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Hidden or hypervisible? Mapping the making of a moral panic over female genital mutilation/cutting

Emmaleena Käkälä

Introduction

The umbrella term female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) encompasses a variety of practices ranging from pricking to cutting and repositioning the labia minora or labia majora (WHO, 2022). FGM/C is practised in a variety of contexts for a range of different social, cultural, religious and psycho-sexual reasons. FGM/C can lead to several possible short-term and long-term consequences, including physical, mental, sexual and reproductive health complications (WHO, 2022). Although FGM/C is concentrated in around 30 countries in Africa, Middle East and Asia¹, since the beginning of the international campaigning to end FGM/C, these practices have been commonly framed as an “African problem”. Critics argue that the contemporary international anti-FGM/C discourse represents a continuation to the historical homogenisation and demonisation of cultures of the Global South, perpetuating stereotypical and racist representations of Africa as primitive, savage and barbaric (Adebisi, 2015; Njambi, 2004). In examining media and political representations of FGM/C in the UK, this chapter seeks to illustrate both the colonial continuities and new exclusionary nationalisms which have been harnessed to fuel the moral panic over the continuation of FGM/C among migrant communities in Europe.

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With growing international migration, these practices are no longer confined to the Global South²; globally more than 200 million girls and women have been affected by FGM/C (WHO, 2022). In the last two decades, FGM/C has emerged as a “burning social problem” in Europe (Johnsdotter and Mestre i Mestre, 2017, p. 14). This can be seen in the proliferation of both national and international policies to tackle FGM/C (Johnsdotter and Mestre i Mestre, 2017; Connelly et al., 2018). As this chapter problematises, the emergence of these policy frameworks cannot simply be put down to the scale of the problem; but rather, Western responses to FGM/C can be attributed to wider societal tensions over cultural diversity and national identity sparked by 9/11 and the European “refugee crisis”.

News media has played a significant part in the making of the moral panic over FGM/C through its role in framing these practices, and in informing public perceptions about the causes and solutions to ending them (Sobel, 2015). Moral panic refers to a societal overreaction as a response to a perceived, exaggerated and simplified threat to shared values (Cohen, 1972). The rising media interest in FGM/C in the UK culminated in 2015, when the left-wing newspaper *The Guardian* launched the Global Media Campaign to End FGM, with backing from high-profile organisations including the UN (Halonen, 2016). In utilising the lens of *femonationalism* (Farris, 2017) this chapter contextualises, illustrates and problematises the increased political and media attention on FGM/C. The chapter begins by illustrating the representations which have led critics to conclude that the Western media discursively colonises the complexities of FGM/C and the lives of affected communities. I will then present a case study of media and political discourses in Britain to demonstrate how FGM/C has become increasingly entangled with anti-immigration sentiments and exclusionary constructions of national identity and belonging.

Western representations of FGM/C

Savages and saviours

Contemporary depictions of FGM/C contribute to producing Western knowledge about African sexualities in ways that reinforce colonial stereotypes about backwardness, sexual deviance and racial inferiority. Despite the complexity of dynamics, meanings and lived experiences of FGM/C, analyses and representations of FGM/C in Europe and the US have largely concentrated on the impacts FGM/C has on women's sexuality (Sobel, 2015), leading critics to accuse Western preoccupation with FGM/C of sensationalism and colonial voyeurism:

The history of colonialism and neo-colonialism has afforded the more powerful west the right to intervene in the lives of its 'third world' Others; a right which is not reciprocal. And through the anti-FGM movement, the west has acquired yet another chance to gaze at African women's genitals (Njambi, 2004, p. 284).

Although FGM/C has been recognised as child abuse, campaigning more often tackles these practices as a form of violence against women. Representations of FGM/C which primarily focus on destroyed female sexuality have been critiqued for objectifying women by reducing them to their genitalia (Boddy, 1998). FGM/C campaigns frequently utilise visual metaphors to portray female genitalia, often as infibulated flags or purses positioned to resemble vulvar tissue (Khoja-Moolji, 2020; 28 Too Many, 2017), bloodied or cut flowers (Footprints Foundation, 2017; End FGM European Network, 2020) or fruit resembling the shape of the vulva (Al Mansoury in Dawood, 2015). The reduction of the complex practice of FGM/C to female genitalia represents a continuation to imperialist caricatures of African sexualities; historically, African women's bodies were portrayed in particular ways to convey primitivity and savagery to legitimise colonising, civilising missions by the West (Tamale, 2011).

While other forms of violence against women have also been represented through problematic images, depictions of FGM/C are unique in their graphicness, often making either visual or written references to razor blades and blood (Forward UK, 2015). Although infibulation³ accounts for less than 10% of all worldwide FGM/C, media often focuses on suturing and “kitchen table circumcisions” in efforts to homogenise these depictions as “the reality” of FGM/C (Njambi, 2004, Johnsdotter and Mestre i Mestre, 2017). These selected framings of FGM/C as barbarity contribute to reproducing ideas about underdeveloped “Third World” (Wade, 2009). It has been argued that depictions of FGM/C serve a strategic value in enforcing the gendered dichotomy between modern/backward which is entangled with notions about Western cultural superiority (Wade, 2009; Gruenbaum, 2020). Although depictions of primitivity and barbarity have become an essential feature of the anti-FGM/C discourse, these are not necessarily recognised by women who come from contexts where FGM/C is normalised or celebrated (Gruenbaum, 2020). As a result, first encounters with Western representations can spark feelings of shock, embarrassment and loss in women who are yet to make sense of what has happened to them (Käkelä, 2021).

The international anti-FGM/C discourse has been criticised for dehumanising and infantilising African women (Tamale, 2011). Silencing of survivors and women’s lack of choice are frequent themes in visual depictions of FGM/C. The construction of an “ideal victim” who is powerless, voiceless and faceless has been central to representations of FGM/C. Where women are visualised, posters often depict them as silenced, either with stitched or covered mouths (End FGM, 2020). Portrayals of children also centre around themes of lack of choice and consent; however, unlike posters of women, images of children often depict either sad or faceless children, without explicit references to sexual violence (Home Office, 2014; Harrow Council, 2017; Metropolitan Police, 2019). A recent World Vision Finland campaign poster (Little Black Book, 2022) represented a rare exception to

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this, presenting closed lips which had been inverted to resemble the shape of a vulva, with a text across the lips resembling stitches: “A girl is subjected to genital mutilation every ten seconds – speak out to end the violence”. Alternatively, recent campaigns have depicted defiant women with no lived experience of FGM/C (see for example Plan UK, 2014). The leading *Guardian* End FGM campaign has been problematised for presenting a dichotomy between selected brave activists who “give voice” to silenced victims (Halonen, 2016). These trends are notable, as anthropologists and Black feminists have long criticised the international movement for failing to recognise FGM/C-affected women’s capacity and efforts to challenge these practices themselves (Nnaemeka, 2005).

Although FGM/C has been recognised as patriarchal violence, it notably differs from most other forms of violence against women in that it is perpetuated by women themselves. The complexity in women’s dual positionalities as survivors and perpetrators has rarely been well captured by campaigns. In addition to infantilisation, the wider international anti-FGM/C discourse has also been criticised for victim-blaming, and for portraying African women as bad mothers (Shweder, 2000). For instance, the *Guardian* media campaign has been critiqued for attributing the continuation of FGM/C to passive and incapable parents who are failing to protect their daughters (Halonen, 2016). Campaigning has tended to place disproportionate onus of responsibility on women, portraying small children with slogans such as “be the mother who ends female genital mutilation in your family” (Home Office, 2014) or images of women with slogans such as “Now that you know, say no to FGM” (SafeHands for Mothers, 2015). Such victim-blaming attaches backwardness not only to practices but also to the people affected by them, overlooking the ways wider gendered inequalities constrain women’s spaces to resist FGM/C (Käkelä, 2020; Gruenbaum, 2020). Researchers have increasingly called for more nuanced representations of the Black motherhood, arguing that women do not perpetuate FGM/C to do harm, but out of the best interests of the child in

Hidden or hypervisible? Mapping the making of a moral panic over female genital mutilation/cutting contexts where socio-cultural beliefs, peer pressure and women's lower social position necessitate FGM/C as a strategy against social exclusion (Johnsdotter and Essén, 2016). However, it is worth noting good practice where it exists; despite the criticisms laid later in this chapter, more recent UK Government campaign materials stand out positively in depicting women and children in the context of the caring family relationships within which FGM/C often takes place (Home Office, 2018).

Tip of the iceberg?

Rumours and anecdotal stories about the continuation of FGM/C are regularly reported in the European press (Johnsdotter and Mestre i Mestre, 2017). Media and campaigners have for long described FGM/C as a “hidden problem” which persists due to a culture of secrecy and the failure of European states to take the problem seriously. Most recently, this has been demonstrated by a multi-award-winning campaign which sought to raise awareness about the number of women at risk of FGM/C in Europe by depicting infibulated European flags (Khoja-Moolji, 2020). However, although Western politicians, non-governmental organisations and media frequently refer to “girls at risk”, the methods for calculating likely prevalence and assessing risk are notoriously unreliable, thus arguably exaggerating the scale of the problem (Johnsdotter and Mestre i Mestre, 2017). Estimates for prevalence of FGM/C among migrant communities in Europe largely overlook migration as an instigator of cultural change in the abandonment of FGM/C (*ibid.*). Despite popular representations about FGM/C as a hidden problem among migrant communities in Europe, it has been argued that a “typical” FGM/C case is one in which the practice is committed as an extra-territorial offence (*ibid.*). This has also been picked up by the media, which often features reports about FGM/C in relation to “cutting season” during school holidays (*ibid.*). These concerns are reflected in the emergence of safeguarding – or as argued by Khoja-Moolji (2020), profiling – operations

Hidden or hypervisible? Mapping the making of a moral panic over female genital mutilation/cutting at the UK and other Western borders, and intermittent suggestions to subject girls at risk to compulsory genital examinations as a preventative measure (Orange and Topping, 2014; Home Affairs Select Committee, 2016).

Across Europe, there has been a notable consensus among governments, non-governmental organisations and political parties on banning FGM/C (Johnsdotter and Mestre i Mestre, 2017; Bader and Mottier, 2020). Although in many European countries FGM/C has been illegal either under dedicated or general criminal legislation since the 1980s, to date fewer than fifty FGM/C criminal court cases exist in Europe (Johnsdotter and Mestre i Mestre, 2017). While France stands out as a “shining example” with its relatively high number of FGM/C prosecutions (Baillot et al., 2018, p.9), other countries have only seen a handful of prosecutions. In Sweden, 86 reports of FGM/C had led to only two court cases by 2017; as suggested by researchers, it is unlikely that police would simultaneously fail to identify large numbers of real cases of FGM/C, while investigating relatively high numbers of false reports (Johnsdotter and Mestre i Mestre, 2017). The UK has only seen one successful FGM/C prosecution in 2019, leading researchers to argue that the real prevalence of FGM/C is likely notably lower than presumed (Karlsen, et al., 2022).

Making of the moral panic on FGM/C in the UK

In the UK, the zero-tolerance approach to FGM/C represents a rare area of political consensus. In 2014, the UK Government (a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition) made a commitment to end FGM/C within a generation. This political will has been partly fuelled by media and campaigners who have argued that the UK has some of the higher rates of FGM/C in Europe (Dirrie, 2022), despite lack of reliable data on continued prevalence. Headlines

Hidden or hypervisible? Mapping the making of a moral panic over female genital mutilation/cutting about “FGM parties” where circumcisers are flown to the UK to cut several girls at once periodically appear in the news media (Travis, 2014; Rhodes, 2016). These rumours are not unique to the UK; in Sweden, a newspaper falsely reported that an entire school class of girls had undergone FGM/C (Johnsdotter and Essén, 2017). In addition to reliance on anecdotal evidence, UK media and political discourse frequently features a misuse of prevalence statistics. For example, an article featured in the right-wing newspaper *The Sun*: “Young girls are being mutilated at ‘FGM parties’ across Britain, charity claims” (Fraser, 2016) included a subheading referring to more than 8,000 identified victims. Nowhere in the article was there an acknowledgement that these repurposed NHS figures include first-generation migrant women who had experienced FGM/C prior to migration. This represents a wider pattern of misapprehensions, whereby identification of (usually adult) FGM/C survivors at health settings is associated with the presumed continued prevalence of FGM/C after migration (Johnsdotter and Mestre i Mestre, 2017; Bader and Mottier, 2020). Paradoxically, although increased global displacement has fuelled the emergence of the moral panic concerning FGM/C, media and politicians continue to overlook migration as the explanatory factor in the sudden rise of FGM/C-affected women seen by health and maternity services.

Misuse of figures on FGM/C prevalence has trickled down from media to the policy-making realm to serve a strategic purpose to build support for punitive and bordering practices:

According to a study based on census data⁴, there are around 20,000 girls in Britain who are at risk of female genital mutilation. One hospital in North London alone has recorded 450 cases of female genital mutilation in the last three years. But despite female genital mutilation being illegal for 25 years, there has still not been a single prosecution (Browne, 2013).

It sickens me to think that there were nearly 4,000 cases of FGM reported in our country last year alone. Four thousand cases; think about that... . . . We need more co-ordinated efforts to drive this out of our society. More prosecutions. No more turning a blind eye on the false basis of cultural sensitivities (Cameron, 2015).

The growing media pressure and selective use of evidence has been instrumental in the introduction of new legislation over the last decade. This has included the introduction of FGM Protection Orders through the Serious Crime Act 2015 in England and Wales and the corresponding Scottish legislation four years later (Female Genital Mutilation (Protection and Guidance) (Scotland) Act 2020). Although the law in England and Wales has gone further in introducing mandatory reporting duty for healthcare professionals and teachers, both pieces of legislation reflect the increased focus on FGM protection over the last decade. However, emerging evidence suggests that political pressures have driven hypervigilant responses to FGM/C which can alienate and traumatise communities and families (Käkelä, 2021; Karlsen et al., 2022). Notably, the punitive turn in FGM/C policy has not led to increasing numbers of cases being identified (Karlsen, et al. 2022). At the same time, national FGM/C funding for support and outreach services has been reduced by 76% (Merrick, 2020). This is notable, considering that a significant majority of “reported cases” likely represent women who have experienced FGM/C before migration and who, when confronted by their own lived experiences of violence, would greatly benefit from such services (Käkelä, 2021).

Femonationalism in the UK anti FGM/C discourse

Femonationalism refers to the ways gender equality is exploited within an otherwise xenophobic rhetoric (Farris, 2017). With the rise of the nationalist far-right, political actors have sought to advance anti-Islamic agendas under the guise of women’s rights (*ibid.*). This

Hidden or hypervisible? Mapping the making of a moral panic over female genital mutilation/cutting mobilisation has been nourished by a deployment of a discursive media apparatus which has reproduced Western cultural imagery of oppressive Islam, gender and sexuality in the Global South (*ibid.*). Femonationalist rhetoric, and especially the equation of Islam and gender oppression, has been instrumental in the widespread rejection of multicultural policymaking in Europe following 9/11.

As demonstrated by the UK media and political discourses, femonationalist pursuits frequently misplace gender equality as inherent in Western cultures and societies (Farris, 2017). It has been argued that “female migrant bodies constitute particular targets for narratives of cultural incompatibility with national values” (Bader and Mottier, 2020, p. 646). The UK political discourse embodies an exclusionary rhetoric, as politicians have described FGM/C as “medieval” and “uncivilised” practices (Javid, 2018) which stand at odds with the “liberating force of our [British] values” (Cameron, 2015) and which act as a hindrance to the “emancipation revolution” in Britain (Browne, 2013). These descriptions form a part of a calculated attempt to locate FGM/C in the past, and as oppositional to British culture. This juxtaposition between civilised/barbaric cultures has fuelled the rejection of state multiculturalism and the punitive turn in FGM/C policymaking. The UK media discourse has frequently placed blame on statutory services for multicultural sensitivities. This is exemplified by headlines featured in the *BBC*: “Female genital mutilation [is] ‘rising in soft-touch Scotland’” (Adams, 2013), the left-wing newspaper *The Guardian*: “Racism label should not deter British police from FGM fight, says officer” (Moorhead, 2017) and commentaries by right-wing politicians in *The Scotsman*: “Scotland has to wake up to reality of FGM abuse” (Monteith, 2017). Leading political actors have likewise pointed fingers at statutory services for undermining “the confidence to enforce our values for fear of causing offence” (Cameron, 2015) and for “nervousness amongst some professionals to confront the practice... head on” (Browne, 2013). It has been argued that such narratives about turning a

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blind eye explicitly seek to erase the racial hierarchies which have been a defining feature of FGM/C discourse (Khoja-Moolji, 2020).

With increased international displacement and intercultural tensions in the West, the bodies of Black women have become a discursive tool for drawing the borders of the nation and belonging (Ticktin, 2016; Khoja-Moolji, 2020). The issue of violence against women has been harnessed selectively to demonise certain, mainly Black and Muslim, migrant groups in order to oppose accelerated forced migration from Africa and parts of Middle East. The strategic use of FGM/C as an issue for the purposes of separating “us” from “them” can also be seen in the conflation of FGM/C and Islamic extremism. Although religion is a weak determinant for the prevalence of FGM/C, recent UK prime ministers have been quick to associate FGM/C with radical Islam (see for example Johnson, 2014; Cameron, 2015). Media have been likewise guilty of perpetuating the image of FGM/C as an Islamic problem; despite the complex relationship between religion and FGM/C, *The Guardian* campaign has attributed the continuation of FGM/C to Islamic fundamentalism, which elicits associations to terrorism (Halonen, 2016). However, while extremist organisations have weaponised other forms of violence against women, including forced marriage and rape, FGM/C is generally perpetuated by families and communities, rather than organised movements.

The framing of FGM/C as an issue of extremism illustrates how claims to protect affected women have been increasingly couched in femonationalist rhetoric. For example, in a column for the *Daily Telegraph* Boris Johnson (at the time, Mayor of London) suggested:

There are still Left-wing academics protesting that the war on FGM is a form of imperialism, and that we are wrong to impose our Western norms. I say that is utter

rubbish, and a monstrous inversion of what I mean by liberalism. On the contrary: we need to be stronger and clearer in asserting our understanding of British values. That is nowhere more apparent in the daily job of those who protect us all from terror – and who are engaged in tackling the spread of extremist and radical Islam (Johnson, 2014).

This rhetoric linking FGM/C campaigning to a war, describing it as a “battle” or “combat”, is a recurrent feature across the political divide, also identified in analyses of the *Guardian*'s campaigning (Halonen, 2016, p.48). This illustrates a recent shift in FGM/C campaigning, which first began by approaching FGM/C as a health issue or an illness that was to be “eradicated”, before re-framing FGM/C as a human rights violation (Shell-Duncan, 2008). In evoking the language of war, UK political and media discourse selectively enforces simplistic representations of (presumed Muslim) victims and perpetrators, overlooking the fact that FGM/C is most often performed by affected women themselves (Halonen, 2016). As demonstrated by Boris Johnson's framing, FGM/C has become increasingly interwoven with concerns over national security, whereby calls to act are no longer only fuelled by the need to protect women but also the British culture and nation. In his speech on “Extremism” (2015), David Cameron addressed FGM/C to position multiculturalism as a threat to the UK national security. Swiss political discourse has likewise framed FGM/C as a threat to the nation (Bader and Mottier, 2020). Campaigns have also been complicit in this; in depicting European flags which were roughly sewn together to resemble infibulation, the 28 Too Many posters framed FGM/C as a crime against not only women but also the predominantly white Western nation states (Khoja-Moolji, 2020).

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Cultural superiority perspectives have fuelled far-right nationalism and anti-immigration sentiments (Gruenbaum, 2020; Wade, 2009), contributing to the making of Fortress Europe. Although then Home Secretary Amber Rudd (2016) claimed that the UK's "compassion does not stop at the border" in her speech addressing FGM/C, the Home Office have been accused of exactly that. Despite commitments to protect girls and women from FGM/C, subsequent Home Secretaries have pushed forward with strategies of deterrence which have made it much harder for women to protect their daughters from FGM/C through claiming asylum (Käkelä, 2022). The contradictory responses to FGM/C are most pressingly illustrated by recent Home Secretary Priti Patel's efforts to end FGM/C through increased development funding, while attempting to return a girl at risk of FGM/C to an area of Sudan with a prevalence rate of over 97% (Summers, 2020). The situation is only likely to get worse, as the recently passed Nationality and Borders Act 2022 penalises women for delayed claims, which are often a result of women's unawareness of their right to claim asylum on the grounds of FGM/C.

Conclusion

This chapter has traced the making of a moral panic over FGM/C by illuminating the contradictions between available evidence and the dominant sensationalist representations on the prevalence of FGM/C among migrant communities in Europe. In doing so, this chapter has problematised the motivations which have underpinned the punitive turn in responses to FGM/C in the UK. The entanglement of anti-FGM/C campaigning and anti-Islam rhetoric has taken place against a backdrop of longstanding stereotyping of Muslim women as powerless victims of multiple forms of culturally and religiously sanctioned violence against women (Farris, 2017). The UK anti-FGM/C discourse illuminates the ways the issue of FGM/C has been politicised to further anti-immigration and Islamophobic agendas, at the

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expense of recognising FGM/C-affected women's intersectional vulnerabilities. Gruenbaum
(2020) has argued that in the face of these increasingly exclusionary discourses, scholars are
tasked with not only contributing to ending FGM/C, but also with preventing international
hysteria which is turning FGM/C into a tool of fear and hatred. This chapter has sought to
contribute to these ends by problematising the extent to which contemporary responses
support FGM/C-affected women's resistance and efforts to make sense of the violence which
has been done to them.

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¹ Countries with highest prevalence rates are all in Africa, but FGM/C is also practised in some parts of Middle East and Asia Pacific Region.

² This chapter addresses the stereotyping of FGM/C as an “African” practice. However, it is important to recognise the history of clitoridectomy and labia removal also in Western medicine (Gruenbaum, 2020).

³ Infibulation involves the narrowing of the vaginal opening through the creation of a covering seal by cutting and repositioning the labia minora, or labia majora, sometimes through stitching, with or without removal of the clitoral prepuce/clitoral hood and glans (WHO, 2022).

⁴ UK Census data reports nationality, and ethnicity based on broad geographical categories (e.g. African). The Census data does not capture the great diversity of ethnic groups in Africa, some which practice varying rates of FGM/C and some which do not practice FGM/C at all.