

Anthropologist explores decline of female genital cutting

December 9 2016, by Linda B. Glaser

In the global campaign against female genital mutilation (FGM), many activists aggressively condemn cutting while depicting it as an intractable problem. Anthropologists have shown, however, that for many women FGM is a meaningful and valued practice.

New research by anthropologist Saida Hodzic challenges the idea that cutting is intractable and analyzes what happens in a country where such a valued practice ends. Her focus is on Ghanaian anti-cutting activists and their global collaborators.

Hodzic's research, conducted over 16 years, is detailed in her new book, ["The Twilight of Cutting: African Activism and Life After NGOs."](#)

Since support for the practice of cutting was waning not only in Ghana, where she did her field research, but across Africa, her book raises the question of why there is increasing discourse about FGM being "intractable" despite it actually decreasing.

"What kind of a feminist anthropology is needed in such a moment?" asks Hodzic, assistant professor of anthropology and feminist, gender and sexuality studies.

In her introduction, Hodzic explains that she first encountered the issue of cutting in Germany while she was a refugee from Bosnia.

FGM is one of the reasons women can gain political asylum, Hodzic explains: "This means they become model migrants because they're

fleeing cutting, whereas other migrants are not welcome and are discriminated against."

But, she says, the vilification of cutting leads to proposals for policies of increased surveillance, such as subjecting all African girls to an examination of their genitals, or passing laws prohibiting international travel for the purposes of cutting. These are some of the [negative effects](#) that can result when liberal governments are interested in promoting the rights of women, she says.

"Those negative effects can be very difficult to discern and it takes an analyst – in this case an anthropologist – to say here's why legislation that looks laudable can be problematic," she says.

Hodzic conducted her research in a very poor, remote area of Ghana, whose residents are considered second-class citizens. "Those who work there for the NGO inevitably have to take a stand against their own culture," Hodzic says. "Denigrating the existing practices of their people enables them both to get grants and also to feel modern."

But there is a cost, she writes. In order to eliminate FGM, Ghanaian NGOs have framed cutting as a harmful tradition based in ignorance. Hodzic found that NGO-state governance is structured on the principle of "blaming and shaming rural populations" for their "harmful traditional practices."

The anti-FGM activists in Africa whom Hodzic interviewed were originally in favor of punitive measures against cutting, but ultimately turned against criminalizing the practice.

"The governmental workers are asked to surveil and sensitize the villagers to the undesirability of cutting and to turn themselves into citizen-enforcers of law and order," she writes. "And they do. But the

governmental workers then find themselves deeply torn. The governance they are asked to embody offers them a seductive place in modern Ghana but does not feel right for very long. This is not a dilemma they discuss publicly."

As Hodzic points out, advocacy against cutting has been from the outset a collaboration of Africa and Europe, and later the global north.

"The campaign to end cutting in Ghana didn't come from the people cutting or being cut, because the practice is not violently imposed. If people don't want to do it they just stop it," she says. "In the group I studied cutting happened around puberty, as a declaration that 'I'm ready to do this as a rite of passage.'" But, she says, with more education, increased labor migration, and NGO interventions, rites of passage have changed and cutting is on the decline.

Provided by Cornell University

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