up’...for their [the male masters’] own pleasure” (Daly 1978: 159). Women “have been deprived of their own sexuality and ‘tightened up’ for their masters’ pleasure” (Daly 1978: 160). However, Hosken (1993: 34; 46) asserts that “The objective of infibulation is to make sexual intercourse impossible.”

The “horror” does not end with the operation: there are health consequences and women “are debilitated for the rest of their lives” (Daly 1978: 156-7). Women “can look forward to a life of repeated encounters with ‘the little knife’ - the instrument of her perpetual torture” (Daly 1978: 157). Women “who physically survive these atrocities ‘live’ their entire lifetimes...preoccupied by pain,” “perpetual pain” (Daly 1978: 156; 159). There is also “the psychological maiming caused by this torture” (Daly 1978: 157). “[P]ain preoccupies minds, emotions, imaginations, sensations, prohibiting presence of the Self” (Daly 1978: 159).

Hughes (1995: 330) notes that the “origins of the practice” of FGM “are unknown.” Hosken (1993: 71) agrees. Strangely, Daly (1978: 160-1) discusses the “massive spread” of FGM throughout Africa: “this ritual spread rapidly over a large geographical area, involving the torture and maiming of millions of women.” She asserts convincingly: “The spread of this atrocity was condoned, legitimated, demanded by the

World Religion which is patriarchy” (Daly 1978: 162). Though there seems to be little agreement as to the origins of FGM, the function(s) of the practice, and/or the theories suggested by various practicing cultures as to why FGM began and why it continues, include: religion, tradition, hygiene, aesthetics, and controlling women’s sexuality, including preserving female virginity, assuring marital fidelity, and preventing a woman’s outward enjoyment or sexual response (Hughes 1995: 331-2).¹⁶ FGM is also practiced because it is required to become a marriageable woman and to marry and that “as long as men make FGM a requirement for marriage, women have no alternative in societies where there is no option but marriage and where women have no choice” (Hosken 1993: 26).¹⁷

2.5 FGM as ‘Culture’ and ‘Tradition’

Among the various justifications provided for the continuation of FGM, “tradition” appears to be the strongest, and “is the most frequent reason that diverse ethnic groups cling fiercely” to the practice of FGM (Simms quoted in Hughes 1995: 332).¹⁸ Yet what is meant by “tradition” and how it works, is contested. Some Western writers “presume Third World women to be dominated by an ahistorical patriarchal ‘tradition’ that is assumed to be more severe than that in Europe or the United States” (Walley 1997: 420). For Hosken (1979: 7), the proponents of FGM “stress the importance of blindly supporting traditions where women are concerned.” They “cling to distorted beliefs and damaging practices” (Hosken 1979: 2). The “mutilations continue blindly and in secrecy” as “our tradition” (Hosken 1979: Personal View 12).

¹⁶ See also Morgan and Steinem (1980: 67); Hosken (1993: 39-42); Lewis (1995: 20-3 [including n. 85]).

¹⁷ See also Hosken (1993: 39); Gruenbaum (2001: Ch.2-4); Gunning (1992: 195-6); Lewis (1995: 21-3).

¹⁸ See also Hosken (1993: 42).

For the mainstream Western media, “tradition” and “culture” are synonymous: “Forrest Sawyer, the anchor of ABC’s *Day One*, emphasized the presumed weight of culture: ‘This is a brutal, disabling ritual so tied to culture and tradition that for thousands of years women have been powerless to stop it. In fact, the taboos are so strong that the women subjected to it will rarely talk about it at all’” (Walley 1997: 421). For Hosken and other Western feminists, this “secrecy” is evidence of guilt and complicity (Hosken 1979: 1).

For Hosken (1993: 16), “What are called ‘cultural traditions’ in reality are practices that support the ritual abuse of women, systematically damaging women’s health and strength to make sure of their subordination to men.” Thus, for Hosken and other Western feminists, “respect for culture” and “cultural relativism” have become for her “the misogynist slogan...that protects the torture and murder of thousands of helpless little girls every year” (Hosken 1993: 4). For Hosken (1993: 16), “wife abuse” and “the selling by fathers of their barely teenage daughters to the highest bidder” and “rape” “are all ‘traditions’” in many African societies. Hosken (1993: 16, emphasis added) generalizes: “African traditions deprive women of *all* personal rights and make them into *wholly owned resources of men*,” into the “wholly owned property of men.” These accounts emphasize “the allegedly coercive and oppressive nature of African cultures and societies as a whole” (Walley 1997: 421).

The “defence” of FGM used by some, that it is part of the “culture” of those engaged in the practices, infuriates many Western feminists and human rights advocates. Many are outraged that, although many issues of violence are accepted as human rights issues (torture; slavery), violence against women, and FGM in particular, is dismissed as part of “culture” (Morgan and Steinem 1980: 67; Hosken 1993: 17). The question that many have asked is: why has it always been women who have traditionally endured

greater violations of their human rights in the name of “culture” than any other group? (Nagengast 1997: 358-9).

Hosken also seems to believe that any rituals surrounding FGM are either extinct or meaningless. Hosken notes that rituals surrounding FGM “are claimed to have social meaning”; and that “in the view of some, [these rituals surrounding FGM] have a positive social influence (a view that I personally don’t share)” (Hosken 1979: Personal View 12). In reference to Somalia, Hosken (1993: 15, emphasis added) states that “*there is no ceremony attached to*” FGM. However, in stark contrast, Daly asserts that FGM is performed as ritual and “the performance is itself highly ritualized” (Daly 1978: 166). All the “ritual prescriptions” and “obsessive repetitiveness and fixation upon minute details” and rules “distract the attention of the participants (and of foreign specialists such as anthropologists) from the victimized women’s physical agony, mutilation, life-long deprivation, deformity, pain, and premature death from complications” (Daly 1978: 166-7).

2.6 FGM, “False Consciousness” and Agency

In addition to the role of “tradition,” Hosken also examines the role of “ignorance.” She claims that those who practice FGM “do not know any better, and are wholly ignorant of the biological facts” (Hosken 1979: Personal View 1). She argues that few, or none “know the health damage involved or the impairment of sexuality that these operations cause” (Hosken 1979: 6). In addition, “African women are not conscious of their own oppression, and deny it” (Hosken 1979: Personal View 11).

Yet, if Third World women want to have, and do have, their daughters undergo FGM, they must be suffering from a form of “false consciousness” (Browne 1991: 243; Gunning 1992: 220; Lewis 1995: 23). “[F]alse consciousness...encourages blind

allegiance to tradition even when it harms them” (Browne 1991: 243). Or, if women support FGM this merely illustrates “the viciousness of the process of socialization of females” (Hosken 1979: Personal View 19). Similarly, if little girls want and look forward to their operations, this is said to somehow involve “a very powerful form of brainwashing” (Hashi and Silver 1994: 62). For Daly (1978: 165) “tradition” has a stranglehold on the mother-daughter relationship”: even “educated” African women (by academic and professional standards) “insist upon excision.”

These portrayals presume that Third World women are “dominated by an ahistorical patriarchal ‘tradition’ that is assumed to be more severe than that in Europe or the United States” (Walley 1997: 420). Ahistorical ‘culture(s),’ ‘tradition(s)’ or ‘custom(s)’ are “depicted as the meaningless hangovers of a premodern era and as the defining characteristic of the Third World” (Walley 1997: 420).

For Hosken (1993: 72) “The final achievement of exerting control over women is to make them internalize the need for their own mutilation and carry out the operations on their own daughters.” The role that mothers play, either implicitly or directly, in carrying out the procedure is, for Daly (1978: 165), “Most horrifying.” In fact, women often take active participation, and FGM is marked by “male absence at the execution of the mutilation” (Daly 1978: 159). Rather, women are used as “token torturers” (Daly 1978: 163). Yet the entire ritual is male-centred (Daly 1978: 163):

It is men who demand this female castration, and possession in marriage is required in *their* society for survival. The apparently ‘active’ role of the women, themselves mutilated, is in fact a passive, instrumental role. It hides the real castrators of women. Mentally castrated, these women participate in the destruction of their own kind - of womankind - and in the destruction of strength and bonding among women. The screaming token torturers are silencing not only the victim, but their own victimized Selves.

Their screams are the 'sounds of silence' imposed upon women in sado-ritual. (Daly 1978: 163-4, emphasis in original)

Similar to Winter's concern (below, p. 53) about the complicity of mothers (and fathers) in France in the FGM of their young daughters, "Hosken had attributed the apparent complicity of African women to their isolation from the 'outside' world, stating, 'Local women - who it is said should speak for themselves (the majority of whom are illiterate...) - have no connection with the outside world and have no way to organize against the practice'" (Walley 1997: 420, quoting Hosken).

2.7 Need for First World Education and Leadership

In any case, it is apparent that campaigns of education must "begin the long and very painful process of consciousness raising" (Hosken 1979: Personal View 19). In the latest edition of *The Hosken Report*, Hosken (1993: 10; 19) acknowledges that the issue of FGM "is discussed quite openly in the cities of many African countries"; and that "[p]reventative actions have been started in many affected areas"; legal and educational campaigns have begun against FGM; and women are "beginning to speak for their rights and against their abuse" and, specifically, against FGM.¹⁹ Yet Hosken (1993: 10, emphasis added) still adds that "We are able to teach those who cling to distorted beliefs some better ways to cope with themselves, reproduction and sexuality." When we educate Africans about "the biological facts," Hosken and *WIN News* receive thousands of letters "from men and women [that] in summary state: Now that we have learned what happens as a result of the operations we shall not have our daughters operated [*sic*]" (Hosken 1993: 11).

¹⁹ The "progress made since the last edition of this report is enormous" (Hosken 1993: 19). The previous edition was 1983, ten years earlier.

2.8 FGM as a Human Rights Abuse

As a result of the work of people like Hosken and other Western feminists concerned with “culturally challenging practices” in other cultures, the debate and the politics have entered the discourse and the arena of international human rights. Feminist human rights advocates have argued that the concept of “human rights” had to be transformed and expanded to include “women’s rights” “the rights of the child,” and other constituencies. Western human rights concern with the public/private distinction had to be bridged, and concern with human rights abuses and violations beyond the state’s control had to be developed. Human rights and women’s rights advocates have struggled over the years to get violence against women recognized as a human rights issue. (Hosken 1993: 24-5; James 1998: 1039; Lewis 1995) FGM is seen as a violation of girls’ and women’s human rights. If FGM were performed on minor girl children, the practices have been labelled “a horrific form of child abuse” (Senator Paul Wellstone quoted in Gunning 1994: 30).²⁰ “Hillary Rodham Clinton, wife of the [then-]U.S. president, publicly condemned FGS at the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, declaring that ‘it is a violation of human rights when young girls are brutalized by the painful and degrading practice of genital mutilation’” (cited and quoted in Lewis and Gunning 1998: 128-9).

These debates and controversies often took place at the official and unofficial United Nations meetings in Mexico City, Khartoum, Lusaka, Copenhagen, Nairobi, Cairo, Vienna, Beijing, and other sites (Morgan and Steinem 1980: 98, 100). Most recently, the Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), has been ratified. The issue of Human Rights will be discussed at some length in Chapter Four.

²⁰ See also Hashi and Silver (1994: 62).

2.9 Western Voices and Cultural Intolerance

The following chapter notes that the condemnation of FGM is often impossible to separate from the condemnation of the people(s) and culture(s) where FGM is practiced or who practice FGM. Gruenbaum, for example, notes that, often, “Western readers and students reject not only the idea of the surgeries, but the cultures where they are found as well,” rejecting “the practitioners along with the practices” (Gruenbaum 2001: 24-5). Obiora (1997: 328) points out that “Effective critics straddle the fine line of condemning the extremities of the practice but not the culture that spawned it.” From the view from “inside” the practicing cultures, many in the Third World “view efforts to eliminate FGC as an attack on their culture” (Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2000: 30).

It appears that Hosken, Daly and Walker, at least, are not so effective at straddling that ‘fine line,’ as their words quoted in this chapter have demonstrated. They *do* attack the culture(s) where FGM occurs, in stark terms. While Hosken (1979: Personal View 13) claims that her own travels throughout Africa “have taught me to respect the diversity of the people,” her portrayal of African men and culture(s) and, especially Somali men and culture(s), does not seem respectful, or tolerant; quite the opposite.

In her work, Hosken speaks of African men generally, and Somali men in particular, in ways that can only be described as intolerant, even racist. Hosken treats African men, especially Somali men, as ‘incomprehensible’, and barely ‘human.’ Hosken (1993: 52) asks the question: “How can we respect men who mutilate their own children?” Hosken sees one way in which African men are dissimilar to all other patriarchal males on this planet: “Though violence against women in all kinds of vicious ways goes on all over the world there is one difference: For African men to subject their own small daughters to FGM in order to sell them for a good bride-price shows *such total lack of human*

compassion and such vicious greed that it is hard to comprehend" (Hosken 1993: 16, emphasis added).

African men, especially Somali men, are also exceptionally 'depraved' and, again, 'incomprehensible': "The sickening performance of every Somali man of cutting open his bride to satisfy his sexual desires by raping a screaming bleeding girl - writhing in pain, often hardly more than a child - connotes a depravity and a corruption of values that are hard to fathom, let alone comprehend" (Hosken 1993: 60).

Hosken (1993: 14) writes that in the summer of 1993, "It is increasingly clear that the Somali men...are unable to govern themselves...Somalia is also the country where FGM is practiced in the most brutal form - infibulation - and no female child is allowed to escape from this savage torture or live a normal life." The same press release states that "A boy who has grown up exposed to such brutality practiced in his own family on all girls and women is *accustomed to abusing every female at will, and has no restraint or compassion for human suffering*" (Hosken 1993: 15, emphasis added). Because of this, "Somalia is reaping the results of its own traditions" (Hosken 1993: 15). More generally, Hosken (1993: 16) writes that "Condoning such traditions by young boys is an education for lifelong violence as the continuous civil wars all over Africa confirm."

So, for Hosken, FGM, in some sense, or a culture or society that 'produces' FGM, in some sense, *produces* civil wars throughout Africa, and anarchy in Somalia. And everything about Africa, about Somalia, is 'explained' by reference to intra-African, intra-Somalia phenomena alone: "Somalia is reaping the results *of its own* traditions" (Hosken 1993: 15, emphasis added). No one, and nothing, impinges upon, or affects, Somalia and Africa.

2.10 *Conclusions*

Clearly, there have been many compelling Western writers involved in the movement toward the eradication of FGM. This section provided a general overview of the major issues for Western feminists, and briefly introduced the work of a select few who have in particular made breakthrough headway in the fight against FGM. However, as will be examined in the following chapter, their work, though undeniably groundbreaking, has been the source of a good measure of controversy.

As I will show in Chapter Three, Western critiques and condemnations of FGC, including those of Hosken, Daly and Walker, have been labelled: arrogant; elitist; paternalistic; maternalistic; judgmental; ethnocentric; essentializing; homogenizing; intolerant; insensitive; demeaning; excessive; disrespectful; condescending; sensationalistic; pornographic; imperial; and racist. Moreover, the material in this chapter is marked by an “Us” helping “Them” attitude that needs to be changed to one of greater respect, agency and leadership for Third World men and women in the fight against FGC, as will also be discussed in the following chapter. Finally, these sorts of condemnations of FGC have been both ineffective and counterproductive, as I will also demonstrate in Chapter Three.

Chapter Three: Critiques of Western Feminists' Critiques of FGC

3.0 Introduction

Although the efforts on the part of the West to eradicate FGC may have truly been based on a desire to help relieve the burden of African women, and to improve the conditions in which they live, FGC, and its negative effects, were often the sole focus of the discourse. Human rights discourse asserts that millions of females are affected by FGC, however it is seldom that the lives of these millions are explored beyond their mutilation. As a result of this focus, Western discourse on FGM is inclined to depict African women solely through their experience of oppression, as victims of patriarchal dominance and abuse. Consequently, Western involvement has frequently been perceived by Third World women as based on feelings of superiority and racism (Gunning 1992: 212 citing Gruenbaum 1988).

However, as will be indicated in this chapter, and maintained throughout this thesis, practices that incite abhorrence in the Western world are not likely to wane if those closest to the traditions find themselves treated as secondary in the discourse. The objective of this chapter is to demonstrate the necessity for new approaches to eradication, methods such as those suggested by Gunning (1992: 202), who proposes “world travelling,” which will be discussed in Chapter Four. We need an approach to eradication of FGC, where cultural practices are viewed within their historical, cultural, social and political context. We require an approach that is concerned with countless other issues affecting Third World women, such as poverty, drought, and starvation; one that includes dialogue with Third World women. One that rids the discourse of “the general air of superiority and self-righteousness” on the part of the West, encouraging instead “truly egalitarian relationships with women in non-Western cultures” (Gunning 1992:212-3). Importantly, an approach is needed that promotes Western support of *their* efforts, instead of taking the lead.

3.1 *Third World Reactions to Western Outrage*

As noted in Chapter Two, during the 1970s and, especially, during the United Nations Decade for Women (1976-85), and since, “female genital mutilation” became a prominent issue, especially among Western feminists. Calls for the eradication of FGC were widespread (Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2000:24). But this was also an extremely controversial and emotional issue (Walley 1997: 405; 418; Obiora 1997: 284; Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2000: 1). The response to the works and writings of Daly, Hosken and Walker, and other Westerners, including feminists, “was not what many First World feminists might have expected. Instead of being congratulated for their opposition to female circumcision, they were called to task by some African and Third World women” (Walley 1997: 418).

The rhetoric of these outsiders’ critiques and condemnations of FGC, their outrage and indignation over the practices, “the venomous tone” of their condemnations, and their own actions, set “a combative tone”: they often provoked responses which were also “emotionally charged,” angry and indignant (Gruenbaum 2001: 205; Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2000: 1;24). Evidently, “[T]he very decision to write (or not) about the topic has become a political statement, and so is one’s choice of tone and terminology” (Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2000: 2, quoting Gosselin).

Western critiques and condemnations of FGC, including those of Hosken, Daly and Walker, have been labelled: arrogant; elitist; paternalistic; maternalistic; judgmental; ethnocentric; essentializing; homogenizing; intolerant; insensitive; demeaning; excessive; disrespectful; condescending; sensationalistic; pornographic; imperial; and racist. In an ironic twist, Hosken (1993: back of title page) has a note “To the reader,” which states that “Despite some recent media attention, the facts published by the press

[about FGC] are often wrong, distorted, taken out of context and even exploited and sensationalized including for personal gain.”

Before I begin a more general analysis of some of the ways in which women and men (especially from the Third World) criticize Western depictions and condemnations of FGC, such as those summarized in Chapter Two, I would like to briefly review some of the concrete criticisms made against, especially, the three authors and activists highlighted in Chapter Two: Hosken, Walker and Daly.

3.2 *Fran Hosken*

Fran Hosken “has been the focus of much resentment among African women and men for her efforts” (Lewis 1995: 30). Hosken’s approach and attitude are “‘notorious,’ because for all her hard work and probable good intentions, her ‘us helping them’ approach has created an enormous amount of bitterness in non-Western feminists for whom the attitude is chillingly reminiscent of colonialism” (Gunning 1992: 200).²¹ Hosken has been strongly and widely criticized inside Africa for her highly controversial positions about the origins of FGC as a manifestation of patriarchal oppression and ignorance, and about the motives of those who reject Western intervention, or who defend FGC (Lewis 1995: 11; 30; Abusharaf 2000: 161). Hosken utilizes a discourse that “tends to frame the role of cultural outsiders as one of ‘enlightenment’” (Lewis 1995: 11-12).

Hosken and Renée Saurel (both Western women) “caused an outcry” when they led a panel “complete with photographs” on FGM at the 1980 NGO Forum meetings in Copenhagen (Gunning 1992: 200). African feminists at the meeting (some from

²¹ See also Abusharaf (2000: 160).

AAWORD²²) were so outraged at what they perceived to be a sensationalist, sensationalized and insensitive presentation that many walked out in protest, but only “after incisively criticizing the graphic presentation that violated, exploited, and sought to ‘forcibly strip them in company’” (Obiora 1997: 328).²³ AAWORD later castigated “uninformed propagandists who, in desperate appeal to Western audiences, are ‘insensitive to the dignity of the very women they want to save.’”²⁴ As Gruenbaum (2001: 203) points out, “The message the African women conveyed, in essence, was that the matter of changing or ending genital cutting should be in the control of those affected, not outsiders passing judgment.” When Western-educated African women tell Hosken that FGC “‘is none of your business’ and ‘this is our culture,’” Hosken is amazed that these women, who have often been away from Africa for long periods of time in the West, “take it upon themselves to speak for all the many millions of women living in Africa” (Hosken 1979: Personal View 13).

22 The Association of African Women for Research and Development.

23 Walley (1997: 419) mentions “a group that threatened to walk out of the mid-decade international women’s conference in Copenhagen in 1980.” Obiora (1997: 327-8) notes that “The African women who were present at the meeting registered their protest by walking out.” Gruenbaum (2001: 25) mentions this incident but mis-dates the meeting as in 1985. She gets it correct on page 203, where she discusses the backlash reaction and anger that Western feminist FGC eradication pressures created. Hosken herself mentions this incident, but obviously she has a different “take” on it. In her version, “a group of African women stormed into the room where I spoke on FGM...Mary Angelique Savane from Dakar, who led the group, gained a lot of media attention - which was her purpose - by shouting so loud that no one could speak or be heard. Savane now has been rewarded with a high administrative post at the United Nations in Geneva by the male decision makers.” Savane charges outsiders protesting FGC with “‘interference’ [sic] This charge is still the weapon used in Africa by those who seek power for themselves and who object to any assistance that is offered without consulting them first.” (Hosken 1993: 51) Hosken (1993: 17; 371) also acknowledges that charges of “ethnocentricity,” “cultural imperialism,” “racism,” and lack of “cultural relativism” have also been levelled at outsiders such as herself who condemn FGC; she dismisses such claims as being at odds with various human rights instruments. See also Gunning (1992: 200) and Lewis (1995: 28)

24 (quoted in Obiora 1997: 328).

3.3 Alice Walker

Alice Walker, an African American “womanist” was “initially perceived...as an ideal ambassador between the cultural divide of white Western feminists and African feminists” (Lewis 1995: 34-5).²⁵ The film *Warrior Marks* was applauded by some for its “sensitive presentation of FGS through dance as informative and moving” (Lewis 1995: 35). Others, in contrast, felt that the film interspersed “an impressive array of interviews” with dancing that was an “almost erotic depiction of the horrors of circumcision” (James 1998: 1032). Gunning (1994: 22) thinks that Walker “starring” in the film “has been a point of controversy,” and suggests letting “the true women warriors, the African women involved, be portrayed as the heroes of their own lives and ‘star.’”

As indicated in Chapter Two, above, some critics felt that Walker “drew too direct an analogy between FGS and Walker’s own ‘patriarchal wound’” (Lewis 1995: 35). James (1988: 1031) thinks that Walker’s analogy, “between her personal misfortune and pervasive traditions of circumcision/mutilation to be particularly problematic.” Gunning (1994: 22) labels it “inappropriate.” James (1998: 1032) asserts that Alice Walker, though “imbued with a sympathetic perspective,” is in fact “‘othering’ or marginalizing the very people she wishes her audience to support” by “centering her own story” in the context of “this international struggle for women’s human rights.”

Like Ms. Walker’s novel “Possessing the Secret of Joy,” this film [*Warrior Marks*] is emblematic of the Western feminist tendency to see female genital mutilation as the gender oppression to end all oppressions. Instead of being an issue worthy of attention in itself, it has become a powerfully emotive lens through which to view personal pain - a gauge by which to measure distance

²⁵ See also James (1998).

between the West and the rest of humanity. (Dawit and Mekuria as quoted in Walley 1997: 428).

Some charged that the film “insensitively and inaccurately portrayed the older women who perform FGS as uniformly cruel and inept”; that Walker’s “outrage came dangerously close to demonizing women circumcisers,” and “characterizing African women as both bad mothers and child abusers” (Lewis 1995: 35; James 1998: 1044). This was labelled as both cultural insensitivity and a subtle form of cultural imperialism (James 1998: 1036; 1044). Some complain that Walker’s outrage permeated the interviews she conducted with circumcisers, refusing to acknowledge that the positions such as circumciser often “provides some women with opportunities to attain respect and income in societies where there are often precious few avenues available to women to attain such critically limited resources” (James 1998: 1032).

For James (1998: 1033), Walker’s portrayal of FGC is done “in a way that invites the characterization of African women as victims without agency.” Nagengast (1997:364) remarks that “A book, *Warrior Marks*, by Alice Walker [sic] (1993) about genital surgeries has been widely read as disrespectful, as exoticising and representing African women as dramatically dissimilar to North American women.”

Perhaps the strongest negative comments concerning *Warrior Marks*, the film, come from an op-ed piece which appeared in the *New York Times*, soon after the opening of the film, “written by two African professional women, Seble Dawit and Salem Mekuria, with the support of six others, all of whom oppose and have been working to abolish female genital operations” (Walley 1997: 427):

Ms. Walker’s new film “Warrior Marks” portrays an African village where women and children are without personality, dancing and gazing blankly through some stranger’s script of

their lives. The respected elder women of the village's Secret Society turn into slit-eyed murderers wielding rusted weapons with which to butcher children. As is common in Western depictions of Africa, Ms. Walker and her collaborator, Pratibha Parmar, portray the continent as a monolith, African women and children are the props, and the village the background against which Alice Walker, heroine-savior, comes to articulate their pain and condemn those who inflict it. (Walley 1997: 428, quoting Dawit and Mekuria)

Thus, while "some Africans appreciate and praise Walker's participation in the campaign against FGS, others find aspects of her work to be imperialist or underinformed" (Lewis 1995: 35).²⁶

3.4 *Mary Daly*

Audre Lorde, an African-American feminist, poet and activist published "An Open Letter to Mary Daly," following the publication of the latter's *Gyn/Ecology*, thanking Daly for having had a copy of her new "useful, generative and provoking" book, "full of import," sent to her.

[W]hat I want us to chew upon here is neither easy nor simple. The history of white women who are unable to hear Black women's words, or to maintain dialogue with us, is long and discouraging...I believe in your good faith toward all women... In this spirit I invite you to a joint clarification of some of the differences which lie between us as a Black and a white woman (Lorde 1984: 66-67).

Daly's *First Passage* speaks of myth, mystification and the Goddess. Lorde wonders why Daly's text highlights "white, western european, judeo-christian" models, instead of African ones, such as "Afrekete, Yemanje, Ojo, and Mawulisa?" (Lorde 1984: 67)

²⁶ See also Gunning (1994: 22-6).

Lorde concludes, somewhat reluctantly, that the omission of African examples must have been a “conscious decision” on Daly’s part, to “narrow her scope and to deal only with the ecology of western european women” (Lorde 1984: 67).

Disheartened, Lorde acknowledges that “As an African-american woman in white patriarchy,” she is accustomed to having her “archetypal experience distorted and trivialized,” but finds it “terribly painful to feel it being done by a woman whose knowledge so much touches my own” (Lorde 1984: 67-8). Lorde asks Daly directly if she has “ever really read the words of Black women?” (Lorde 1984: 68). Lorde clearly expresses her disappointment, and asserts that *Gyn/Ecology* “feels like another instance of the... work of women of Color being ghettoized by a white woman dealing only out of a patriarchal western european frame of reference (Lorde 1984: 68).²⁷ Daly, she argues, deals with “noneuropean women, but only as victims and preyers-upon each other.” (Lorde 1984: 67). She felt her “history and... mythic background” were “distorted by the absence of any images of my foremothers in power.” She recognizes the importance of the “inclusion” of “African genital mutilation... in any consideration of female ecology,” (Lorde 1984: 67) and admits that “too little has been written about it” (Lorde 1984: 67). She maintains that to consider the experience of oppression suffered by women as a uniform entity, transcending racial, cultural, class and religious boundaries, their commonality established simply by virtue of collective female-ness, as Daly seems to do, “is to lose sight of the many

27 Daly (1978: 154) notes, in a footnote that she is aware of some of her potential critics: “I have chosen to name these practices for what they are: barbaric rituals/atrocities. Critics from Western countries are constantly being intimidated by accusations of ‘racism,’ to the point of misnaming, non-naming, and not seeing these sado-rituals. The accusations of ‘racism’ may come from ignorance, but they serve only the interests of males, not of women. This kind of accusation and intimidation constitutes an astounding and damaging reversal, for it is clearly in the interest of Black women that feminists of all races should speak out. Moreover, it is in the interest of women of all races to see African genital mutilation in the context of planetary patriarchy, of which it is but one manifestation.”

varied tools of patriarchy. It is to ignore how these tools are used by women without awareness against each other” (Lorde 1984: 67). To be ignorant of this, Lorde (1979: 69) argues, “serves the destructive forces of racism and separation between women.” Lorde believes it is perilous to apply “the herstory and myth of white women” as “the legitimate and sole herstory and myth of all women,” while using “nonwhite women and our herstories” as “noteworthy only as decorations, or examples of female victimization” (Lorde 1984: 69). Lorde (1984: 70) pertinently adds: “The oppression of women knows no ethnic nor racial boundaries, true, but that does not mean it is identical within those differences. Nor do the reservoirs of our ancient power know these boundaries.” And perhaps more significantly, Lorde (1984: 70) asserts: “To deal with one without even alluding to the other is to distort our commonality as well as our difference. For then beyond sisterhood is racism.”²⁸

3.5 General North/South Dynamics Concerning FGC

I now move from some of the specifics of the criticisms concerning the actions and writings of Hosken, Daly and Walker, to the more general criticisms concerning Western feminist (and other) portrayals of FGC.

Essentially, the controversy concerning Western portrayals and condemnations of FGC involves the lack of acknowledgement of a lengthy history of a troubling differential power relationship between the cultures of those doing the criticism and the cultures of those being criticized: namely, a history of imperialism, (neo-)colonialism, and the overall relationship between the so-called First World and the so-called Third World. This includes a history of a troubling differential power relationship between

²⁸ See also Leonard (2000: 172-173)

hegemonic” First World liberal feminism and Third World women (and men) (Walley 1997: 419; Mohanty 1991b: *passim*).²⁹

This controversy concerning Third World criticism of Western portrayals and condemnations of FGC “formed merely one segment of a broader challenge to mainstream Euro-American feminism by women of color, working-class women, lesbians, and many Third World women, who felt that their experiences and understandings had been excluded by white, middle-class formulations of feminism” (Walley 1997: 419).³⁰ Feminists argued “that the white male ideal marginalizes, disempowers, and renders the ‘other’ invisible” (Obiora 1997: 312). Ironically, however, Third World women and women of color accused First World feminists of having done the exact same thing that they themselves had accused men of doing (Kim 1993: 61). Ironically, this also parallels the charge that anthropology also emphasized a distinction between “us”/the West versus the “Rest”/the Third World, in which the West was always valued more than the Rest in a series of binary oppositions (Mohanty 1991a: 31-32).³¹ First World feminists have “falsely universalized” from their own perspective, location, and experience(s) (James 1998: 1039). “Universal feminism has come under attack due to the contention that universality within feminism is a fiction, based on essentialist notions” (Oloka-Onyango and Tamale 1995: 697). It has been argued that “Despite the scathing criticism of androcentrism and false universals [Western feminists’ treatment of FGC] is borrowing from the tools of patriarchy” (Obiora 1997: 311).

²⁹ See also Gruenbaum (2001: 25); Mohanty 1991a).

³⁰ For further discussion on this issue, see Lewis (1995: 9); Kim (1993: 60-63); Bhavnani and Coulson (1986); Amadiume (1987); Bulbeck (1998); Mohanty (1991a); Mohanty (1991b); Johnson-Odim (1991); Gilliam (1991) and Russo (1991).

³¹ Also see Amadiume (1987).

Western feminist accounts of FGC have generated so much media attention and so much controversy because of the ways these accounts “have fed into powerful and value-laden understandings” which presume a radical difference and binary opposition between Africans and Euro-Americans, between the Third World and the First World, “that itself is built upon the historical belief in a chasm between ‘modern’ Euro-Americans and ‘native’ colonized others” (Walley 1997: 419).³² To a great extent the “Western-oriented literature by Euro-Americans that opposes female genital operations invoked a series of binary oppositions,” including: First World v. Third World; modernity v. tradition; science v. superstition; civilized v. barbarous; freedom v. torture/repression; women as actors v. women as oppressed; medical knowledge v. ignorance/disease (Walley 1997: 423). Walley (1997: 423) asserts that “The cumulative effect of these binary oppositions is to perpetuate a dichotomous understanding of First and Third Worlds, an enduring division between ‘us’ and ‘them.’”³³

Western depictions and condemnations of FGC “seemed to establish a hierarchical relationship to their Third World sisters through intellectual neocolonialism. It revealed latent racism, because the form in which the issues were articulated was in terms of those ‘savage customs’ from ‘backward’ African and Arab cultures” (Gilliam 1991: 218).³⁴ Western condemnations of FGC perpetuate “the myth of Africa as the dark continent of unbridled savagery, violence, and moral bankruptcy. Thereby [it] legitimizes discourses that provide moral justifications for the recurring Western saviour and rescue complexes” (Obiora 1997: 327).

³² See also Abusharaf (2000: 163).

³³ See also Gunning (1999: 59); Mohanty (1991a).

³⁴ See also Browne (1991: 245; 251).

Despite the assumed “good intentions” of Western feminists in expressing solidarity or ‘helping’ their sisters of colour, Western criticisms of Third World FGC and calls for its eradication “are often perceived as only thinly disguised expressions of racial and cultural superiority,” imperialism or orientalism (Gunning 1992: 212).³⁵ Moreover, efforts to eradicate FGC have been seen as “an imperialistic intervention from meddling Westerners of privilege” (Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2000: 25). Hosken (1993: 371, emphasis added) addresses this charge, by stating the following: “Publishing the terrible facts of traditional ritual mutilations and abuse was regularly called interference or cultural imperialism by the press and at the UN, and *women who dared to say the truth* were attacked as racists and strident feminists who did not understand African culture and traditions.” Furthermore, “reading through much of the Western-based literature opposing female genital operations, the degree to which many of the arguments work to reproduce such beliefs is striking” (Walley 1997: 419). This is true of the portrayals and condemnations of FGC noted in Chapter Two.

The bitter controversy over FGC “plays upon tensions relating to cultural difference, the relationship between women and ‘tradition,’ and the legacy of colonial-era depictions of gender relations in non-Western countries” (Walley 1997: 406).³⁶ Obiora (1997: 329) notes that, in Africa, “outside interventionists, whether colonialist or missionary (and now feminist), continue to presume that it is their duty as the ‘advanced’ to elevate and enlighten the ‘backward.’”

The sense of a radical separation between First and Third Worlds, however, is perhaps most forcefully reproduced in the terms (labels) and accusations of ‘savage,’ ‘barbaric,’

35 For further discussion, see also Walley (1997: 427; 430); Obiora (1997: 287); Shell-Duncan and Hernlund (2000: 1).

36 See also Mohanty (1991a); Mohanty (1991b).

‘torture,’ ‘mutilation’ and other terms mentioned in Chapter Two (Walley 1997: 423). Because FGC is usually performed at the request of parents and relatives, “this discourse implicitly suggests that even family members in such societies are callous or barbaric [or savage] enough to ‘torture’ [or ‘mutilate’] their own” (Walley 1997: 423). This is becoming even more pronounced with increased immigration from the Third World to the First (Walley 1997: 406; Lewis and Gunning 1998: 131; Gruenbaum 2001: 30). I return to this issue of terms and labels below.

Walley (1997: 409) argues that the incredible interest in the West concerning FGC “stems not only from feminist or humanist concern, but also from the desire to sensationalize, to titillate, and to call attention to differences between ‘us’ and ‘them’ in ways that reaffirm notions of Western cultural superiority.”³⁷ This tendency of the West to “exoticize” and “eroticize” the bodies of “sub-Saharan and North African women” is not a recent occurrence, but rather has a “long history,” for example the Hottentot Venus, erotic French colonial postcards, and other preoccupations with the genitalia and sexuality of non-Western women (Walley 1997: 422).

Typical Western depictions of FGC emphasize the lack of hygiene and anaesthesia, the dirty or blunt knife or razor blade, the suturing thorns, the holding down of the child, the screams, the blood, and, of course, the physical and psychological consequences of the practices. Many critics of these portrayals note that they are often “voyeuristic”;³⁸ “there is a prurience in the detailed descriptions of processes and outcomes”; and in

³⁷ See also Gilliam (1991: 219).

³⁸ Walley (1997: 422) cites Dawit who “noted the voyeurism implicit in a CNN newscast that spent nearly ten minutes graphically depicting the infibulation of an Egyptian girl.”

some cases, there is “what can only be described as pornographic detail of the operations” (Green and Lim 1998: 370).³⁹

Although African feminist activists, physicians, and scholars have rarely challenged the accuracy of the descriptions of the serious physical consequences caused by FGS, they object to the manner in which international human rights discourse defines and describes FGS. For example, a number of African women have objected to certain graphic photographs, slides, and other media as disrespectful to the women and girls involved. They argue that this disrespect perpetuates the historical use of African women’s bodies as objects of Western public display without regard for the privacy or human dignity of the women involved. (Lewis 1995: 28-9)⁴⁰

Non-Western women (and men), even non-Western feminists who are fighting against FGC, sometimes objected to the way the issue was being handled by First World feminists and to the tone of Western feminist campaigns to eradicate the practices (Lewis and Gunning 1998: 128; Walley 1997: 419; Kim 1993: *passim*).⁴¹ Critics argue that Western depictions of FGC have been “excessive, essentializing, and paternalistic” (Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2002: 2). Much Western feminist involvement in FGC “has tragically been characterized by a ‘maternalistic’ tendency to try to change the minds of women who practice FGC and - when this fails - to attribute to them ‘false consciousness’” (Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2000: 29, citing Engle).

³⁹ See also Shell-Duncan and Hernlund (2000: 18); as well as Obermeyer (1999: 90).

⁴⁰ A “striking example” of this is noted by Shell-Duncan and Hernlund (2000: 18-19) who mention a 1762 expedition to Egypt which had “an eighteen-year-old village girl brought out to display her genitalia while the expedition artist created a sketch.”

⁴¹ Gruenbaum (2001: 21) notes that when she first presented and published a paper on FGC in Sudan, she “found that several of the women scholars of Middle Eastern origin were intensely critical of this topic entering the Western discourse on the Middle East at that time. They considered it an inappropriate topic for outsiders because it tended to sensationalize and stigmatize their cultures... They had a valid point: talking about this shocking practice could contribute to stereotyping, rather than promoting understanding.” See also Gruenbaum 2001: 25; Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2000: 24).

Lewis (1995: 23) asserts that “Western feminists” risk “replacing patriarchal oppression with Western cultural oppression” in their quest to “‘enlighten’ African women.” Such an elitist and ethnocentric attitude does not promote “productive dialogue and mutual understanding” (Gruenbaum 2001: 17).

It is characteristic of these interventionists [colonialist, missionary, feminist] to pay scant attention to crucial issues including the wishes and opinions of the supposed beneficiaries of their benevolence, the overall implications of intervention, and the possibility of more ‘benign’ intervention. Not surprisingly, their campaigns, often couched in terms of virtual monopoly on good judgment, are perceived as unduly ethnocentric and presumptuous. Such campaigns...have historically provoked righteous indignation and engendered cultural resistance to Western ‘missionary’ exploits. Moreover, they tend to pre-judge and alienate the only forces – women, the ‘victims’ and perpetrators – capable of facilitating or subverting meaningful change. (Obiora 1997: 329).

As Gruenbaum (1996: 456) notes, “Simplistic condemnations” by outsiders “are not only ineffectual but can also stimulate strong defensive reactions,” provoking a backlash, characterized by a staunch defence of traditions by African men and women against what is perceived as Western cultural criticism, interference and imperialism.⁴² Pelayo Correa (quoted in Gunning 1992: 225) asserts “‘The African, like all peoples of the world, likes to make even bitter criticism against his country and people, but finds it difficult to tolerate that others do it, especially at a time when Africa tries to find its own identity and unity.’” Some Third World feminists fighting to eradicate FGC have rejected any interference by outsiders (Gunning 1992: 226).⁴³ Gilliam (1991: 218) notes that the Copenhagen 1980 Forum controversy over FGC “forced Arab and

⁴² See also Gruenbaum (2001: 25); Obermeyer (1999: 90); Gunning (1992: 224); (Lewis 1995: 32); Walley (1997: 425-426).

⁴³ See also Lewis 1995:25).

African women - who had always fought against female circumcision on health grounds - to feel compelled to defend it.” And Gunning (1992: 223, citing Lightfoot-Klein) notes “how colonialism and continuing expressions of western superiority can serve to solidify resistance to abandoning indigenous and traditional cultural practices.”⁴⁴

The reality that First and Third World women have different needs, concerns, and power bases, combined with the particular histories of feminism in former colonies..., has contributed to tensions in the midst of efforts to create an international women’s movement...Female genital operations have proven to be one of the most powerful fault lines along which such tensions erupt. (Walley 1997: 425)

This challenge to Euro-American feminism resulted in a shift of attention toward issues of difference and diversity between women (of different cultures, ethnicities, classes, etc., etc) rather than an assumption of homogeneous interests among all women as well as toward a shift in feminist politics that emphasized communication and coalition-building across those differences (Walley 1997: 419).⁴⁵

3.6 *Naming*

Obviously, the terminology used to refer to FGC is contested and debated: “The act of naming these practices is controversial in and of itself” (Walley 1997: 407).⁴⁶ Many Western feminists object to the term “female circumcision,” as both a euphemism and as it compares FGC to the relatively “minor” surgery undergone by many Western male infants (Hosken 1979: Medical Facts and Summary 1; Gunning 1992: 193; Lewis

44 Obiora (1997) in a footnote (#282), writes that Boddy has noted that, since the operation remains a lively symbol of ethnic identity, direct outside interference may prolong the practice. And in the same footnote, Obiora writes that Scheper-Hughes notes that even the most balanced and well intentioned attention given to FGC by outsiders may do more harm than good.

45 See also Mohanty (1991a); Mohanty (1991b).

46 “The choice of terminology in describing these practices is fraught with political land mines” (Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2000: 6).

1995: 6; Hughes 1995: 321; Lewis and Gunning 1998: 123; Walley 1997: 407; Obermeyer 1999: 84; Gruenbaum 2001: 1; 3-4; Dorkenoo 1994: 4; Winter 1994: 941, Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2000: 3-4;6). In contrast, Obiora (1997: 290) suggests that this “semantic tug-of-war” be resolved by urging deference “to the euphemism that resonates with the affected population” and chooses instead to use “the term ‘circumcision,’” a term she feels “indigenous African coalitions prefer.”

Many non-Western (and Western) women and men object to the term “female genital mutilation,” as it implies that mothers, fathers, ritual practitioners, and others in the family and community intentionally and purposefully (or subconsciously) torment, harm, hurt, disfigure and deliberately “mutilate” their daughters and young girls (Lewis 1995: 7; Lewis and Gunning 1998: 123; Walley 1997: 407; 418; Gruenbaum 1996: 456; Obermeyer 1999: 84; Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2000: 6; Gruenbaum 2001: 3; 40).⁴⁷ Gruenbaum (2001: 4) notes that the term “mutilation” connotes “evil intentions or wanton mayhem.” This has been criticized as implying ““excessive judgment by outsiders and insensitivity towards individuals”” who perform or who have undergone the practices (Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2000: 6 quoting Eliah). This “has proven offensive” (Obiora 1997: 290). Lewis (1995: 5) notes that Cerny Smith rejects the term FGM because it alienates rather than communicates. Some note that the term “mutilation” suggests “a condemnation” (Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2000: 6) or “a negative moral assessment before we have even begun the analysis” (Gunning 1992: 193). Some object to the term FGM “because they believe it may thus elicit inappropriate reactions from those who misconstrue its purposes” (Lewis 1995: 7).

⁴⁷ Gruenbaum (2001: 3) notes that “‘Mutilation’ is technically accurate because most variants of the practices entail damage to or removal of healthy tissues or organs. But for most people, the term ‘mutilation’ implies intentional harm and is tantamount to an accusation of evil intent.” In contrast, Hughes (1995: 321) argues that the term female genital mutilation “adequately describes the practice discussed” here.

Walley (1997: 408) nicely notes that “existing usages are deeply embedded in the ‘either/or’ perspectives characteristic of discussions of female genital operations, with *circumcision* signalling relativistic tolerance and *mutilation* implying moral outrage.” Obiora feels that “Arbitrary imputations of conscious malevolence or misogyny distort and misrepresent the issue. Such insinuations may only incite righteous indignation and thwart reformatory endeavors” (Obiora 1997: 306). Because of this debate, and perhaps the desire to avoid offence, writers often, like Gruenbaum (2001: 3), elect to use the term most often used in cultures themselves. Gruenbaum (2001: 3) notes that “Some of my Sudanese friends have been deeply offended by the term, and it is their reaction as much as the connotations of that term that have influenced my preference for the term that is very commonly used when speaking or writing in English: female circumcision.”

While many emphasize the physical pain and damage to health and well-being caused by the practices, some authors avoid viewing the practices as “the intentional infliction of harm” (Lewis 1995: 6-7) or the work of “unreflective and cruel parents” (Gruenbaum 2001: 47) or “callous or even cruel” African mothers and traditional practitioners (Lewis 1995: 29).

Some think that the issue is much more than the label and value judgment: “To describe the surgeries as a system of torture as opposed to an ugly piece of a much larger, more complex cultural fabric and system is more than a value judgment. It so magnifies and amplifies one aspect of an organic and multiple layered system of organization that it denigrates the other aspects that are positive” (Gunning 1994: 20). This issue will be elaborated further later in this thesis.

Some activists and writers have introduced new terms, such as “female genital operations” or “female genital surgeries,” some in an attempt to be more “neutral” (Lewis 1995: 1-2; 7; Gunning 1992: 193; Gunning 1994; Walley 1997). However, these terms imply an antiseptic, medical, hospital-like setting, which does not apply to most cases of FGC (Lewis 1995: 7; Gruenbaum 2001: 4; Hughes 1995: 321; Obermeyer 1999: 84; Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2000: 6). Others have attempted to avoid the controversy over labels by using “indigenous” terms such as “*sunna*,” or “*irua*,” (Lewis 1995: title; 5; Gunning 1992: 194; Walley 1997: 407) but these are local terms that denote specific forms of FGC, and not others. Other Western terms, such as clitoridectomy or excision, similarly apply to specific forms of FGC and not others.

I have decided to utilize the phrase “female genital cutting” (FGC), to avoid the controversy surrounding mutilation or circumcision, and to broadly cover the various forms that FGC take. FGC has been used by, among others, Lewis and Gunning (1998: 123), Shell-Duncan and Hernlund (2000: 3,6), Gruenbaum (2001: 4), and James and Robertson, eds. (2002).⁴⁸ Gruenbaum (2001: 4) notes that FGC “seems to be gaining greater acceptance.” It has become clear that “no nomenclature can be value-neutral” (Lewis 1995: 7); and that one cannot “coin a new phrase that purports to escape the problematic power relationships surrounding this topic, for clearly that is impossible” (Walley 1997: 407).

⁴⁸2002*Genital Cutting and Transnational Sisterhood: Disputing U.S. Polemics*. Urbana, University of Illinois Press.

3.7 *The Varieties and Prevalence of FGC*

As Walley (1997: 407) points out, the practice, and its varying levels of severity, is as diverse as the people who practice FGC: "Practitioners include Muslims, Christians, Falasha Jews, and followers of indigenous African religions." FGC is practiced in a large range of places, including "Indonesia... the Middle East... Europe and the United States,"⁴⁹ though "the vast majority of female genital operations occur on the African continent." The age at which girls undergo the procedures also varies widely, from infancy to adolescence to adulthood (Gruenbaum 2001: 2; Hughes 1995: 321; Obermeyer 1999: 87; Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2000: 3).

FGC takes different forms in different practicing cultures. Lewis (1995: 5), following the World Health Organization, discusses "the three predominant forms of FGS": circumcision proper; excision; and infibulation.⁵⁰ Circumcision proper, also known as *sunna*, which involves the removal only of the clitoral prepuce or "hood," "is the mildest but also the rarest form," according to Lewis (1995: 5), Gunning (1992: 195) and Lewis and Gunning (1998: 125).⁵¹ Infibulation is the most severe and invasive of the various FGCs. According to Nagengast (1997: 364, emphasis added), the "*most drastic and most widespread form*" of FGC is infibulation. Gunning (1992: 194,

49 See also Obermeyer (1999: 88); Gruenbaum (2001: 33); Shell-Duncan and Hernlund (2000: 3).

50 Shell-Duncan and Hernlund (2000: 4) state that "four major types are generally recognized." It is somewhat difficult to follow their argument here, but I believe the four are: (1) *sunna*; (2) clitoridectomy; (3) excision; and (4) infibulation. "A sharp distinction between clitoridectomy and excision is difficult to draw since one grades into the other. Consequently, attempts to differentiate the two in survey research have proven to be difficult, and commonly the two become collapsed into a single category." See also Gruenbaum (2001: 2-3).

51 Obermeyer (1999: 82) states that "it has been argued convincingly...that no operations, in fact, conform to this description because part of the clitoris is always removed." Gruenbaum (2001:2) states that "Toubia asserts that in her years of medical practice in Sudan, Egypt, and the United Kingdom, she never saw any circumcisions that precisely fit this description." "N. Toubia and S. Izett (1998) claim that, in actuality, no medical reports document the existence of this procedure" (cited in Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2000: 4).

emphasis added) repeats this seemingly incorrect notion: “the “pharaonic type [infibulation] is the oldest, *most prevalent* and *most drastic* of the operations.” In contrast, “Toubia estimates that approximately 15% of the women who undergo FGS experience infibulation” (Lewis 1995: 14). This is consistent with Hosken (1993: 33), Dorkenoo (1994: 5), and with Shell-Duncan and Herlund (2000: 9, citing Toubia) who state that excision/clitoridectomy “is the most commonly practiced form...accounting for an estimated 85 percent of all reported cases.”

The “meaning” of these figures and estimates must be further investigated. As Lewis (1995: 1-2) has noted, FGC “implicates the most private aspects of individual female physical and cultural identity.” FGC “is most often performed in private, in rural areas, and among those who see it as an extremely intimate family matter” (Lewis 1995: 29-30). In many non-Western cultures, issues of female sexuality and sexual behaviour are not discussed openly with males and members of other cultures (Gruenbaum 2001: 15). Lewis (1995: 6) also notes “both African and Western unease with public discussion of sex and genitalia.” There is also the fear of outsiders’ disapproval and condemnations (Gruenbaum 2001: 16; Browne 1991: 246) and the fact that FGC is often illegal. “Even surveys conducted by African women from practicing regions have met resistance, thus requiring researchers to build relationships based on trust with the people surveyed” (Lewis 1995: 30).⁵² For all these, and other, reasons, “Reliable data on the nature and scope of FGS is [*sic*] difficult to obtain and the methodology of information-gathering is fraught with the potential for misinterpretation” (Lewis 1995: 29). Estimates of the extent of (the various forms of) FGC are just that: estimates. Consistent and dependable figures (i.e., empirical data) are not available, or are

⁵² Gruenbaum (2001: 13) states that she “did not know about the surgeries” before her initial fieldwork and she did not learn of pharaonic circumcision (infibulation) “until the last few weeks before my husband and I were to depart” Sudan.

inconclusive and insufficient (Lewis 1995: 29).⁵³ Yet Hosken and others both cited and quoted in Chapter Two regularly produce (widely ranging) figures for the extent of FGC. Obermeyer (1999: 85)⁵⁴ specifically mentions that *The Hosken Reports* are marked by “the poor quality of the evidence they use, and the methodological shortcomings of their estimations.”

One major fact is known, however. And that is that the terms and descriptions “most often used by human rights activists and scholars, as well as by the media, have involved infibulation, the most extreme [but *not* common] form of FGS” (Lewis 1995: 14).⁵⁵ Many of the statements made by Hosken, Daly, Walker, and others cited and quoted in Chapter Two, refer to infibulation only but are generalized to refer to a ‘generic’ FGC (Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2000: 15; Shell-Duncan *et al* 2000: 110; Ahmadu 2000: 284; Browne 1991: 264-265). African feminists who oppose FGC “object to the tendency in Western human rights literature to treat infibulation as the primary form of FGS, either for purposes of simplifying discussion of a complex set of practices or for eliciting more widespread condemnation of the practices” (Lewis 1995: 29).

Most studies on circumcision are unanimous regarding the paucity of data on the distribution and incidence of the practice. Nevertheless, to orchestrate a ‘sensation-value’ and convey an outrageous impression of daily mutilations of millions of women, some studies indulge in oppressive academic practices that range from crudity of methods, premature generalizations, and deductions of grand conclusions from scant and haphazard evidence, to manipulative neglect of the distinctions between severe and negligible circumcision. Speculations are propagated as credible findings, and other findings fall short of vigorous analyses of the nuances and complexities. (Obiora 1997: 325)

53 See also Walley (1997: 407); Gruenbaum (2001: 7-9).

54 See also 99; Shell-Duncan and Hernlund (2000: 7; 9)

55 See also Obermeyer (1999: 82).

3.8 *Lack of Contextualization*

One major criticism of much of the Western condemnation of FGC is that the practice is seen in isolation, “largely severed” from its meaningful sociocultural, and historical contexts, or with “grossly inadequate cultural contextualization” (Obiora 1997: 364).⁵⁶

Sometimes, in the portrayals and condemnations of FGC, FGC is inseparable from the culture itself. The condemnation of FGC is often impossible to separate from the condemnation of the people(s) where FGC is practiced, or who practice FGC.

Gruenbaum (2000: 24-25) asks whether outsiders can effectively challenge such cultural practices “without challenging the cultural integrity of the people who practice them?” Relatedly, “many Africans view efforts to eliminate FGC as an attack on their culture” (Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2000: 30).

3.9 *FGC and Patriarchal Control of Women*

Another major criticism of much of the Western condemnation of FGC is that the practice is seen as a manifestation of a global and monolithic patriarchy and its major function or purpose is seen as a means of denying women sexual pleasure and enjoyment (Walley 1997: 418; Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2000: 17). The Western feminist tendency is “to see genital mutilation as the gender oppression to end all oppressions,” (Walley 1997: 428) and to see the origin of FGC “monolithically” in terms of patriarchal control (Obiora 1997: 301). FGC is associated with the devastation of sexuality and sexual enjoyment (Gruenbaum 2001: 139). However, this monolithic “‘Patriarchy’ is too simple an explanation” (Gruenbaum 2001: 47). FGC is “By no

⁵⁶ See also Gruenbaum (1996: 456); Shell-Duncan and Hernlund (2000: 18; 19); Walley (1997: 418).

means... a single phenomenon with a single purpose such as ‘controlling women’ or ‘suppressing female sexuality’” (Gruenbaum 2001: 47).

Rather, there are real debates over the actual relationship between (the various forms of) FGC and sexual activity, sexual pleasure, for females and males (and for childbirth and orgasm). Even the pain itself, and the “alleged” physical and psychological effects of FGC are questioned and disputed (Ahmadu 2000: 284). These will be discussed further in the following Chapter.

Furthermore, in an interesting comment, Gruenbaum (2001: 151) notes that El Saadawi cautions outsiders to beware of the paternalistic “‘them’ helping ‘us’” approach to solidarity over FGC “that sometimes takes the form of pitying circumcised women for the damage to their sexuality. She notes that many Western women experience psychological impairment of their sexuality that may be equally damaging.”

A primary concern expressed in African feminist texts is the tendency among Western human rights activists to essentialize the motivations for practicing FGS as rooted either in superstition or in the passive acceptance of patriarchal domination. In rejecting these characterizations, African feminists seek to recapture and control the representation of their own cultural heritage. (Lewis 1995: 31)

Boulware-Miller (cited in Lewis 1995: 41) notes that Western feminists are seen as “culturally insensitive” by Third World women, who would “prefer to view female circumcision within a socio-economic and political context rather than as a violation of their sexuality or physiology.”⁵⁷

⁵⁷ See also Shell-Duncan and Hernlund (2000: 22).

3.10 *Women as Victims*

Related to this, another major criticism of the Western condemnation of FGC is that it routinely sees Third World women as “victims” of “tradition” and/or “ignorance” and/or “culture.” In much of the Western literature condemning FGC, Third World women have been characterized “as thoroughly oppressed victims of patriarchy, ignorance, or both, not as social actors in their own right” (Walley 1997: 419). Western efforts to eradicate FGC (“as if it were a disease”) preach against “ignorance” and “tradition” and “sound condescending to many African women” (Gruenbaum 1996: 456).

Much of the Western-oriented literature opposing female genital operations also constructs ‘culture’ and ‘tradition’ in problematic ways. Rather than focusing on ‘culture’ as historically changeable and broadly encompassing beliefs and practices characteristic of a social group, the discourse on genital operations understands culture as ahistorical ‘customs’ or ‘traditions.’ Such ‘traditions’ are simultaneously depicted as the meaningless hangovers of a premodern era and as the defining characteristic of the Third World.” (Walley 1997: 420)

The view that FGC is simply irrational (“unreflective”; “unthinking”), carried out, or succumbed to, because of “blind allegiance” and obedience to “tradition” suggests that the practitioners are somehow less rational and less intelligent than “people in ‘modern’ societies and justifies a heavy-handed approach that strives to teach (or preach to) people who are seen as ‘ignorant’”⁵⁸ (Gruenbaum 2001: 16-17; 50; Browne 1991: 243; 244; Gruenbaum 1996: 456).⁵⁹ These “backward traditions,” it is assumed, will be replaced by more “rational” ways of life as Third World societies “develop” (Walley 1997: 420; 421). All these portrayals “presume Third World women to be dominated

⁵⁸ Gruenbaum (2001: 50) notes that “such is seldom the case. I challenge the notion that practitioners are ‘prisoners of ritual,’ as Lightfoot-Klein’s book title suggested.”

⁵⁹ See also Winter (1994: 949; 950; 951).

by an ahistorical patriarchal ‘tradition’ that is assumed to be more severe than that in Europe or the United States” (Walley 1997: 420).

Obiora (1997: 303) argues that “Western analyses continue to be informed by misconceived notions of African women as nothing but subjugated and devoid of agency.” Western analyses objectify and homogenize Third World women with myths about their “complacency and passive submission” (Obiora 1997: 303). Third World women are *only* depicted as passive victims and objects; never acting subjects.

In much of the Western-oriented literature condemning FGC “women are blamed for their false consciousness and are seen as the mere pawns of men” (Walley 1997: 419).⁶⁰ Third World women who do not oppose FGC, or who support and defend the continuation of this custom “are alternately seen as not being allowed to express their voices, or as having defective or confused understandings if they speak in favor of genital operations” (Walley 1997: 419; Browne 1991: 243; 247). Winter (1994: 964) asserts that “One of the greatest problems facing feminists campaigning against excision [in France] is, in fact, women’s complicity in their own oppression and in that of their children.”

3.11 *Need for Western ‘Enlightenment’*

Another major criticism of the Western condemnation of FGC is the “troubling tendency” or assumption that Third World women (and men) need to be “enlightened” or “awakened” by more militant Western feminists and others (Lewis 1995: 11-12; 32). Moreover, “[n]ot enough is made of the strength and capacity of African people, especially African women, to battle against their own problems” (Gunning 1994: 20-1).

⁶⁰ See also Gruenbaum (2001: 35); Browne (1991: 243).

One Western condemner of FGC (Alice Walker) “seems ‘possessed’ of the pernicious notion that she can and must rescue those unfortunate women from themselves, from their ignorance, and from their patriarchal traditions” (James 1998: 1033). The implication is that there is no indigenous opposition to FGC in the Third World.

FGC is also often seen as the *only* item of Western interest related to the Third World; it is the *only* thing we know about women in the Third World, in Africa, in Islam. The Western-oriented literature on the Third World “demonstrates an unusually single-minded preoccupation” with FGC (Gilliam 1991: 219). Westerners often use FGC “as the only point for defining women’s oppression” in the Third World (Gilliam 1991: 219). “[M]any people [in the West] know little about the Middle East except the topics of veils and circumcision” (Gruenbaum 2001: 204). “Angela Davis attests to the astounding number of women she encounters who know nothing else about the conditions of life for women in Africa but for their so-called mutilation” (Obiora 1997: 324-5).

[T]he African women and children who are most affected by FGS are almost unrecognizable as whole human beings in much of the popular media and in some anti-FGS campaigns. Human rights discourse often states that millions of women and girls are affected, but gives very little information about the lives of those women and girls beyond their experience of FGS. Their screams of pain caused by FGS are described, but other sources of pain, joy, or support in their lives are rarely identified. (Lewis 1995: 49).

While gender inequality is widespread, “the cultural and historical particulars of how gender relations are constructed differently in different places, and the alternate sources of power and authority that women often hold, are ignored in these generalized assumptions about the oppression of Third World women” (Walley 1997: 420).

Another, and very related, major criticism of the Western condemnation of FGC is that Westerners *only* see FGC as a problem for Third World women and see no *other* issues concerning themselves and women in the Third World. This issue will be discussed at some length in Chapter Four.

3.12 *Legal Eradication or Education?*

Ultimately, this question remains: “Who, if anyone, has the moral authority to condemn this practice?” (Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2000: 25). And *how* and in what manner should one go about a political project aimed at eradicating FGC, in the Third World or the First, if one decides that this is a legitimate and suitable thing to try to achieve? As Lewis and Gunning (1998: 131) appropriately recognize, “[M]ere opposition to the practice does not lead to easy answers about the most effective means of ending FGS” either in the Third World or in the First. The traditional weapon of law (in the West) is “punishment and forced change” (Gunning 1992: 227). However, most attempts at using the law to eradicate FGC have been unsuccessful, from colonial times to the present, both in the Third World and in the First (Gunning 1992: 227-231; Lewis 1995: 39-40; 51-51; Walley 1997: 425; Obiora 1997: 330; Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2000: 33; 34; Browne 1991: *passim*). And Gunning (1992: 230) argues that the actual effect of the law can be the reverse of its intended effect. Furthermore, ““You simply can’t outlaw cultural practices... People have to decide to stop on their own”” (Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2000: 34, quoting Mackie). And what about the fact that women are likely to be “the prime initiators and practitioners”? (Gunning 1992: 229).

Midwives/practitioners are probably among “the most relatively powerful and economically independent women within the cultures”: do we want these women, as

well as mothers, and other kin, fined and imprisoned, as has happened in France? (Gunning 1992: 229-230).⁶¹ The law could in fact drive the practice underground (Gunning 1992: 229), where health and sanitary conditions may be even worse (Lewis 1995: 40; Hughes 1995: 369; Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2000: 33; Browne 1991: 263-4). As a result, “most eradication efforts have focused on education about the health hazards of the surgeries rather than on legislation” (Gunning 1992: 230).

3.13 *Conclusions*

This chapter has examined many problematic issues that Third World men and women have raised, concerning the analyses and condemnations of FGC by Western feminists and others, as typified by the works and actions of Hosken, Daly and Walker, as summarized in Chapter Two. These problem areas relate to: respect, arrogance and racism; the dynamics between the North and the South (both historically and in the present dialogues concerning FGC); the role of leaders and followers; the need for contextualization; the terms used and the prevalence of the varieties of FGC; the portrayal of women as victims and/or agents; and the need to address *other* issues concerning women in both the Third World and the First, such as SAPs, ‘modernization,’ poverty, and various social, cultural and economic human rights. This brings us finally, and crucially, to the issue of “voice,” and who “has the ‘right’ to speak about such issues” (Walley 1997: 408). Who speaks ‘for’ and ‘on behalf of’ whom? Who “owns” FGC? Who leads and who follows? These are the questions that will be examined in the following chapter. As will be asserted in Chapter Four, Western ‘outsiders’ can facilitate this approach by eliciting and relying upon the active participation, and leadership, of African women.

⁶¹ See also Walley (1997: 405); Winter (1994: 962; 963; 965; 969-70); Gruenbaum (2001: 209); Shell-Duncan and Hernlund (2000: 36).

Chapter Four: A More Respectful Approach to FGC

4.0 Introduction

As we saw in the previous chapter, FGC has generally been the predominant issue of interest for Westerners, with regard to the Third World. It has been demonstrated that FGC has virtually been the sole issue affecting women in the Third World that we are familiar with; and it has become the defining factor of our understanding of oppression of Third World women. This chapter explores questions such as: What would a more respectful way of dealing with FGC entail? How can we “improve understanding [and] reduce simplistic denunciation” of FGC? (Gruenbaum 2001: 1). Examining such questions is central to this thesis, as the answers encourage forthcoming discourse between the North and South, promoting respectful Western engagement with the subject of FGC, while demonstrating the need for Western women to step back, and for Third World women to take the lead.

The criticisms of Western condemnations of FGC, as discussed in Chapter Three, do not, by and large, spring from the fact that Third World feminists (and women of color in the First World, and other women and men) do not oppose FGC and seek its eradication. As Lewis and Gunning (1998: 131) state: “We, like many feminists in both Africa and the United States” do *not* think that FGC should “be treated as a culturally-specific practice that should be beyond the scrutiny of international human rights bodies”; rather, “FGS is a gender-based human rights violation.”⁶² However,

62 An exception is Browne (1991: 244) who seems to literally believe that Third World women (in the First and Third Worlds) “have the right to decide what is to be done with their bodies, as long as this does not harm others” and any decision to abolish FGC “must be made by the women practicing this custom.” Browne (1991: 247-8; 250; 264-5) believes that Kikuyu clitoridectomy does not usually involve serious physical and psychological problems. “Thus,” Browne (1991: 265) argues, “choosing to have such an operation seems best left in the realm of private decision.” Browne does not particularly discuss what “harm” to others might entail. And it is not

how Western feminists and activists go about making this claim and acting on it is also extremely important. A “troubling question...for Western feminists...remains how to avoid inappropriate criticism, intentional or not” (Lewis 1995: 37). Lewis and Gunning (1998: 132) note that we “need to exercise extreme care in the portrayal of people who participate in unfamiliar cultural practices. In the rush to save the ‘victims,’ western media and activists use racist imagery to demonize entire cultures.”

In the context of the practice of FGC within immigrant populations in the North, Winter (1994: 940) notes that “These are difficult issues, and I am not sure there is, for any feminist...committed to eradicating [FGC] while at the same time maintaining respect for the women who are both the perpetrators and the victims of the practice, one simple solution or one ‘right’ way to go about finding one.”

4.1 Arrogant Perception and World Travelling

Much of the information about FGS disseminated in popular culture embodies the problem I...[call] ‘arrogant perception.’ The problem is not that the surgeries are presented as a negative, a patriarchal practice detrimental to women. That they are. Rather, the problem is the manner of expression. Typically the approach aggrandizes Western culture by ignoring our own patriarchal practices which damage women, both in the country and abroad; conversely the approach tends to denigrate all other cultures, typically African, virtually in their entirety. (Gunning 1994: 19).

clear if Browne would make the same argument for infibulation. See also Lewis (1995: 7); Gunning (1992: 191).

In other words, the “problem of arrogance is...not in the adverse reaction itself, but rather in the way the horror is expressed and the solutions that are proposed” (Gunning 1992: 199).

Originally, Gunning (1992: 189; 197) felt “anger and revulsion at the practice,” was “horrified and frightened,” and had “a strong desire to see it eradicated as quickly as possible” through laws or treaties. But feminism also teaches and advocates respect. For Gunning (1992: 190), the question is “Can one be respectful of other perspectives or cultures and still be critical?” As an African-American woman, Gunning could not just dismiss FGS “as the barbaric practice of those ‘others’” (Gunning 1992: 198). Gunning “understood the practice as one of patriarchal domination. Yet my own desires to fit the practice neatly into a feminist version of the category ‘human rights violation’ led me toward an arrogant attitude that ultimately rendered those African feminists already engaged in a struggle within their cultures over the practice as either invisible or as stereotyped victims with a great need for yet another Western (if racially correct) savior” (Gunning 1992: 198).

Gunning’s “own feeling now is that culturally challenging patriarchal practices like genital surgeries require a complex vision of independence and connectedness. The distance that arrogance involves must be bridged, but the interconnectedness built must be both complex and preserve independence” (Gunning 1992: 198).

As African-American feminists, Gunning and Lewis, among others, “understand the choice of some African women to defend the practice of FGS or to reject the manner in which some non-Africans have shaped the discourse of the eradication campaigns. Their belief in cultural self-determination leads them to resist prescribing solutions for others who do not want their help” (Lewis 1995: 39). But African-American feminists

also feel a deep concern over a practice that “puts millions of their ‘sisters’ at psychological and physical risk” (Lewis 1995: 39). Is there “any room for respectful, cross-cultural engagement among African and African diaspora feminists on the issue of FGS?” (Lewis 1995: 39). And, I of course would add: and white feminists? What “should be the response of black [and white] feminists to this form of human rights violation?” (Lewis 1995: 39).

Gunning suggests a methodology of “world travelling,” which involves “multicultural dialogue as a way to encourage the evolution of more shared values” (Gunning 1992: 193). This method suggests that “The arrogant perceiver sees himself as the center of the universe” and sees great distances between himself and any “others,” unlike himself (Gunning 1992: 198). Furthermore, Gunning (1992: 199) notes that “The ‘other’ has no independent perceptions and interest but only those that I impose.” The arrogant perceiver perceives the distance between the “I” and the “other” as a classic binary opposition: “us” versus “them.” And, as many feminists and others have demonstrated, the “I” has subjectivity and agency and is associated with all that is “good and valued,” whereas the “other” is merely an “object” and is associated with all that is “bad and devalued.” For example, in contrasting a culture that practices FGC and “us,” “us” is “good and enlightened,” in contrast to “them,” who are “ignorant and barbaric” women, without agency or struggle (Gunning 1992: 199-200). The “other” is described in terms that are bizarre, defective and incomprehensible. Indeed, the “good” West can provide the solution (Gunning 1992: 199). For Gunning (1992: 201), Hosken is a perfect example of an “arrogant perceiver.”

“Playful” and “open” “world-travelling” is discussed by Gunning (1992: 202-5) as a means “to understand the context and condition of the “other”” and not to judge it (which would be “dangerously close to imperialism”). At the end of the journey, “one

finds that the victims of arrogant perception are really ‘subjects, lively beings, resistors,’ [and] ‘constructors of [their own] visions’” (Gunning 1992: 204, quoting Lugones). “One can recognize and respect their independence and yet understand their interconnectedness with oneself” (Gunning 1992: 204). In other words, we should begin by avoiding the terminology, the tone, the superiority, the condescension, and so forth, of the materials presented in Chapter Two and discussed in Chapter Three.

World travelling involves a “three-pronged methodology for understanding culturally challenging practices in an “other’s’ culture, like female genital surgeries,” by creating that recognition of both independence and interconnectedness (Gunning 1992: 194; 204). (1) “[B]e clear about the boundaries and ramifications of one’s own will and interests, i.e., understand one’s own historical context” and sense of self (Gunning 1992: 194; 204-5). (2) “[U]nderstand one’s historical relationship to the “other”” and “how as an outsider one impacts on the “other’s’ world and is perceived by the “other’, i.e., see yourself as the other woman might see you” (Gunning 1992: 194; 205). (3) “[R]ecognize the complexities of the life and circumstances of the other woman, i.e., see the other woman, her world and sense of self through her eyes,” as she sees herself (Gunning 1992: 194; 205).

(1) Seeing oneself (a Westerner) in historical context: “The most interesting aspect” of this exercise is exploring the fact that FGC “has been performed in Western countries” (Europe and the United States) as well, a fact that has been largely omitted, if not actually denied, in most discussions of FGC in other countries (Gunning 1992: 195; 205; Lewis and Gunning 1998: 125; Lewis 1995: 23; Walley 1997: 407; Obiora 1997: 298; Gruenbaum 2001: 9-12; Browne 1991: 262-3). Both clitoridectomies and castrations were carried out in the West to control and to “cure” women (of masturbation, nymphomania, sexual deviance, “disorderly women,” and other female

“disorders”) in the new medical specialty of gynecology (Gunning 1992: 205-11; Lewis 1995: 23-4; Walley 1997: 407; Gruenbaum 2001: 9-12; Browne 1991: 265). These practices continued in the U.S. until the late 1930s (Lewis 1995: 24; Gunning 1992: 207).⁶³ Women were submissive or welcoming of these treatments, similar to what Western feminists refer to as “craziness or ‘false consciousness’” in Third World women today (Gunning 1992: 208). Given this, Gunning (1992: 226) argues that “Western women’s historical experience [with FGC]...ought to dictate humility and sensitivity.”⁶⁴ Interestingly, Daly (1978: 155) notes (in a footnote) that she is aware that “genital mutilation” is not something restricted to Africa: “Lest Westerners feel smugly distant from these rituals, it would be well to recall some facts of ‘our’ culture...[C]litoridectomies and other mutilations have been inflicted by American gynecologists.”

Gunning (1992: 210) notes that, although we may breathe a sigh of relief that FGC is only in our past, she notes that “The basic motivating desire to control women into submission still reigns strong in our current American and Western cultures.” Moreover, “There are also isolated instances of FGS practice in the modern West” (Lewis 1995: 25).⁶⁵

(2) Seeing oneself (a Westerner) as the ‘other’ sees you: “The two most important issues in examining how Westerners are perceived by women in third world nations are

63 Concerns about women and (racial) purity introduced a class and racial element to these practices (Gunning 1992: 207; Lewis 1995: 24).

64 In contrast, “by focusing on the practice as it is performed in African countries and ignoring FGS’ existence...in our own American history, he [A.M. Rosenthal, editorializing in the New York Times] accesses an ugly set of racialized representations, myths, that have been formulated in the American psyche since the birth of the nation when the founding fathers had to justify the enslavement of African people” (Gunning 1994: 20).

65 Including the case of the infamous Dr. Love; see Lewis (1995:25); Lewis and Gunning (1998: 132); Obiora (1997: 298-9.)

imperialism and racism” (Gunning 1992: 212). We are seen “in terms of prior negative racial and colonial policies” (Gunning 1992: 212). Just as a Westerner may view FGC as a cultural challenge, “the street runs two ways: non-Westerners too can view Western practices as culturally challenging” (Gunning 1992: 212). These may include, but are not limited to: elective cosmetic surgery (including breast augmentation and reduction; facelifts; vaginal tightening; and liposuction of the pubic mound); anorexia, bulimia and self-starvation techniques; body piercing; tattooing; sterilization and contraceptive abuse; malnutrition; “the high incidence of medically unnecessary radical hysterectomies performed in the United States”; and male circumcision (Lewis 1995: 7-8; 24; Gunning 1992: 212; Lewis and Gunning 1998: 132; Obermeyer 1999: 94; Obiora 1997: 318-21; Gruenbaum 1996: 463; Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2000: 32). Do we accept these as forms of “mutilation”? (Gunning 1992: 213-5; Lewis 1995: 7-8; Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2000: 32). As Gunning (1992: 212) notes, in Third World contexts where “starvation and dire poverty are aspects of everyday life, the thought of women refusing food for cosmetic purposes...or wasting food by eating it and then regurgitating it must be close to sacrilege.”

Looking at ourselves as others might see us ultimately deepens our view of ourselves. In addition to the caution and care that the legacy of imperialism requires Western feminists to take in appreciating and participating in truly egalitarian relationships with women in non-Western cultures, the general air of superiority and self-righteousness must wither away upon reviewing where we have come from and how far we still have to go within our own cultures. (Gunning 1992: 212-3)

(3) Seeing the “other” in her own context: “The real key in attempts by outsiders, Westerners, ‘see-ers’ to see a culturally challenging practice through the eyes of the

‘other’ is understanding that any single event or norm is a part of a larger, complex, organic social environment,” a social and political context (Gunning 1992: 213).⁶⁶

4.2 *Contextualization of FGC*

In examining the larger context of our cultural ‘other,’ for example FGC in the Third World, we should look in detail at the organic social environment of the ‘other’ which has produced the culturally challenging practice being explored, and understand them “as part of a complex system” (Gunning 1992: 213; 215). For Lewis (1995: 32; also 48) “The African feminist literature on FGS emphasizes the importance of the cultural context in which FGS occurs and the complexity of justifications for its continued practice.” Each justification or explanation for the existence of FGC “are in fact ‘interconnected and mutually reinforcing and, taken together, form overwhelming unconscious and conscious motivations’ for its continuation” (Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2000: 19, quoting Ahmadu). We must ask: “Why do they do it?” and “What are its effects and functions?” (Gruenbaum 2001: 48-9). Recognizing the complexities of the lives and circumstances of the ‘other’ woman (i.e., seeing the ‘other’ woman, her world and sense of self through her eyes), the third of Gunning’s three-pronged methodology of world-travelling, should be applied to initiates, their families, and the practitioners themselves (Lewis 1995: 49). This recognizes the “cultural significance” or value of the practices in their cultural context - “not very pleasant or healthy, perhaps, but a significant element of the culture” (Gruenbaum 2001: 21). Walley (1997: 413-4) notes that both Hayes and Boddy “focused on the motivations of women as participants in these practices, not simply as victims.” This is not an apologist stance, according to Gruenbaum (2001: 21). Some contextualized accounts of FGC “neither

⁶⁶ See also Gruenbaum (2001: 1); Shell-Duncan and Hernlund (2000: 3).

condemns those who practice [FGC] nor endorses the continuation” of FGC, according to Gruenbaum (2001: 23).

As Gunning (1992: 218) points out, “There are...positive ways of viewing the procedure that cause many women to embrace it and describe it as something that their families do ‘for them.’”⁶⁷ FGCs generally occur during rituals and ceremony. Jomo Kenyatta, African politician and anthropologist, has written that the Kikuyu term *irua* refers to “the initiation of both boys and girls into adulthood” and the rituals involve “surgery as well as educational and socialization rites aimed at strengthening” ethnic and cultural identity (Lewis 1995: 5; Browne 1991: 250). Kenyatta (1979 [1938]: 133) argued that *irua* “is regarded as the *condition sine qua non* of the whole teaching of tribal law, religion, and morality.” FGCs may be “essential prerequisites for full citizenship” (Browne 1991: 253). As is basically true of most women in the West, “women in cultures where genital surgeries are performed find ‘their social status and economic security [derive] from their roles as wives and mothers’” (Gunning 1992: 215, quoting Gruenbaum).⁶⁸ Women *must* undergo FGC to (among other things, and variously): be “clean,” feminine, and a virgin; keep her reputation and her family’s honour; be considered an adult, marry, and have children; survive economically; and maintain gender, ethnic, religious and class status (Obermeyer 1999: 94; Gruenbaum 2001: 48-9; 67; 76-91; 102; Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2000: 20-1).

67 In the following discussion, I am very aware that any generalizations are misleading. To compare the situation of a young girl being infibulated in Somalia with that of a young woman undergoing “relatively minor” clitoridectomy is misleading. If anything, in what follows, I err towards the more “positive” portrayals and experiences of FGC, to counteract the overwhelmingly negative portrayals in the Western literature on FGC, including the material I summarized in Chapter Two.

68 See also Gruenbaum (2001: 45; 88).

Women want to, and want their daughters to, undergo FGC (Gunning 1992: 215-7; Lewis 1995: 21-3; Walley 1997: 410; 411).⁶⁹ As Gruenbaum (2001: 1) points out, “loving” parents are concerned with the best interests of their children.⁷⁰ Parents in FGC-practicing cultures “are good people who love their children; any campaign that insinuates otherwise is doomed to provoke defensive reaction” (Gruenbaum 2001: 176, quoting Mackie). These women and men “firmly believe they are protecting their family, their way of life and the status, health and honor of their daughters and granddaughters” (Gunning 1992: 223).

Some “girls look forward to initiation” and some “request their parents’ permission to be initiated” (Lewis 1995: 23).⁷¹ In some situations, people talk about FGC “with a boisterous pride” (Walley 1997: 409). For some, FGC is significant and joyful (Gruenbaum 2001: 37). This is “their special day,” sometimes “considered to be the most important day of a girl’s life” (Gruenbaum 2001: 56; Lightfoot-Klein 1989: 73). Gruenbaum (2001: 15) quotes a Sudanese woman: “It’s *not* a secret; we celebrate it!” Furthermore, “[M]ost young women in Togo are happy to have the procedure done and ‘think it is something very great’” (Walley 1997: 421, quoting Fauziya Kasinga). FGC is part of what all women do. For many women, “especially those who are

69 Gruenbaum (2001: 18) tells of Mohammed, “our friend and colleague” in Khartoum, Sudan, a cosmopolitan man who had travelled internationally. Mohammed had a “strong sense of cultural pride” (Gruenbaum 2001: 18-9). Mohammed thought that the “limited educational opportunities for girls and female circumcision” “were real injustices” (Gruenbaum 2001: 19). Although Mohammed had told the women of his family that he did not want his daughters to be circumcised, he was still worried about them undergoing FGC. “I naively assumed that in a culture where the males are clearly dominant, his decision would be enough to protect them” (Gruenbaum 2001: 19). “Not so. He was afraid that if he left the country to go to the conference he was planning to attend, the grandmothers would simply arrange everything and have the older two daughters circumcised in his absence. He was sure his wife would not oppose her own mother” (Gruenbaum 2001: 19). Even though he might be angry, and even though it is illegal, Gruenbaum (2001: 20) quotes Mohammed: “If they do it, I’d just have to accept it.”

70 See also Shell-Duncan and Hernlund (2000: 27), and James (1998: 27).

71 See also Walley (1997: 410); Obermeyer (1999: 93).

uneducated⁷² or unexposed to other ways, the surgery is a fact of life” (Gunning 1992: 220). It exists within a relatively loving and supportive extended family and community environment. “She is whole and complete as a woman in the world that she lives in” (Gunning 1992: 220). FGC is “just another part of life - not a troublesome custom, but an assumed, normal reality”; any pain, “like the pain of childbirth, just one of the burdens and joys that go with being female” (Gruenbaum 2001: 38-9).

FGC is often a public celebratory occasion, sometimes an initiation or “rite of passage” into adult womanhood, and often an occasion for gifts and feasting, during which the girl(s) is(are) the centre of attention (Gruenbaum 2001: 56; 58; Gunning 1999: 47; Gunning 1992: 218; Walley 1997: 409; 410; Ahmadu 2000: 290; Browne 1991: 249). Gruenbaum (2001: 36) refers to “female circumcision parties.” In some cultures, there is a period of “training” or “formal instruction” that initiates undergo (Walley 1997: 410; Browne 1991: 249). A girl often undergoes FGC with others, often sisters, friends, and other relatives and members of the community (Gunning 1992: 219; Browne 1991: 249). These public festivities are sometimes “a part of the creation of a special and exclusive ‘women’s space,’” sometimes marked by “solidarity among women” (Gunning 1992: 219; Obiora 1997: 295). In fact, on occasion, “Women’s control over rituals can be located as a source of strength and power” (Obiora 1997: 303). Some girls “develop a personal sense of self-confidence and pride that made them feel like adults...[and] they were awarded considerable public respect” (Walley 1997: 412). FGC may bestow “honour and adult privilege” (Browne 1991: 248). This *may* build sisterhood; it *may* be empowering (Lewis 1995: 49, including a quotation from Dorkenoo).⁷³

⁷² I feel compelled to note that “educated” here must refer to “modern Western schooling”; all women everywhere are educated.

⁷³ See also Shell-Duncan and Hernlund (2000: 28).

Many of these “rationales” contain some element of coercion that “virtually force women to perform the surgeries on their daughters”; but women who “support” or “desire” FGC for themselves and/or their daughters should not simply be dismissed as having “false consciousness” or as “irrational” or “ignorant” (Lewis 1995: 23; Walley 1997: 410; Obermeyer 1999: 93). Rather, “supporting the surgeries can be viewed as rational and empowering in the context within which they find themselves” (Gunning 1992: 221).⁷⁴ FGC is “not done without thought” (Gruenbaum 2001: 17).

In many cultures that practice FGC, practitioners (midwives) and grandmothers are often the strongest advocates of maintaining and perpetuating FGC: “both groups of women have exceptional power and influence in a culture where women are otherwise subordinated” (Gunning 1992: 222).⁷⁵ Midwives (practitioners) are one of the few avenues open to women for income generation and economic independence (Gunning 1992: 222). And age seems not to be a factor; both young and old alike seem both to embrace FGC, and oppose Western intervention: “Active resistance against intervention [against FGC] [comes] not just from the elders...; some younger women seem to cling to the custom with equally fierce tenacity” (Obiora 1997: 317). In fact, “some African women actively resist male efforts to modify or eradicate FGS” (Lewis 1995: 32).

What seems to be a prevailing fear for mothers is that daughters who have not undergone FGC will not be able to marry and have children, and will end up as a “social outcast” (Winter 1994: 942).⁷⁶ In some contexts, an uncircumcised woman is

⁷⁴ See also Gruenbaum (2001: 35).

⁷⁵ See also Walley (1997: 414); Browne (1991: 260).

⁷⁶ See also Hughes (1995: 365); Gunning (1994: 27); Gruenbaum (2001: 88).

simply “unfathomable” (Ahmadu 2000: 306). In others, “it is not atypical to hold the uncircumcised in contempt” (Obiora 1997: 297).

While there clearly are physical and psychological consequences of FGC (that vary depending on the type), the actual consequences and the actual relationship between FGC and pain, sexual practice and sexual pleasure (including childbirth and orgasm) is highly contentious and debated (as mentioned in Chapter Three; see Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2000: 17; 21-3; Obermeyer 1999: *passim*; Gruenbaum 2001: 133-57; Lightfoot-Klein 1989: 80-102; Walley 1997: 415-6; Ahmadu 2000: 284). There is great variation in the training of the practitioners (some are nurses or medical technicians; some are not), as well as in the use of medications, antiseptic, painkillers, anaesthesia, and sterilization (Browne 1991: 248; 249-50). Also, there are some cultural practices that counter the pain: for example, some cultures “practice traditional forms of anesthesia, such as having the girls bathe in very cold river water prior to the surgery and applying compresses intended to soothe and heal the wound” (Lewis 1995: 13). Walley (1997: 410) notes that a whole night of dancing tires the novices “and numb[s] them for the pain to come.”

Walley (1997: 422) notes that “for the adolescent initiation rituals that I described for Kikhome,” pain and adversity are intrinsic parts of the ritual and are “socially meaningful.”⁷⁷ The “mutual experience of pain helps to forge a cohesive bond and instill a strong spirit of solidarity and cooperative assistance in the initiates” (Obiora 1997: 296). For some, the girls (initiates) show that they are brave and can withstand pain without expression (Walley 1997: 410). Obiora (1997: 296)⁷⁸ notes that FGC

⁷⁷ See also Browne (1991: 252).

⁷⁸ See also Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2000: 16; Browne 1991: 253)

may serve “as a test of courage and endurance in simulation and preparation for birth labor pains.”

African feminists “argue that many mothers in practicing regions are very concerned about the pain associated with the practice and refuse to witness the initiation process, and that parents and health workers from many cultures often adopt a stoic appearance when they believe that a child’s painful medical or surgical procedure is for her or his own good” (Lewis 1995: 29). Lewis (1995: 29) notes that “Janice Boddy’s description of an infibulation is an example of a text that humanizes practitioners because it depicts their expression of concern for the child’s well-being.”

In addition, change is uncertain and potentially disastrous, and is therefore often feared (Gunning 1992: 223). The known may appear more secure than the unknown (Gunning 1992: 223; Browne 1991: 258). “Any important social change will be disruptive and costly. When it is our own battle we can make our own determinations on how to bear the costs. But when supporting other women who will be the ones to bear the brunt of the disruption, caution and respect for the ideas of those women become imperative” (Gunning 1992: 226-7). And, as already noted, the fact that colonial administrations, missionaries, Westerners and Western feminists have long condemned FGC and worked for its eradication has led to defensive celebrations of indigenous practices and cultures.

I think that Boddy (1982; 1989) and Walley (1997) come closest to this ideal of trying to understand FGC within its historical, sociocultural and meaningful context, as do, of course, women from the Third World, such as El Saadawi (James 1998: 1034). Walley (1997: 406) offers “an ethnographic account of clitoridectomy within the context of daily life for a rural population in western Kenya’s Kikhome village in 1988.” Walley

(1997: 408) attempts to reinfuse “humanity into a debate that has often been reduced to dehumanizing abstractions.” While Walley (1997: 408) acknowledges that she was an “outsider” and her knowledge of FGC was limited, her “purpose is to describe the quest to know, the desire to understand these practices as an ‘outsider,’ someone inevitably forced (as we all are) to draw upon her or his own resources for understanding the world.” Walley (1997: 408) was a young woman who was “deeply troubled” by the practice of FGC and she “sought some way of thinking about the issue that I could reconcile with my sense of myself as a feminist, as a student of anthropology, and as a friend of many in the community where I was staying.” While Walley (1997: 410-2; 428) tried to find the “authentic voices” of the community, she discovered that this was a very nuanced and difficult project. But Walley (1997: 413) attempted to learn “how the significance of these practices extended beyond their ritual and psychological meanings and related to other forms of social life such as kinship groups, ethnic identity, and economic practices.” Walley (1997: 416-7) even questions how FGC “practices had changed over time” and wonders whether individual girls and women were agents “for resistance to social norms?” Similarly, “Boddy’s sensitive analyses...demonstrate [that] it is possible for someone who does not condone female genital surgeries to provide such insights and to uncover the symbolic significance of these practices in their cultural context” (Gruenbaum 1999: 89).

4.3 Third World Women Leading the Struggle

Finally, and this is crucial to a more respectful view of FGC, a common theme running through much of the African feminist literature is: “the survival and liberation of African women through their own activism” (Lewis 1995: 26). There are many Third World women in practicing regions, and African feminists, who have organized against FGC (Lewis 1995: 28; Walley 1997: 425).

Gruenbaum (2001: 206) asserts that there are Third World women who resist FGC - though pointing out that these women often possess an education,⁷⁹ or have been “exposed” to “other social practices.”⁸⁰ Gunning (1992: 223) avers there exist “heroines” who have defied their families and communities by undergoing “modified surgeries” or a “mock ceremony”⁸¹ involving ritual but no cutting. Moreover, Gunning (1992: 223-4) heralds the work of “indigenous feminists” who have collectively condemned FGC, and with the support of “health care professionals and other activists” have held conventions which concentrated on the negative consequences of FGC on the health of women, while “decrying their continued performance.”

As Lewis (1995: 27) notes, African women have engaged in resistance, and have acted in efforts to protest FGC.⁸² Health professionals, such as Nawal El Saadawi and Nahid Toubia, have fused their Western medical training with their knowledge of Third World communities from which they come “to educate others and advocate the eradication of FGS on an international level” (Lewis 1995: 27). Other activists, such as Awa Thiam, provide “an explicit African feminist condemnation of FGS and other traditional practices” (Lewis 1995: 27). AAWORD “is active both in inter-African eradication efforts and in resisting the domination of Western feminists and other human rights activists over FGS discourse” (Lewis 1995: 28).

⁷⁹ Gruenbaum is presumably speaking of a formal education.

⁸⁰ Gruenbaum (2001: 206) also notes that the most effective of the “large number of African women [who] have taken leadership” concerning FGC (with the best access to facilities, research assistance, and high profile roles) “are not usually the rural women or poor women themselves, of course.” The “African women most heard will be educated, elite women who have migrated to North America or European countries. Some of these may have relatively little firsthand experience with poverty or isolated rural areas of their home countries.”

⁸¹ Quoting Gruenbaum (1988: 127).

⁸² See also Lewis and Gunning (1998: 127).

Lewis (1995: 27) also notes that Africans from practicing cultures now living in the West are leading educational and health campaigns surrounding FGC.⁸³ For example, Efua Dorkenoo is the director of FORWARD (Foundation for Women's Health, Research and Development) International, "the most active non-governmental organization outside Africa working specifically on FGS" (Lewis 1995: 27-8).

Some Western feminists, however, appear to be ignorant of, or fail to recognize, these African indigenous activists, organizations and resistances against FGC, or "suggest that it is merely the result of Western feminist influence" (Lewis 1995: 26; 28).

Western feminists should learn "to prioritize the role of African women in practicing areas in defining their own experiences of FGS" (Lewis 1995: 50; Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2000: 29). Any eradication campaigns "must originate with the women and communities among whom it is practiced" (Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2000: 2-3; 38; Browne 1991: 244). Third World women should "lead their own struggle" against FGC; it is something that they should "argue out for themselves" (Gruenbaum 1996: title and 472, quoting Scheper-Hughes; Gruenbaum 2001: 32; Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2000: 2). For "Kenyan anthropologist Achola Pala-Okeyo... the role of [Western] feminists is not to be in front, leading the way for other women, but to be in back *supporting* the other women's struggles to bring about change" (quoted in Walley 1997: 430).⁸⁴ Yet the "thought that 'other' peoples might have the same aspirations and rights [as Americans, to lead] seems hard to grasp: why not an image of African women at the helm with Americans following, filled with suggestions and ideas

83 See also Lewis and Gunning (1998: 127-8).

84 Hale (quoted in Gruenbaum 2001: 205) suggests that "women living in the countries affected by the custom [of FGC] are taking the lead in its eradication and that we [Western feminists] might want to mind our own affairs." See also Lewis and Gunning (1998: 133); Gruenbaum (2001: 24; 204).

to be sure, but recognizing that we have no monopoly on expertise here and respecting the wisdom and abilities of our sister feminists?" (Gunning 1994: 21). While no one can 'speak for' 'others,' "if we have the power and the resources, we can create the room for them to speak, and to speak with us as well" (Lewis 1995: 48, quoting Dawit and Mekuria).

This is required not only out of "respect for cultural difference or rights, but also the desire for effectiveness that demands assessment of the questions: Who owns the problem? Who sets the agenda?" (Gruenbaum 2001: 205). Hosken and other outsiders "trumpeted the outrage" that Western feminists felt about FGC in international fora (Gruenbaum 2001: 205). Gruenbaum (2001: 205-6) suggests that the "backlash reactions at the Copenhagen conference and other venues - which seemed to be a reaffirmation of the right to circumcise girls and women - were probably a necessary step toward establishing African ownership of the issue. In subsequent years, the 'Stay out of our business' sort of responses have changed to 'We're working on it. Here's what you can do to help.'"

4.4 North/South Dynamics Revisited

At the same time, one of the most profound differences between feminists and activists against FGC in the Third World and those in the First World is that FGC is *not* seen as particularly isolated nor the most pressing problem for the former. Thiam "criticizes the failure of Western discourse to place FGS and other traditional practices in their proper cultural and political contexts" (Lewis 1995: 27). Third World women view FGC as merely one of many problems facing women and the poor: other "local problems...are experienced as far more serious than FGC" (Shell-Duncan and

Hernlund 2000: 24).⁸⁵ One source “of significant conflict over the status of FGS as a human rights violation is the failure of Western feminists to address the health complications and effects of FGS in the context of other important social, political, and economic issues associated with the health of African women” (Lewis 1995: 33). While Walley (1997: 421-2), for example, acknowledges that the “Health consequences [of FGC] *are* real and disturbing,” nevertheless “these health consequences must be located within a larger context in which women’s health may also be severely affected” by malnutrition, poverty, lack of clean water and land, and inadequate health care.⁸⁶

Yet such basic needs are not given the same priority or urgency in the West as the eradication of FGC (Lewis 1995: 33). Walley (1997: 422) quotes “Henry Louis Gates [who] asks, ‘Is it, after all, unreasonable to be suspicious of Westerners who are exercised over female circumcision, but whose eyes glaze over when the same women are merely facing starvation?’” A serious and legitimate campaign against FGC cannot stand in isolation from other serious and legitimate concerns (Gunning 1994: 47).

Illustrating the difference in priorities between some Western feminists and some Third World feminists, Gilliam (1991: 217, emphases added)⁸⁷ wrote of a 1980 division between those who believe “the major struggle for women is increasing their access to, and control over, the world’s *resources* and those who believe that the main issue is access to, and control over, *orgasms*.” Gruenbaum (2001: 203-4) recorded a similar division at a 1994 Women’s Human Rights in the Muslim World conference, between those concerned with “basic human needs for Third World women, like water supply,

85 See also Gunning (1992: 225-6).

86 See also Gunning (1992: 225-6); Lewis (1995: 33); Gruenbaum (2001: 21; 174).

87 See also Shell-Duncan and Hernlund (2000: 24).

economic development, and peace” and those Western feminists who “seem more concerned about veils, clitorises, and so on.”

In addition, some “modern practices” may be as, or more, harmful to Third World women than more “traditional practices”: for example, “Western apprehensions about the health of African women did not appear to extend to the detrimental effects” of “modernization,” neo-colonialism and inequitable development (Lewis 1995: 11, quoting Tomasevski; 33).⁸⁸ African critics of Western FGC discourse also argue that “Western economic exploitation enables the continued occurrence of FGS” (Lewis 1995: 33).⁸⁹ Western feminist discourse addressing FGC, as outlined in Chapter Two, “rarely concerns itself with the participation of feminists, as Westerners, in the exploitative economic and social institutions that arguably perpetuate FGS” (Lewis 1995: 33). As Lewis and Gunning (1998: 133) indicate, “Rather than function solely as voyeurs of exotic foreign practices,” perhaps the West should look at how our own policies or actions play a role in, or “contribute to the violations we seek to end.” Equally important, “American activists should also examine the impact of” transnational corporations, “free trade,” banks, the IMF and World Bank structural adjustment programs, arms dealers, and militarization “on the status of women and girls” in the Third World (Lewis and Gunning 1998: 134; Oloka-Onyango and Tamale 1995: 702; 704; 727).⁹⁰

Joyce Russell-Robinson denounces the “Western missionaries” like Alice Walker and Congresswoman Pat Schroeder for “harping on the ritual of female circumcision.” Instead, she says, “Let them save Africans from malnutrition, unhealthy environments and diseases. Let them save Africans from poverty and violence, themselves responsible for malnutrition, poor

⁸⁸ See also Obiora (1997: 352).

⁸⁹ See also Lewis and Gunning (1998: 134).

⁹⁰ See also Abusharaf (2000: 162).

sanitation, lack of clean drinking water and infant mortality.”
(Cited and quoted in Gruenbaum 2001: 220)

While all of these points can be applied, to varying degrees, to most Western feminist analyses and condemnations of FGC, they become almost absurd when applied to the mainstream Western media diatribes against FGC by, for example, A.M. Rosenthal, who otherwise would not be concerned about the Third World (without oil), or women.

4.5 Conclusions

The issues and materials addressed in this chapter, such as Gunning's concept of “world travelling,” instead of adhering to the classic opposition between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ provide some ideas as to how to best proceed in discussing and opposing FGC in a respectful way. We have seen that it is essential to understand the condition and experiences of “others,” instead of judging without any awareness or appreciation of their situation, and to steer clear of feelings of superiority and self-righteousness. North and South plainly have distinct priorities. Gruenbaum (1996:456 citing Gruenbaum 1982) argues that current international efforts to eradicate FGM have “served as a smoke screen, focusing attention and resources on ‘traditions’ while drawing attention away from disastrous situations of economic exploitation and neglect in poor countries.” Wright (1996:256 citing Davis, 1985) concurs with this position, adding that the attention Western feminists have placed on FGM neglects other areas of suffering and persecution, such as “human rights abuse...poverty, the effects of war, employment discrimination, illiteracy, inadequate health care and personal status law.” Gruenbaum (1996: 471) provides a poignant example of the situation in Sudan in the late 1980s, where “at least a quarter of a million people died of starvation due to drought...millions were at risk of death from starvation...due to civil war...[and] repressive government. Thousands of little Sudanese girls died - whether circumcised

or not.” I feel this particular passage emphasizes the necessity for the West to consider other issues related to oppression of women living in the Third World. Clearly there exist other violations of human rights which are prevalent in the Third World that require immediate attention. FGC may not head the list of issues Third World women intend to tackle, and clearly, precedence must be given to Third World women: to their voices, their concerns, and their priorities. Lastly, and significantly, women from and in the Third World *have* engaged with the issue of FGC, and the priority of the West should be to support their efforts.

Chapter Five: Conclusions

The material presented in Chapter Four, such as the model of “world travelling” presented by Gunning, including respect for difference, understanding and not judging the cultural “other” out of context, provide some ideas as to how best to proceed in engaging with the issue of FGC in a respectful fashion. Clearly, debates and politics concerning FGC must give priority to the voices and concerns of and from the Third World.

However, as Gunning (1992: 246) and Lewis (1995: 48) have both themselves noted, their analyses and methods do not represent a resolution to the tensions and conflicts over this tough problem of approaches to FGC; “it is rather, the beginning of a process fraught with difficulties.” Lewis (1995: 50) addresses this dilemma, and asks: “How then, can black feminists [and others] actively address the responsibility they feel for the well-being of others while avoiding the pitfalls of cultural imperialism and discrimination against ethnic groups whose traditions are unfamiliar?” And concludes that fully achieving both goals is an impossible task (Lewis 1995: 50). But many Western feminists (black and non-black) “share the intuition that the importance of the problem obligates them to choose respectful engagement, rather than respectful isolation” (Lewis 1995: 50).

Lewis (1995: 45) mentions that Western feminists who seek to discuss and hopefully eliminate FGC throughout the world, must combine *all* of the possible approaches mentioned so far: we need “integrated approaches” which “combine domestic legal and nonlegal approaches, international standard-setting, and technical assistance and monitoring, with grassroots health and education campaigns in order to eradicate FGS. This mixture of techniques, rather than universalist condemnation and ‘enlightenment’

or exclusionary rejection of Western influence, appears to be the most promising basis for cross-cultural Western and African feminist activism on FGS.” The integrated approach of CEDAW, for example, “establishes an international context of concern and focus, but prioritizes African feminist activism” (Lewis 1995: 46).

As discussed in Chapter Three, most efforts at using the law to eradicate FGC have been unsuccessful and/or counterproductive. As a result of this, education regarding the detrimental health effects of FGC has become the focus, as opposed to legislation (Gunning 1992: 230).⁹¹ Improving women’s educational and economic condition and independence, in general, might be a more effective route to allow women to perceive that FGC is not necessary for their own, or their daughters’ marriage and successful adulthood (Lewis 1995: 47). Winter (1994: 942) notes that, in France, the generational difference is crucial: those who have undergone FGC “who have grown up in France are infinitely less likely to have excisions performed on their own children.”

Rather than local laws, some activists and others are trying to help focus attention on the negative aspects of FGC through international human rights discourse and instruments, as briefly mentioned in Chapter Two (James 1998: 1039-40; Obiora 1997: 332-6; Gruenbaum 2001: 24; 209-17; Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2000: 27).

Feminists and others have argued that traditional human rights, as well as “women’s human rights,” must be developed, including rights to sexual, bodily and reproductive control and autonomy, and breaking down the traditional barrier between “public” and “private” (Lewis 1995: 15-7 Lai and Ralph 1995: *passim*; Kim 1993: *passim*; Brems 1997: *passim*). Human rights must also be expanded beyond the role of the state and

91 See also Lewis (1995: 19); Winter (1994: 969); Lewis and Gunning (1998: 136-7); Obiora (1997: 361-2); Gruenbaum (2001: 207; 209); Shell-Duncan and Hernlund (2000: 36).

into the community and family spheres. Other human rights, such as the rights of the child, rights to health, and others may also apply to FGC (Gunning 1992: 231-8). However, pursuing these “rights” might be perceived in the Third World as arguing that Third World women are being called “incompetent and abusive mothers who, in some ways, do not love their children” or that performing FGC under medical and antiseptic conditions was “okay” (Boulware-Miller quoted in Lewis 1995: 41).⁹² Obviously, arguing that FGC violates prohibitions on “slavery,” “torture,” or inhuman and degrading treatment brings up all the problems with cultural insensitivity and disrespect raised in Chapter Three. U.N. bodies and conferences have recently “explicitly condemn[ed] FGS as a violation of human rights, thereby sanctioning international participation in eradication efforts” (Lewis 1995: 44).⁹³ Yet, CEDAW (the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women), for example (mentioned above), “despite having been widely ratified...is also the subject of the largest number of substantive reservations of any of the major human rights treaties” (Lewis 1995: 47).

In addition, however, many people have problems with “universal” human rights: they are “falsely universal” in that they are largely a product of the West and Western educated Third World elites; they strongly prioritize civil and political rights over other “generations” of human rights; they are individual rather than communal; they ignore obligations and responsibilities; and they are imposed from above and often externally.

Still others argue that, although human rights are not presently “universal,” it is possible to build “universal” human rights “from the ground up” (Lewis 1995: 18; An-Na’im

⁹² Also see Lewis 1995 42; 19; Gunning (1992: 233; 237).

⁹³ See also Lewis and Gunning (1998: 126).

1992a: 1, 5, 7; An-Na'im 1992c: 431; Messer 1997: 307). Through intracultural and crosscultural dialogues, alliances and consensus building, and through world-travelling, "shared values can become universal" (Gunning 1992: 240).⁹⁴ Cultural change is produced due to external influences: as "people and cultures interact they do change and learn from each other" (Gunning 1992: 240).

In addition to cross-cultural dialogues, there is also always the possibility of internal change. "A culture" is not static or monolithic. Each "culture" consists of "a cacophony of voices," including a dynamic of internal contradictions and resistances (James 1998: 1036; Gruenbaum 1996: 463; Gruenbaum 2001: 32). "Culture is always contested" and there are always "marginalized" voices and differences between members of "a culture" in terms of ethnicity, gender, class, region, religion, and other factors (Gruenbaum 2001: 32; James 1998: 1040; 1044; An-Na'im 1992b: 20). Customs and ritual, in particular, are "by definition not static, but organic and dynamic" in terms of rationale, significance, social function and ideology (Obiora 1997: 300).

This "integrated" approach "emphasizes a slow, grassroots process of health education and norm-creation that is intended to lead to gradual abandonment of the practices" (Lewis 1995: 42).⁹⁵

Others argue that "modifying" FGC, or "harm reduction," should be advocated as a first step toward, or an alternative to, eradicating FGC (Gruenbaum 2001: 22). We should also learn about the "positive, empowering roles of initiation among women and how those aspects might be retained even after FGS is eradicated" (Lewis 1995: 49).

⁹⁴ See also Walley (1997: 430); Lewis (1995: 42; 43); Shell-Duncan and Hernlund (2000: 29); An-Na'im (1992a: 3).

⁹⁵ See also Winter (1994: 942-3).

Some suggest encouraging more modified cutting, causing “bleeding but no permanent alteration of the external genitalia”; others mention purely “symbolic cutting,” involving a “simulacrum” or “a ‘mock ceremony’ where the ritual is carried out but no cutting occurs” (Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2000: 5; 31; 37).⁹⁶ Obiora (1997: 288) states that “this procedure is innocuous and has a strictly symbolic connotation.” Obiora (1997: 287; 367-8) seems to think that advocating such a ‘modified,’ minimal and sanitized form of FGC is “not only the least restrictive means; it is the path of least resistance and the more efficient and humane strategy.”⁹⁷ According to Obiora (1997: 367), “Sanitation may not be the ultimate solution, but neither is abolition.”⁹⁸

Fahtma, a Sudanese woman, in discussing her daughter, said:

Everyone tries to persuade me that it must be done to my daughter, saying that no one will marry her, but I tell them I don’t care. Let her get old enough to decide what she wants for herself. In a year or so I will have a party for her and pretend that I am going to circumcise her. I will buy her new clothes, paint her hands with henna, and call in the midwife, exactly as I would if I were to have her circumcised. Then I will pay the midwife to do nothing, and tell everyone that it has been done.” (Quoted in Lightfoot-Klein 1989: 133)

Other African women are engaged in developing “their own communities of resistance” (James 1998: 1045).⁹⁹ Families and communities are participating in “an alternative

96 See also Gruenbaum (2001: 2; 183-5); Obiora (1997: 288; 284; 365-8); Gunning (1992: 223; 230).

97 This was considered but ultimately rejected in the United States and the Netherlands (Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2000: 5).

98 See also Walley (1997: 430); Lewis (1995: 42; 43); Shell-Duncan and Hernlund (2000: 29); An-Na’im (1992a: 3).

99 See also Shell-Duncan and Hernlund (2000: 37).

rite,” to mark and celebrate this important life transition without the genital cutting, called “Circumcision Through Words” (James 1998: 1045).¹⁰⁰

Rather than subjecting their daughters to the traditional rites of passage that include FGM, young candidates are spending a week in seclusion learning traditional teachings about their coming roles as women, parents, and adults in the community. They are also taught about personal health, hygiene, reproductive issues, communication skill, self-esteem, and how to deal with peer pressure. The week concludes with a community celebration of song, dancing, and feasting to affirm the girls and their new place in the community. (James 1998: 1045-6)

Lewis (1995: 54)¹⁰¹ notes that cross-cultural dialogue “does not imply a one-way transfer of knowledge from the West to the Third World... Westerners also may learn from advice or criticism from the developing world with regard to human rights.”

Perhaps Walley is an example of a Westerner who was changed and transformed by her “dialogue” with the people of rural Kenya. Many of the activists discussed, cited or quoted in Chapter Four, have clearly been influenced by Third World FGC activists. In Chapter Four I also mentioned that Third World activists have tried to educate Westerners about the need for Westerners to address issues such as: modernization and underdevelopment; structural adjustment programs; the roles of Western governments, multinationals, the IMF and the World Bank; poverty; lack of health facilities; and other issues in both the First and Third Worlds. Third World activists have also tried to educate Westerners about the need to address *all* human rights and address them as all interrelated and interconnected, especially social, cultural and economic rights as well as collective rights such as the right to development, cultural survival and a safe environment.

100 See also Gruenbaum (2001: 195-6); Shell-Duncan and Hernlund (2000: 5); Hernlund (2000: assim).

101 see also Messer (1997: 307-8); An-Na'im (1992a: 5); Renteln (1990: 139).

Lewis and Gunning (1998: 138) assert that “A more attenuated, but ultimately essential aspect of the human rights struggle against FGS is the promotion of respect for international human rights within the United States” (Lewis and Gunning 1998: 138). The U.S. (at the time) had not ratified CEDAW and “still fails to recognize economic, social, and cultural rights.”¹⁰²

Oloka-Onyango and Tamale (1995: 716) argue that “it is somewhat surprising that feminists in the United States have not pursued the ratification of CEDAW in US domestic law with more vigor....[as they did in the] campaign for the Equal Rights Amendment...For Third World feminists, concerted action by US feminists on the question of ratification [of CEDAW and other international human rights instruments] will signal a commitment to the promotion of a truly internationalist agenda on women’s human rights, and thereby dispel the notion that there is a parallel application of standards - one global and one local.”

Yet the bottom line seems to be: most examples of “cross-cultural dialogue” involve Third World women coming into contact with Westerners or Western ideas and sharing those views. In this respect, an important question to consider is: what happens when dialogue doesn’t effect change: when members of a culture insist “on maintaining a practice that others deem to be a violation of established standards of human rights?” (An-Na’im 1992a: 9; An-Na’im 1992c: 433).

Anthropology has largely discussed human rights within a context of a sharp supposed dichotomy: cultural relativism versus universalism (i.e., universal human rights)

¹⁰² Bulbeck (1998: 70) notes that economic, social and cultural human rights “refer to systemic or structural inequality, which legal systems, particularly in the United States, are almost incapable of apprehending.” See also Oloka-Onyango and Tamale (1995: 707).

(Messer 1993: 221; Wilson 1997: 2-3; and the volume edited by Nagengast and Turner 1997, especially Zechenter 1997). I have avoided this “false dichotomy.” Even Nagengast and Turner (1997: 272) acknowledge that “universals and relativism are not necessarily mutually contradictory; rather, they constitute complementary perspectives, both of which are essential components of an anthropological approach to human rights.”¹⁰³ As Downing and Kushner (1988: 5) note: “Cultural relativism cautions that before judgment is reached, careful attention should be given to the context of human behavior. In practice, it has not prevented anthropologists from frequently making overt judgments.”¹⁰⁴ Renteln is perhaps clearest about the difference between cultural relativism and “tolerance”:

Relativists, like everyone else, are ethnocentric...and remain true to their own convictions. There is no reason why the relativists should be paralyzed as critics have often asserted...But relativists will acknowledge that the criticism is based on their own ethnocentric standards and realize also that the condemnation may be a form of cultural imperialism. Under extreme circumstances, meaning that an action in another culture violates one of the relativists’ most deeply held beliefs, the relativists may decide that criticism and even intervention are lesser evils than either ethnocentrism or cultural imperialism. (Renteln 1990: 77; citing Hartung 1954 and Bidney 1953).

Like Renteln (1990: 77), I believe that “It is better to be honest about the local source of the criticism than to pretend that it is universal.” An-Na’im (1992b: 25) agrees that (Western) claims of “universalism” “are in fact based on the claimants rigid and

¹⁰³ See also Renteln (1990: 9, 14) and Wilson (1997: 3).

¹⁰⁴ For a clear statement of this common anthropological understanding of cultural relativism, see Maybury-Lewis (1997: 152-3). Turner (1997: 275) agrees that cultural relativism is “a commitment to suspending moral judgment until an attempt can be made to understand another culture’s beliefs and practices in their full cultural, material, and historical contexts” (as I have tried to do for FGC in Chapter Four).

exclusive ethnocentricity.” It is possible, in this context, that an individual act or cultural practice of infibulation of young girls may be particularly offensive to my morality and sensibility: I may condemn FGC and seek its eradication on those grounds, rather than on a ‘falsely universal’ conception of human rights. In the meantime, I hope to allow Third World women and men to lead that fight, while I and other Westerners attempt to effect change in our practices (whether breast implants or SAPs). In any case, as I have argued in this thesis, FGC is not a unitary phenomenon: the roughly 85% of FGCs that do not consist of infibulation no longer strike me as a severe human rights abuse, as they did when I began this “journey.”

It has become evident in my research that although a pressing issue, ‘mutilation’ is only one of countless problems that plague Third World women, although it is clear that it strikes a nerve for many Westerners. Mutilation is a daily fact of life for many African women, however without the observance of other rights, mutilation will remain marginal in light of other abuses of human rights that Third World women suffer. For example, the economic position of Third World women has been argued as a significant obstacle in the attainment of other classes of rights. I feel it is reasonable to assume that once Third World women achieve economic independence, they will have greater success in achieving the observance of other human rights; and as Gunning pertinently indicates, “the surgeries do not head the list of wrongs that need to be righted to improve the status of women” (Gunning1992: 225-6 citing Lightfoot-Klein at 75).

Furthermore, as has been established, Western campaigns to eradicate customs such as FGC have been considered imperialist and condescending by many women in and of the Third World. This is especially true if they believe the West is attempting to save them from their backward ways, while refusing to view the women, and their practices, within a larger cultural context. As Sussman (1998: 212) reveals: “the failure to engage

African women in dialogue on their own terms and within the context of their cultural realities will do little to change their beliefs or behaviour.”

Finally, and in closing, I feel that the West should take on a supportive role in the quest for eradication of FGC. Examples of future support could include lobbying to provide funding for educational campaigns; providing Third World women and others with the avenues through which to have their voices heard; engaging in efforts to improve Third World women’s educational and economic conditions; and pursuing the objective of educating people about the role of advocacy with regard to FGC, and other oppressive conditions. Importantly, it would be worthy for us, as Westerners, to explore how our own activities contribute to the economic situation in the Third World. It is essential to actively explore ways that we can modify our own actions, in ways that would benefit the Third World. In short, leaving *ownership* of the issue of FGC to women and men in and of the Third World, while encouraging and supporting their endeavours, both financially and otherwise. This can be an alternative to seizing the reins. We need to step back, and be open and prepared to provide support - this is especially key if approached by Third World women for assistance. Also important is engaging in efforts to raise awareness in the First World of the circumstances and experiences of Third World women, including the larger cultural context within which FGC is practiced, instead of directing our attention, and the attention of others, solely on FGC, as has been done in the past. As Morgan and Steinem (1980: 99, emphases in original) rightly argue: “Past campaigns against female mutilation, conducted for whatever ambiguous or even deplorable reasons, need not preclude new approaches that might be more effective because they would be sensitive to the cultures involved and most important, supportive of the *women* affected, and in response to *their* leadership.” As Gruenbaum (2001: 205-6) notes, Third World women *are* “taking ownership” of FGC, and saying “We’re working on it. Here’s what you can do to help.”

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