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Young men against Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting in Somaliland

Discursively negotiating violence, gender norms and gender order. "In Somaliland, the prevalence rate for female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) renders it nearly universal". Doctoral dissertation by Maria Väkiparta.

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Doctoral dissertation by Maria Väkiparta

In Somaliland, the prevalence rate for female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) renders it nearly universal. An overwhelming majority of girls undergo the most radical type of FGM/C, locally referred to as pharaonic cutting. Yet, there is some evidence on a shift towards less radical types, locally labelled sunnah cutting. Amongst international institutions, researchers and activists engaged in preventing FGM/C, the practice is increasingly conceptualised as a human rights violation and as a form of gender discrimination. It is now argued that challenging stereotypes about gender power structures will pave the way for abandoning the practice. Simultaneously, researchers and activists urge men to voice their opinions about the practice.

This research provides a deeper understanding of the engagement of young men in the prevention of FGM/C, but it also critically examines men's engagement. Focusing on discursive practices, I examine how young men engaged in preventing FGM/C in Somaliland discursively negotiate violence against women, gender norms, and the gender order. I also explore whether these negotiations are on the one hand, consistent with those goals related to deconstructing the patriarchal gender regime and, on the other hand, consistent with locally prevailing masculinities.

My study is guided by critical studies on men and masculinities and by a critical discourse analysis, through which I address the complex and often hidden workings of power and ideology in discourse. To do so, I collected data via semi-structured individual interviews with 19 university students (15 men, 4 women) who volunteered in a project to advocate against FGM/C in Somaliland. The interviewees employed four interlinked discourses: the righteousness discourse, the health discourse, the hierarchical difference discourse, and the masculine responsibility discourse. These discourses challenge some forms of violence against women, while legitimating others. They (re)produce prevailing masculinities and hierarchical gender order in many ways, but there are also discursive elements that renegotiate prevailing gender norms, particularly idealised womanhood.

The findings of this study contribute to theories associated with female genital cutting as patriarchal violence, feminist theories on the workings of power and ideology within a discourse, and theories on men and masculinities. More practically, these findings can inform the design of programmes to prevent FGM/C, which should remain consistent with the deconstruction of patriarchal structures and practices that uphold FGM/C.