

Human Rights and the Body: The Question of Consent Within the Practice of Female Circumcision

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ABSTRACT

The research paper described in this poster analyzed the role of consent within the practice of female circumcision. It began by acknowledging the highly emotional and sensitive nature of the topic, given that it is one of the most personal topics within the realm of international human rights. It then discussed the importance of the role of culture and medical danger within discussions of female circumcision. It analyzed the degree of medical danger by distinguishing the different types of female circumcision, as well as some of the medical risks that accompany it (Alston & Goodman, 562-563). Next, it commented on the perspective that female circumcision violates human rights by reflecting upon the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (Alston & Goodman, 562-563) (Smith, 543). In contrast, it then spoke on the importance of culture in female circumcision, emphasizing that we should acknowledge our Western perspectives and not demonize beliefs that differ from our own (Alston & Goodman, 564). It then spoke of the legal status of female circumcision in the United States, Canada, and Ireland (Akinrinade). It concluded by proposing understanding and culturally sensitive dialogues among those who hold differing opinions of this issue. It also proposed focusing on supporting women's ability to make consensual choices for their bodies- whatever those choices may be.

INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

I introduce the topic of female circumcision within my paper by stating- "In the realm of international human rights, there is almost no issue that is more intimate than that of female circumcision. Similar to reproductive rights, female circumcision deals with one of the most sacred parts of a woman's body. For many this area is synonymous with empowerment, for others it is a reminder of the vast inequalities that are inflicted upon women on the basis of their gender. It is impossible to discuss female circumcision without the passion which it inspires; for people on both sides of this argument feel as if they are fighting for pride, autonomy, and dignity. There are other factors which need to be considered, such as the role of culture and the degree of medical danger. Ultimately, these points make up positions for those trying to turn this highly sensitive issue into a black and white problem. The uncomfortable truth is that there is no clear answer to the morality of female genital circumcision. Though we may prefer for our answers to be in concrete terms, the ethics of female circumcision may be best decided on an individual basis rather than by blanket statements- one woman's choice may not reflect the choice of another. As observers, we should focus our efforts on trying to protect the rights of women to make an informed and consensual choice, rather than taking extreme positions without considering the points of the other side".

The purpose of my paper is to understand the complex topic of female circumcision with respect to international law, international human rights, medical concerns, and culture. It focuses on the general theme of consent, and advocates for all women to have the ability to exercise it. An additional goal of my paper is to examine the differences in perspectives of those who believe that female circumcision is a human rights violation and those who believe that it is a medical issue. Within this paper, I explore my own opinion on which of those categories the practice of female circumcision falls into.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based upon the information that I collected, I came to the opinion that female circumcision is a medical issue with the possibility of becoming a human rights violation. Within my paper, I stated that, "My reasoning for this is that there is clear evidence to show the ramifications that female circumcision can have on health, while there is not definitive data that shows that the majority of female circumcisions result in human rights violations. If a woman has given her informed consent to undergo circumcision, then her rights have not been violated".

Also discussed at length within this paper, was my opinion on the role of culture within consent. I specifically focused on Western perspectives and the cultural bias that we have. On this topic, I stated, "The role of culture cannot be understated; what we may feel about the subject is not necessarily the case. As members of Western society, it is important that we recognize our differing cultural values and not demonize the values that deviate from our own". I wish to advocate for cultural understanding and open-minded perspectives when discussing the practice of female circumcision. We can be culturally understanding, while also supporting women in their ability to exercise consent and choose what happens to their bodies.

PROPOSED SOLUTION/RECOMMENDATIONS

Within my paper, I propose solutions and recommendations by stating, "While female circumcision is without a doubt an issue of passion, it is a debate that lacks a clear solution. It is important to acknowledge the health impacts that female circumcision can have, but it is equally important to reflect upon the cultural circumstances which may encourage a woman to choose circumcision for herself. As a culture, we need to stop concerning ourselves with condemning the other side and listen to what the opposing views are saying. I believe that we all want the same thing - the ability for women to make informed consensual decisions about what they want to do with their bodies, whether that is circumcision or not. We can prevent human rights violations by providing informational resources about the health risks associated with circumcision and accepting women who choose not to undergo it. We can appreciate the value of other cultural contexts by listening and not imposing our westernized values on others. Let's use this essential issue as an opportunity to bridge the cultural divide and support each other in whatever consensual choices that we make with our bodies".

In other words, I recommended that the best way to move forward in conversations about female circumcision is with cultural understanding. If we can become united over a common goal, protecting and maintaining women's ability to give consent over what happens to their bodies, we will be able to reach that goal through teamwork. We can do this through education and by having open discussions with those that have differing views than we do.

METHOD(S)

In order to reach an informed opinion about female circumcision, I used a variety of sources to educate myself on the topic. These sources include written work from Khazan, Alston & Goodman, and Smith. I also used information from class lectures with Professor Akinrinade.

I began my paper by discussing the different types of circumcisions and some of the medical consequences that can be associated with the process (Alston & Goodman, 562-563). I then discussed consent, which I defined from my own knowledge and experiences as requiring all of the relevant information and having the ability to make decisions based upon one's own values and without social or societal pressure of any kind. I used information from Khazan's article to explain some problems with obtaining consent, namely, allowing women to make this decision without any external pressure (Khazan). Next, I examined the perspective that female circumcision violates human rights. I did this by using some examples from Alston and Goodman's work (Alston & Goodman, 562-563). I also utilized information on General Recommendation No. 19 from the Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (Smith, 543). Similarly, I used information from CEDAW General Recommendation No. 14 to support this argument (Alston & Goodman, 571). Then, I explored the cultural and religious significance of female circumcision (Alston & Goodman, 564). I also recognized the pride that female circumcision can provide for some women (Khazan). Finally, I discussed the perspective that female circumcision is a medical issue, rather than a human rights issue. For this section, I drew upon class lectures with Professor Akinrinade that discussed the legal status of female circumcision within the United States, Canada, and Ireland (Akinrinade). I also used information from Alston & Goodman to describe the legality of female circumcision within the United States (Alston & Goodman, 572). Finally, I used various quotations from Alston & Goodman to support the perspective that female circumcision is a medical issue (Alston & Goodman, 569).

CONCLUSIONS

Even though the practice of female circumcision can be divisive, it is important to reflect upon all aspects of it. This can include cultural impacts, international human rights, legality, and degree of medical danger. Examining these topics can help us reach a common goal of ensuring consent for anyone who is undergoing female circumcision, though it is open conversations with others that will allow us to reach that common goal.

REFERENCES

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