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Abstract

My research investigates female genital mutilation (also known as FGM or female circumcision) in African societies, and Western efforts to control the practice. While the four different categories of FGM vary in severity, each involves the alteration or removal of all or part of the female genitalia for nonmedical, cultural reasons. For the most part, Western authorities and NGOs have been successful in obtaining government support to halt the practice of FGM. However, their efforts have been met by strong opposition from FGM practitioners, who see their campaigning as a Western attack on traditional African culture. While the procedure is no longer publicized and celebrated as it was in the past, it continues to be a vital part of a young woman's acceptance into her culture. By looking into the interaction between traditional practices and the attempts of outsiders to limit the spread of FGM, this research will show how campaigns directed against FGM have been unsuccessful. In particular, it will show how their skewed interpretation of the complex history and rationale for undergoing female circumcision has limited their success. By understanding the dangers of the procedure while keeping in mind its cultural significance, I hope to outline a plan for those opposed to FGM that is more culturally sensitive and receptive to the needs of the people.