

CONFRONTING FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION

The Role of Youth and ICTs
in Changing Africa



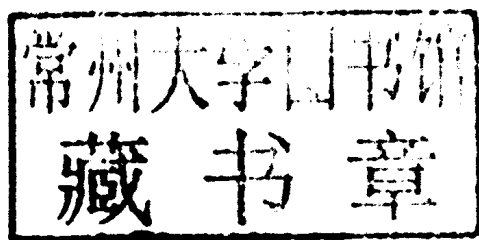
Marie-Hélène Mottin-Sylla and Joëlle Palmieri

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Marie-Hélène Mottin-Sylla and Joëlle Palmieri

Translated by Mamsaït Jagne



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Abbreviations and acronyms

AIDOS	Associazione Italiana Donne per lo Sviluppo
ARH	Adolescent reproductive health
BF	Burkina Faso
CBO	Community-based organisation
ECA	Economic Commission for Africa
ENDA	Environmental Development Action in the Third World
FAWE	Forum of African Women Educationalists
FGM	Female genital mutilation
FLE	Family life education
GEEP	Groupe pour l'Étude et l'Enseignement de la Population
IAC	Inter-African Committee on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children
ICT-FGM	'Contribution of ICTs to the Abandonment of FGM in Francophone West Africa: The Citizenship Role of Youth' (Project)
ICTs	Information and communications technologies
IDRC	International Development Research Centre
IEC	Information, education, communication
ML	Mali
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
RH	Reproductive health
SN	Senegal
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WARF	West Africa Rural Foundation
WSIS	World Summit on the Information Society

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Foreword

By making ICTs and the contribution of youth central to all the efforts and strategies aimed at eradicating FGM in francophone West Africa, ENDA shows that it is determined to effect a clean break, which should be taken at face value.

The first challenge regarding FGM was how to talk about it: to name the nameless, speak the unspeakable, make sense out of something that makes no sense so far as human rights and dignity are concerned. By giving black women the opportunity to speak for themselves three decades ago, Awa Thiam let out of the bag what was considered private and taboo, an ancient practice sanctioned by tradition and culture. That breach was further widened by the struggle of many women and human rights activists. By using legal and medical language and making it women's business, this struggle unwittingly imposed on itself limitations in the form of cognitive, cultural, methodological and strategic biases that were bound to compromise the achievement of its main goal.

The merit of ENDA's approach is undoubtedly the highlighting of three essential types of deconstruction, which

- ascribe FGM to a single gender – while women physically endure FGM, they are not the only actors involved;
- confine the practice to a strictly private domain – it is an issue that concerns society in its political dimension;
- connects it directly with a land, tradition and culture.

To show that FGM is a social and political issue, and therefore concerns both men and women as members of the human community, is tantamount to saying that it can only be stopped by the adoption of a holistic approach. The world of that human community is no longer a land whose boundaries are delineated by a memory that lends meaning and legitimacy to customs and traditions that must be preserved as part of a cultural heritage, but rather a global village whose symbols and values are in free circulation, thanks in no small measure to information and communications technologies.

These values should serve the purpose of reconnecting with a dignified humanity by reviving that ancient but still relevant imperative that Kant expressed when he wrote that 'other people should be considered not as a means but as an end'. Hence, stopping FGM is less a matter of engaging a memory, history or culture than having a vision, a future to build with deeply humanistic values. It is obviously necessary to try to put a stop to such practices, but beyond that the real task is to try to construct a tradition that is worthy of being passed on. In that sense, Souleymane Bachir Diagne rightly sees in tradition not the values that are deposited, but the evaluations and re-evaluations of those values.

A precondition to constructing such a genuinely humanistic tradition is respect for human dignity, which is inconceivable without respect for its primary locus: the human body, and more significantly the body of a woman, which is considered sacred because it bears life. This vision, this tradition, naturally includes youth, because they are the recipients and custodians of this legacy. It is with them that we should build the future world, which is no longer ours but most definitely theirs. They live in this world by being connected, by constantly moving to and fro between the real and the virtual, between the local and

the global. Is not this token of their times the most beautiful way to show that, in every corner of our planet, the practice of FGM is finally being abandoned?

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Introduction

The African information society is developing very fast. Information and communications technologies (ICTs) are no longer a novelty. Daily life has changed completely, and many certainties and practices have been modified, especially for youth. One might therefore wonder whether it would be relevant to look at the consequences this could have, in Africa and elsewhere, on how female circumcision is perceived, considered and addressed.

But how is the subject to be examined? The study described in this volume reached the conclusion that in the era of the Internet the abandonment of female genital mutilation (FGM)¹ in Africa is primarily a question of youth, gender and citizenship, which imposes a cross-cutting vision of development. Thus, this work sets out to convey the conviction that putting youth and gender at the centre of development issues, in the era of ICTs, helps speed up the citizenry's abandonment of FGM.

The book is intended for a scientific and academic readership, researchers specialising in the social sciences and working on issues related to development – gender and development, youth in development, FGM, ICTs and development, citizenship. On the basis of the research findings and recommendations of the ICT–FGM project, the volume shows why it is important to take into account the impacts of the sudden emergence of the African information society on policy. In this regard, it is also expected to engage decision-makers, heads of institutions, parliamentarians and development project managers on the need to decompartmentalise the conventionally fragmented visions of development

so that, in view of the penetration of ICTs in francophone West Africa, youth and gender can be placed at the centre of civic and democratic processes.

25 years for the abandonment of FGM

What has been the impact of 25 years² of coordinated interventions, strategies and policies implemented on the issue of FGM in the world and in Africa, particularly in francophone West Africa? How and by whom has the issue of FGM been addressed? What have been the resultant initiatives and interventions, in terms of policies, strategies and in the field? In what circles: international, regional, sub-regional, national, local, village, community, family, private? Who have been the protagonists, active, and the victims, passive? What methods were used? What have been the results of such methods?

Regarding these issues, we are witnessing the emergence and adoption of a new political and strategic message based on human rights and citizenship, which the digital revolution, that of ICTs, is reinforcing. The purpose of this study is to clarify the conceptual and methodological bases of that message.

10 years of digital revolution

The African information society has been established in francophone Africa for about 10 years.³ The information 'revolution' is now a reality; although, while the customs and practices of the information age⁴ have since become relatively commonplace, their essential consequences, in terms of impacts on the lives of people and communities, have not been identified by everybody, be they politicians, decision-makers, or the populations, youth, 'elders', women and men. How do the new realities of the information society – or, rather, the knowledge society⁵ – drastically change,

for better and for worse, the development issues? How can they be anticipated or encouraged, in terms of political and strategic planning? How do we formulate and express the visions, concepts and methodologies that these new issues are introducing and imposing? How is the role of the various actors of FGM changing, including those who have been traditionally excluded from the action, such as the so-called unproductive people, including youth, women and those people considered inactive? What changes can be expected from these innovations, in a historical, political, economic, social and cultural context that apparently should be taken into account (Giraud, 2008)?

Combining different approaches

In Africa, the practice of FGM, in the final analysis, looks like a magnifying mirror, revealing (among other things⁶) structural, cultural and imaginary changes caused by the major qualitative innovation represented by ICTs. Such innovations should be expected, hoped for, guided and supported for the benefit of the majority, particularly young girls and boys who are already potential elders. This hypothesis allows us to reconsider the vision, policy and practice of FGM from gender, generational, citizenship, democratic and governance perspectives with 'ICT-sensitive lenses'. How can we use the new reality of ICTs to make significant progress towards the abandonment of FGM in francophone West Africa? How far, why and how can the youth be relied on? What are the likely consequences for gender relations? What can be learned with respect to the promotion of the practice of citizenship? How are we to guide strategic recommendations on the optimal contribution of ICTs to the promotion of the abandonment of FGM in francophone Africa, relying on the youth and encouraging gender equality?

Looking for convergence

The research project entitled 'Contribution of ICTs to the Abandonment of FGM in Francophone West Africa: The Citizenship Role of Youth' was implemented by ENDA in 2006-08, with the support of the IDRC, according to a qualitative, collaborative, participatory, transdisciplinary and federative approach. It was conducted experimentally with three youth groups in three communities practising FGM in francophone West Africa that had access to ICTs, in order to find answers to the questions posed. This publication presents the main findings of the research, which was quite thrilling, in terms of the many actors who took part in it and the scope of the vision it culminated in. The research project showed that in the era of the African information society, the abandonment of FGM in Africa will necessarily involve the ownership by the youth of the concept of gender and the globalised citizenship space created by the ICTs, an approach implying a cross-cutting, rather than a fragmented, vision of development.

The report first presents the background to the current issues of FGM, gender and intergenerational relations, citizenship and globalisation, ICTs and the African information society, before discussing the methodology used to conduct the research. It then deals with the problem defined and enriched by the study as a cross-cutting paradigm in which development issues such as FGM, gender, citizenship, youths and ICTs, hitherto treated as separate subjects, are organically interlinked. The next section discusses the consequences of this vision in terms of research approaches. Finally, a summary of the main political and strategic recommendations is proposed.

FGM: Broadening the viewpoint

The issue of FGM has always been considered 'sensitive' (meaning dangerous), which has deeply affected the way it has been approached and addressed. This chapter tries to find out why and to analyse critically the concepts and visions that have prevailed in the area of FGM with a view to proposing new avenues of reflection.

Viewpoints

The purpose of this study is not to provide a historical, geographical or typological perspective on the practice of FGM,¹ nor a report on the interventions that have been conducted over the past 25 years in a bid to put a stop to it (ENDA, 2007a), but to develop a few visions while highlighting the main viewpoints that have determined perceptions, and therefore actions, on this topic.

- Female circumcision was first perceived as one of the manifestations of tradition, considered from outside as 'barbarian' (by an Ancient Greek traveller, for whom all non-Greeks were barbarians) or 'strange' (by the missionaries of the colonial era), and defended from inside as a cultural or religious – and central – *value*. Such a viewpoint based on distancing (or its opposite, identification) and judgement is bound to lead to antagonism, conflict, with inevitable political consequences. Currently, in line with the results achieved through the tireless efforts of

supporters of the health arguments (see below), a major change is under way. The highest authorities of the Muslim world have declared (though they have not yet sufficiently publicised it) that female circumcision is not a religious prescription, while refusing to criminalise it (Al Azhar University, 2006, 2008). Nowadays, FGM is defended only by the supporters of tradition, the self-styled ‘resistants’² or traditionalists. But what is tradition? Who formulates it and where?

- In the early 1980s, people highlighted the harmful effects of the practice on human health, considered as the ‘lowest common denominator’ able to play a unifying role among all the parties concerned. This approach resulted from the fact that the main strategies conducted in a coordinated manner were led by medical and health professionals in the broad sense: the various specialists in maternal and child health,³ human reproduction and demography. This limited view of FGM had the advantage of mobilising coordinated action (field, political, legislative, medical), and particularly the descriptive knowledge of FGM and its consequences (prevalence, distribution, effects, reasons, knowledge, attitudes and practices). On the other hand, it had the disadvantage of putting knowledge of and expertise on FGM *outside* the circles where it is considered to represent a ‘problem’. Hence, (1) the rhetoric on FGM was remote, based on *judgement*; (2) a body of experts in institutions focusing on research, evaluation, decision-making, communication, and operating according to sectorial issues and methodologies, became a power and decision-making centre outside of the communities where FGM was practised; (3) as the practice was perceived as a matter of personal choice affecting women and children, the community members sought as partners in the campaign against FGM were those very men and women who had authority over women and children: mothers, elderly