POLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF FEMALE GENITAL MUTILIATION (FGM) IN AFRICA

By
Dr. Rasheed Akinyemi

Institute for Political Science
University of Vienna - Austria
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INTRODUCTION

The female genital mutilation, an initiation that is widely practiced in many developing countries, has become an issue of concern in the last few years due to the active engagement of concerned persons and the victims of this practice. Non-governmental organisations, both in developing and in developed countries are instrumental in creating public awareness to the circumstances, effects and future strategies to put an end to what has been claimed to be one of the most fundamental violation of female's human rights. The attempt to awaken public attention to FGM practice is also a step forward in looking into the political dimension of the practice and to enforce the placement of the FGM discussion on the political agenda of national governments and international political forum.

However, the political dimension of FGM has received less attention because of the concentration on the cultural, traditional, and religious background of FGM practices. The literature and research on FGM in the last years show that researchers have concentrated much time into looking into the different forms of FGM practices and into the various reasons behind the practices. However, there is less research carried out on the political dimension of the practice. There is no attempt to look into the political systems and how they have favoured or given support to the practice of FGM. This ommission in the research could also be responsible for the inability to point to political solutions that might be useful for the discussions on how to eradicate FGM in the developing countries where it is practised. The proper understanding of FGM and strategies to put an end to the practice shall go short without taking the political dimension of FGM into consideration. To be able to understand this political dimension it is important to look into the following aspects.

AFRICAN POLITICAL SYSTEMS AND FGM

The issue of the political responsibility of the practice of FGM should be discussed within the particular type of political system under which the FGM is particularly practiced. As it has often been pointed out, the reasons for the practice of FGM cannot be attributed to a single cause and it is not a peculiarity of a particular society or of a particular culture. Even nowadays, the practice is no more limited to developing countries. There is evidence that in some European countries, FGM is being practiced on female immigrant children living in Europe.

However, in Africa the political responsibility of the practice of FGM lies more within the control of indigenous political structures and systems because it is under this system

that most Africans define their social, political, and cultural identities. The power structures of indegenious political systems are made up of some structures and institutions, which comprise personalities of higher social standing. Because of the close relationship between political power and traditional beliefs, many practices that take place within the political domain of the indigenous political system have become the responsibility of the system.

This is the particular case of such a practice like the FGm in Africa. The social relevance of FGM practice both to the individual families, to the practitioners of FGM and to the maintenance of social and political cohesion of the society is very important in traditional systems and any attempt to put a stop to such practice will be seen as a threat to the system. There is a reciprocal interest of maintaining power between the protectors of traditions and cultures and the protectors of political institutions and power. In some cases, these are the same power-holders. Because of the immediate relation and influence of the traditional political systems on the lives and daily activities of the majority of Africans it can be easily argued that the eradication of FGM in Africa can not be easily achieved if there is no strong awareness-building process among the population of rural Africa and within the political leadership of the indigenous systems.

POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY

On the question of political responsibility, we have to be conscious of the structures and institutions of contemporary political systems and the dominant power of Africa's nation-states. The political reality of Africa is that the peoples of Africa live in within the domain of two different political systems and authorities. The first and most important one is the indigenous one, as mentioned above. This is the system that commands loyalty from majority of Africans and the legitimacy of this system is because it does not employ force on the people to gain recognition. Africans identify themselves with the system because it is not a foreign one and not imposed on them. The reverse is the case of the modern African state with the contemporary political system. These two systems are in contradiction with each other both in terms of their missions as well as with respect to the values and interests they represent. While the traditional systems endeavour to protect and maintain the cultural and traditional values and practices, the modern African state with modern political elite dispaly double standard in their political approach. While they intend to promote modern and sometimes western values, they still find it difficult to take responsibilty for some traditional and cultural rites that are not compatible with the new values that are being propagated for. This is the case with the FGM practice in Africa. Post-colonial African leaders have shown less concern to the issue of FGM because they too have easily supported the arguments about the cultural, religious and traditional and male-dominated arguments in support of FGM practice. In his anthropological book of the Kikuyu Society (Jomo Kenyatta: Facing Mount Kenya. First published in 1938. The reference in this presentation is based on the Kenyan edition, Nairobi, 1989). The first President of Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta, pointed out the political importance of the practice of "irua", "that is circumcision or trimming the genital organs of both sexes". As he wrote, " It is important to note that the moral code of the tribe is bound with this custom and that it symbolises the unification of the whole tribal organisation". Hence, the FGM is regarded as not only the "rite de passage" in the matrimonial relation, but also it is an important factor in the tribal psychology of the Kikuyu, "this operation is still regarded as the very essence of an institution which has enormous educational, social, moral, and religious implications, quite from the operation itself............ Therefore the abolition of the surgical element in this custom means to the Kikuyu the abolition of the whole institution". As we mentioned earlier, the political responsibility of the practice of FGM lies within the political structures and systems within which this custom takes place. In the case of the Kikuyu, therefore, the indigenous political system is responsible. It

recognizes the practice as part of the identity, of the political culture. It also recognizes it as an essential element that keeps the society together. It also penalises anyone that does not abide by this practice through the individual families who make up this society. As Kenyatta mentioned as in the case of the detribalised Kikuyu who have sexual relation or married women who have not gone through this operation. "If it happens, a man or a woman must go through a ceremonial purification" or "they must divorce the wife married outside the rigid tribal custom and then marry a girl with the approved tribal qualification. Failing this, they have been turned out and disinherited". (Citations in this presentation are from Jomo Kenyatta, Facing Mount Kenya, Nairobi, 1989).

This explains why contemporary political leaders in African societies have not shown any political will or signal to intervene into this practices. It is regarded as an integral part of the indigenous political system and structures. Therefore, to intervene would mean to attempt to disrupt the system and this would lead to a political confrontation between the indigenous political elite and themselves. This is a clear indication that the post-colonial African states inhabit two different political systems. The state-society relationship is also dependent on these systems. On the one hand, the 80% of Africans stll identify themselves closely with this indigenous system because this is where their immediate social, political, economic lives are regulated and they are almost unaffected with the new political system. On the other side, the African nation-state with its structures and institutions is directly in relation with the remaining 20% of the population living in the urban centres whose daily survival is depending on the political decision-making of the new political class and the state institutions.

We can argue further that the intentional upholding of this custom by the new political class shows that their political legitimacy still depends on showing regards and respect for the indigenous cultures and traditions because they would still need to approach the leadership of this indigenous systems during periods of seeking for political support. Africa's modern states and their political elite find themselves in a situation of competition for resources and in crisis of legitimacy. At best, the modern African political class sees the FGM issue as a cultural phenomenon and at worst, it is seen as purely private affairs. These are some of the reasons why there is almost no serious political and legal steps taken to stop the FGM practice.

However, this question of political responsibility cannot be disposed of because the FGM practice has been identified as a gross violation of human rights on women and as such, the respect for and protection of human rights rests within the constitutional responsibility of individual African states. The violation of peoples and human rights includes the absence of adequate protection from traditional, religious, and customary practices that are non-conform with the dignity and respect of individuals and peoples. It is the violation of peoples and human rights if the state tolerates within its political and geographical territory any political system, whether indigenous or otherwise that enforces rituals and practices that inflicts on the psychological and physical conditions of its people. Thus, not withstanding the arguments of late President Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, the Kenyan state, like any other African state is to be held responsible for the continuation of FGM and it is the responsibility of the political leadership to do everything possible, in cooperation with the indigenous political leadership, towards the eradication of FGM in their societies. Before we go into the question of what can be done it is important at this junction to mention some of the steps taken so far. In the last few years and due to pressures from the international community the gradual awareness of some African female organisations, some countries have began efforts to see that FGM becomes an issue of the past in their countries. These efforts are based on legal pronouncements on the banning of FGM and making it a criminal issue. However, these countries do not possess adequate data on the extent and intensity of

the practice. This means that it is almost imposssible to measure the effects and success of these legal pronouncements.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

In 1930, the British House of Commons raised the issue of clitoridectomy and the question of what can be done to eradicate the practice. A committee of Members of Parliament was appointed to investigate the matter. Jomo Kenyatta was invited to attend the committee to give the Kikuyu's point of view on the issue. The committee of Members of Parliament then came up with the suggestion that the best way to deal with the problem was through education and not by force of an enactment, and that it was best to leave the people concerned free to choose what custom was best suited to their changing conditions. In 1931, a conference on African children was held in Geneva under the auspices of the Save the Children Fund and in this conference, representatives of western world called for the abolition of the "barbarous" custom by law. It was proposed that African countries should pass laws making it a criminal offence for anyone who should be found guilty of practising the custom of clitoridectomy. However, the popular position was for education which will enable the people to choose what customs to keep and which ones they would like to get rid of. We should not forget that the two historically mentioned occasions, all retraced in Jomo Kenyatta's book, took place during the period of colonialism whereby the colonial administration were responsible for the administration and law making in Africa.

Therefore, we should also question the contribution of the colonial power to the maintenance and prolongation of FGM. Of course, the option for education for the people to create more awareness about the option of having a choice on the type of custom they would prefer is an acceptable one but how far was this option put into deliberate practice under the colonial administration in African countries? Certainly the colonial education system was not directed towards awareness building of the people, rather it was meant to create some group of people that would be instrumental to the running and functioning of the colonial economy and administration. The very few that was privileged to enjoy the colonial and missionary education in the 1930s up till the end of colonialism were the elite of the post-colonial period, whose class formation was of more importance than the creation of an awareness that would stimulate the type of "rational" thinking amongst the "tribal and barbarous" African people. Therfore, we can argue that the type of educational system that was needed to lead to the eradication of clitoridectomy or FGM was not broadly introduced into the masses during the colonial period.

The post-colonial African states emerged as modern nation-states with the assignment of developing their societies into modern societies with new sense of orientation, especially with the intention of creating the feeling of nationhood in the people. However, the state of social and economics of the African masses was underdeveloped and poverty and diseases was rampant. The political situation was such that leaders were much concerned with the consolidation of their political and economic powers, which eventually led to various forms of power struggle. The post-colonial political circumstances did not augure well for an appropriate target of eliminating FGM through education or any other social programs. The remaining story of Africa's development predicament in the post-colonial period was made up of civil wars, military intervention in politics, droughts, environmental degradation, political dictatorships, corruption, high burden of external debts, structural adjustment programs, state collapse and more poverty. Under these conditions the FGM practice will even be intensified because the state is not in the position to command authority and it is also not in the position to provide for the people nor is the state in a position to

protect the people from violations of their rights. Hence, the indigenous political structures get stronger and popular among the people. It also becomes more socially, politically and economically relevant to the people's lives than the modern nation-state whose existence and relevance is diminishing every day.

Therefore, any meaningful solution to the problems of FGM should start from the grassroots where the indigenous political systems are still very relevant. This is the political sphere where awareness building process should take place at the first instance. It is at this level of the society that efforts to eliminate FGM practice should start and concentrate much and it is here efforts to eliminate poverty and underdevelopment should be focused. All efforts should be directed towards the prevention and not in the punishment of those involved in FGM practices. Female genital mutilation has more social impications than legal implications. It is through social and economic enigeering of the society that all other arguments like culture, tradition, or even sexuality can be addressed. The legal aspect of addressing FGM can only be effective if the social and economic problems are addressed and solved.

Law enforcement alone cannot and should not be the means through which FGM can be addressed. Policy makers should show political willingness by placing the issue of FGM on top of their social and development agendas. The issue should attract political discussion and debates while at the same time creating the environment for the empowerment of women, politically and economically. The legal aspect of the whole dimension should then be included in the constitution of each African country and make the lawmakers responsible for the implementation of FGM and gender sensitive programs in all areas of legislation and in all issues of social and economic development. The major solution to the eradication of FGM shall be achieved through education that is geared towards awareness building for male and female, for youth and adult and for rural and urban population as well as for traditionalists and modernists.

CONCLUSION

Finally, the agents of all these processes of creating awareness and providing the social and development agendas are the members of civil society and the various non-governmental institutions. The active participation of civil society in Africa in cooperation with their counterparts in the western world will be necessary for the public awareness creation. In this case, the civil society should not see itself as an alternative to the state, rather as a partner to the state. Its interest is to help the state in identifying and implementing basic social and economic programs for the eradication of poverty. It is also its duty to support the state in the promotion of political and social awareness and the regulation of the state-society relationship. These functions of the civil society is very essential for the achievement of development targets where the state might have failed or where the state has not been able to reach the people, especially on the grassroots levels. However, the civil society as such needs also to be people oriented and not to remain elitist in its structures and approaches. The civil society should be ready to decentralise from urban structures to rural and from male dominated to gender equality. NGOs involved in development cooperation should be sensitive enough to see that all development projects contain measures that deal wizh FGM and to target towards the eradication of this practice. They should work together with African NGOs in order to gain more insight into local and indigenous practices. They also need to understand the reactions of local political leaders and other personalities in order for any meaningful development program to be accepted. This is true especially where the programs could affect the political, social, and economic positions of those involved in carrying out the practice of FGM.

Governments in developed countries should also make sure that development assistance and cooperation with African states should lay emphasis on the issues of FGM instead of asking for too much "governance", they should make FGM sensitivity as conditionally for development assistance. By doing this the FGM will become an integral part of the Development Cooperation Discourse.

Finally, it remains to be mentioned that traditional and cultural practices are complex phenomena that need to be dealt with through various investigative methods. The role of social sciences and other natural sciences is important because it is only through adequate knoweldge of the historical origin of social phenomena that we can understand how they relate to people's history and background. It is only through this that we can also understand the measures to take in order not to cause social dislocation of a society. We should also be aware that the introduction of foreign solutions to problems of particular indigenous origin could bring more problems and conflict of another dimension. Therefore, more knowledge of the societies and the phenomena we are dealing with needs to be acquired, especially in the case of FGM where there is no serious scientific evidence of its origin and of historical background of the practice. While the call for the elimination of FGM should be widely supported there should be intensive research into the political dimensions of FGM in order to be able to relate the social solutions to the political ones.