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# Criticizing Female Genital Mutilation Practice from Feminist Standpoint Theory: A View from Communication Science Perspective

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**Hendar Putranto**

Ph. D. Candidate in Communication Science, Universitas Indonesia, Indonesia  
Senior Lecturer in Strategic Communication, Universitas Multimedia Nusantara, Indonesia  
Email: [bonifacius.hendar@ui.ac.id](mailto:bonifacius.hendar@ui.ac.id)

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## ABSTRACT

This conceptual review examines Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) practice in Indonesia viewed from Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST). The current study uses a literature review to build an argumentative contribution from communication science perspective. FGM is a global phenomenon locally and culturally practiced in more than 29 countries, including Indonesia. Despite many state regulations and international treaties forbidding the practice because of its harmful consequences, FGM practice is persistently maintained by religion, culture, tradition, and other factors. The author proposes FST as a theoretical base to criticize FGM because it does not represent the lived experience of women, marginalizes women further to the brink of ideal democratic participation, and does not contribute towards the positive construction of female selfhood. The author will elaborate on these three objections using the communication science perspective within the Indonesian cultural context. The author proposes more action-oriented theorizing to overcome FST's practical deficiency by providing insights from critical intercultural communication. Women's collective agency based on situated knowledge will empower their communicative skills as enablers of transformation to eradicate FGM.

**Keywords:** *Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST); Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) practice; female selfhood; Communication science perspective*

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## INTRODUCTION

Salsa Djafar, a 1,5 years-old toddler living in Gorontalo, Indonesia, was circumcised as part of obligatory religious rituals<sup>1</sup>. Lali, a 15-year-old British-Somali girl, living in Norway, recently experienced genital cutting performed in her native community. She then narrates her traumatic experience to a journalist in a TV documentary program (Nyangweso, 2014). Salsa and Lali's painful story adds to the long list of horrors, pain, and trauma faced by girls and women experiencing genital mutilation. Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is a global phenomenon in low-and-middle income countries, such as Somalia, and some high-income countries such as the UK, Norway,

United States, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan (Berg & Denison, 2013; Cappa et al., 2019). In Indonesia, FGM is used interchangeably with female circumcision or P2GP.<sup>2</sup>

A systematic review identifying factors perpetuating and hindering Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C) in some Western countries has been reported at length (Berg, Denison & Fretheim, 2010; Berg & Denison, 2013). Social scientists from inter-and trans-disciplinary studies, such as cultural and medical anthropology (Salmon, 1973; Lyons, 1980; Gruenbaum, 2001, 2005a, 2005b, 2006; Rezaeeahan, 2012; Hidayana

et al., 2018; Shell-Duncan et al., 2018), sociology (Androus, 2006; Ida & Saud, 2020), public health (Rouzi, 2013; Ahmady, 2016; Alamri, 2016; Llamas, 2017; Kandala & Komba, 2018; Cappa et al., 2019), gender-related studies (Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis, 2002; Davis, 2004; Njambi, 2004; Moruzzi, 2005; Mulia, 2014) and philosophy (Galeotti, 2007; Mende, 2011, 2018) highlight the constant tension between women's obligation to obey cultural norms and their relative autonomy on bodies. The medical-material universal invocation intertwined with the cultural-symbolic values embedded within FGM practices in many countries has permeated these scholars' inconclusive analyses and opened some unexplored paths towards contextualizing the finding and theorizing the more significant impact.

In Indonesia, FGM practices have already been reported in many official documents, newspapers, magazines, and academic journals. Suryandaru and Liestianingsih (2004), Ida (2005), Nurdiyana (2010), Mulia (2014), Rokhmah and Hani (2015), Ratnasari (2017), Salma (2017), Ida and Saud (2020), and Sulahyuningsih et al. (2021) show empirical records of FGM prevalence in most of the areas in Indonesia, from Payakumbuh to Lampung, Sampang, Sumbawa, Gorontalo, and West Sulawesi.

The National Commission on Violence against Women (*KOMNAS Perempuan*) has issued a dire warning on the prevalence of FGM practices in Indonesia and the urgency to mainstream FGM discourse within Indonesia's current socio-political-cultural contexts (Hodijah and Indraswari, 2018). FGM practice prevention and elimination are included in the Strategic Plan and Work Plan of *Komnas Perempuan*, Ministry of Religious Affairs, and Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019–2024 (Nurmila, 2019: 9-11). Unfortunately, mass media broadcasts are rarely sympathetic towards the grim experience of women's genitals being mutilated. FGM phenomenon is a predominantly gray area (Hendarto, 2019) where the diversity of interpretations is profuse. Not all of those interpretations take a stand on protecting the interest of the girls' and women's well-being (Putranti, 2008; Mulia, 2014; Hermanto, 2016; Hodijah and Indraswari, 2018).

Since the earliest arrival of Islam in Indonesia, the collective experience of genitally mutilated women has not been relatively solidified as the standard platform for campaigns, regulations, and collective actions against FGM (Feillard & Marcoes, 1998). In the name of upholding tradition and religion's legacy (Bradley, 2011; Hodijah and Indraswari, 2018; Nurmila, 2019; Ida and Saud, 2020), the dominant sociocultural

framework of FGM practice has turned into an iron cage for women, marginalizing them deeper and further into the ragged edge of the democratic ideals of emancipatory participation.

The practice of FGM is massive and impactful across territories and geographical boundaries and deeply rooted in cultures, religions, and traditions. It is no wonder many inter-and cross-disciplinary academic studies address the issue and consequently yields multiple findings, recommendations for actions, and public policies to respond to the FGM phenomenon. The FGM issue has already been mainstreamed in academic discourse on women's equality and rights campaigns and then spread to the public since the end of the 1970s and early 1980s. Despite the increase in multi-disciplinary studies on FGM, some written in Indonesian, there is very little in-depth scholarly literature on FGM from the Communication Science perspective.

The standard Communication Science introductory books used in several undergraduate and postgraduate communication programs in Indonesia (Wood, 2009; West & Turner, 2010; Griffin et al., 2015, 2019; Littlejohn et al., 2017) do not mention nor discuss the issue of FGM at all. DeVito (2013: 33) only passingly mentions *female circumcision* under the sub-chapter of *Culture and Ethics*. Some reputable international and Indonesian-based communication journals share the same fate of being silent on the topic. The absence of discussion and the awkward reluctance to engage in addressing FGM issues/practices have astounded academics and activists alike. Is not "at least 200 million girls and women subjected to FGM practice in 30 countries" too many to ignore? Researching literature reviews on the topic then becomes a personal and scholarly concern.

Female scholars mostly write previous studies on FGM practice within the Indonesian context with a few exceptions: Uddin (2010), Hermanto (2016), Hidayana et al. (2018), and Saud, with Ida (2020). There is a wide research gap between women's and men's voices on the subject matter of FGM seen from the *gendered subject position*. Male scholars are generally positioned as outsiders in researching women's experiences; nonetheless, it does not delegitimize nor devalue their contributions to discuss the issue. The author is following and empowered by the suggestion of Mottin-Sylla and Palmieri, "(by virtue of their social roles as fathers, husbands, sons, brothers, uncles, grandfathers) men can have a personal and socially constructed, explicit sensitivity, even though it may not be expressed, to the issue of FGM." (2011: 21) When FGM is analyzed using the lens of FST, the scarcity is even more expansive, almost non-existent.

In this paper, the author will employ Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST) within the framework of Communication Theory to analyze why the issue of FGM is curiously absent from the aims and scope of Communication Science's focal concern. This research gap is the leitmotif behind using FST as a gender-perspective social science framework and a critical communication perspective to address the FGM issue. Therefore, the author proposes the dual research question: **How does FST empower and limit the current discussion of the FGM issue, and how to enhance FST as an analytical tool using a Communication science perspective?**

The author confirms this conceptual paper using a literature review on FGM practices. To analyze this, the author engages with several feminist thinkers to think about FGM using FST in the context of Communication science. The author then proposes critical intercultural communication (CICC) as a theoretical contribution from Communication science to enhance FST as an analytical tool. Following Jaakkola's (2020) recommendation, the author builds the argument from an observable phenomenon toward conceptualizing the addressed empirical phenomenon.

## THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF FEMINIST STANDPOINT THEORY

Feminist standpoint theory (FST) usually refers to diverse theories (Naples, 2007; Howell, 2011) ranging from feminist *historical materialist perspective* (Hartsock, 1983), analysis of *situated knowledge* (Haraway, 1988), *black feminist thought* (Collins, 1990), Third World feminists' *differential oppositional consciousness* (Sandoval, 2000), and *everyday world sociology* for women (Smith, 1987, 1990a, 1990b). Not all feminists agree with such naming of a theory. Smith (1992: 88-89) prefers the notions of 'women's perspective', 'women's experience,' and 'women's standpoint,' while Harding (1986) formalizes 'women's standpoint' as an empowering breakthrough. For lack of a cohesive unity of naming 'things,' FST is an umbrella conceptual term referring to several feminists who argue on the crucial importance of situating knowledge in women's experiences.

Tracing back to its earliest development phase, FST is a response to debates between Marxist and socialist feminists from the 1960s to the 1980s. FST highlights the historical specificity of any situation and the political possibilities to which it may give rise (Bryson, 2003). In this debate, Nancy Hartsock (1983:

283) developed a feminist standpoint, "an important epistemological tool for understanding and opposing all forms of domination." Hartsock uses FST to provide a vantage point to criticize "the phallogocentric institutions and ideology which constitute the capitalist form of patriarchy" (Hartsock, 1983: 284). Therefore, FST has been epistemologically effective in giving accounts of gender bias in power relations. Hartsock's 'groundedness of women's material activity' would then be criticized by future feminist thinkers.

Harding's critique of the under-representation of women in science propels her to create "research that is *for* women" (Harding, 1992). Harding attempts to provide less partial and distorted answers to questions that arise from women's lives. Her answer comes from differentiating between two models of feminist empiricist standpoints: the spontaneous empiricist feminist epistemology and the standpoint feminists. The former refers to the 'bad science' assumption, and the latter believes that this is only part of the problem faced by women (Harding, 1992: 439-440). Standpoint feminists take responsibility for reconstructing the existing scientific method to become a good method or less partial one, "by socially situating knowledge projects in the scientifically and epistemologically most favorable historical locations" (Harding, 1992: 441). Harding's 'strong objectivity' solidifies FST epistemology.

The author highlights its dialectical tension through Hartsock and Harding's conceptual contributions. FST has a *universalizing tendency* to reach out and include all women voices wherever/whomever they are and a *localizing tendency* to ground the diversity of women's voices and experiences in their specificities. FST is not a neutral theory because of its critical edge (paradigm). FST's main strength lies on the fact and values of its positionality on the side of marginalized women whose voices are (mostly) deemed unworthy and experiences trivialized.

Some feminist and communication scholars have variously portrayed 'women in marginalized position', such as women's bodies and their attitude toward corporeality (Spelman, 1982), the "Woman Question" in the Academy (McLaughlin, 1995), a woman of color in a predominantly White organization (Allen, 1996: 265), the revisioned ethic of caring based on women's constrained agency (Hallstein, 1999: 34-37), the impoverished African American lesbian women (Griffin et al. , 2019), editors in reputable communication journal (Moon and Holling, 2020), and Black/Latina woman in the academy (Valdivia, 2021).

In the current context, approximately 1 in 4

survivors of female genital mutilation were cut by a health care provider (UNICEF, 2020). In other words, there are the most marginalized women amongst women seen from “the standpoint of the woman in the margin of the margin” (Collins, 1991, in Tuin, 2016: 2; Allen, 1996). For them, FST could mean a liberating tool from their disadvantaged ‘in the margin of the margin’ positionality.

## **FGM PRACTICE AND FST VIEWED FROM COMMUNICATION SCIENCE PERSPECTIVE**

From the description above, we come to understand the discrepancy in societal attitudes toward the FGM issue. On the one hand, current social arrangements and ideologies, the capitalist form of patriarchy, put greater responsibility on the shoulders of women themselves to choose what is the best course of action(s) to be performed towards their bodies (or organs), such as whether to accept or to reject the mutilation/cutting. Choosing entails freedom and responsibility in a properly balanced disposition, something rarely achieved in a patriarchal culture and gender bias rituals rooted in many Indonesian ethnic groups. Nevertheless, FGM/C in Indonesia is rarely performed on adult bodies, but rather on toddlers (Susilastuti et al., 2017: 77-78; Hodijah and Indraswari, 2018: 121). As toddlers, they are not capable of choosing nor having autonomy over their bodies.

Associating “women’s nature and women’s lives with the body and bodily functions” (Spelman, 1982: 110) is not accidental nor functional attitude, but also cultural and philosophical. These latter aspects of attitude are the battle ground for feminist standpoint to resist the dominating religious norms and oppressing rituals in the form of FGM. To operationalize these aspects of cultural and philosophical attitude, the communication perspective might play a role in sharpening the vision in practical affairs. The author will elaborate on this point below.

On the other hand, the marginalized knowledge situation experienced by women as victims of FGM is not collectively apprehended and transformed into weaponized strategies for social change. Hartsock’s groundedness of women’s material activity and Harding’s strong objectivity contribution to epistemically justify FST do not automatically turn the table on FGM practice and issues. The epistemic agency of women envisioned by Hartsock, Harding, and many other Western liberal feminist thinkers is not contextually sensitive and culturally relevant to the plight of Indonesian women in some ethnic groups practicing FGM. The communicative

skills needed to articulate the issue and address the resistance against FGM lurk under the shadow of collective obedience to male-interpreted religious norms and cultural traditions.

In standard communication theories’ book, FST is classified within a ‘cultural context and highly interpretive’ worldview (Griffin et al., 2019: 22), parallel with *the muted group and co-cultural theories*. FST says that all knowledge is shaped by the social location of the knowing subject. Therefore, the urge to seek truth should indeed start from the perspective of the person who is most sensitive to the existence of power inequality: the most marginalized or those whose voices are muted. They are the ones who are least afraid of losing if the findings of the (re)search challenge the convenience of the *status quo*, “a male-dominated, Western European research establishment” (Griffin et al., 2019: 406-407).

Prominent communication scholars, such as West and Turner (2010: 512), highlight the advantages of FST in communicating both the establishment and transmission of various points of departure. FST shows that communication can effectively challenge (question) the status quo and initiate change. FST also contributed to laying the methodological foundation for giving voice to those whose voices have rarely been heard (women are among them). Therefore, FST is relevant to communication practice.

The cluster of concepts that are interrelated and highlighted in FST, such as standpoint, voice, subjectivity and objectivity, daring to speak openly (speaking out), and speaking for others (as a form of solidarity) are the strengths of FST both as a method and an epistemological theory. These concepts are rooted in communication as ‘a practical discipline’ (Craig, 2018: 289, 293).

## **APPLYING FST TO FGM PRACTICES IN INDONESIA**

The field that seems to be lacking in addressing and finding (temporary) answers to the complexity of the FGM issue is inter-and cross-cultural communication<sup>3</sup>, from which some sets of intercultural communication skills and competencies (Spitzberg, 2000; Deardorff, 2009; Eko & Putranto, 2019) could become potential resources to explore. The most potential lines of argument and attitudes to support anti-FGM practice would come from critical intercultural communication or CICC (Nakayama & Martin, 2017; Piller, 2017; Halualani, 2019) since it interrogates the invisible dimension of “the structures and contexts of power that surround us and impact our lives and experiences.” (Halualani, 2019:



7) CICC contribution to enhancing FST as analytical tool will be discussed later in the paper.

## FGM AS ONE OF THE CULTURAL RITUAL PRACTICES THAT HARM WOMEN IN INDONESIA

The study by National Commission on Violence Against Women (*Komnas Perempuan*) acknowledges the passing of knowledge and practices of FGM from one to the next generation for hundreds of years because of these three main causes, namely: first, tradition, habits, and cultural beliefs; second, religious teachings; and third, a specific belief or conviction in society. Overall, the legacy aspect of tradition is the most consistent reason why FGM still exists in Indonesian cultures and societies until now (Putranti, 2008; Hodijah & Indraswari, 2018).

According to a renowned Indonesian Islam scholar-activist Musdah Mulia, FGM/C practiced in Indonesia is commonly acknowledged and accepted within the religion/tradition framework, such as “parents circumcise their daughters or older women continue to force themselves to be circumcised because it is the obligation of a Muslim and Muslim women and a symbol of Islam.” (Mulia, 2014) Nevertheless, FGM practices conceal unbalanced power relations in the form of “attempts to perpetuate the patriarchal culture and gender bias for the sake of male pleasure and interest, justified by Quranic holy verses and the Prophet’ hadiths” (Mulia, 2014; Mulia in Hermanto, 2016: 270).

Several field researchers from *Komnas Perempuan* interviewed midwives (*bidan*) who perform FGM/C amongst some ethnic groups in Kalimantan. They found some testimonies below:

“If Muslim followers are not circumcised, it is not a problem. But, if circumcised, it is better. Being circumcised is a process to become a Moslem. Female Circumcision should be maintained; it is a characteristic of Muslim girls, an obligation. *Basunat* (being circumcised) is a custom and obligation for Muslims, passed on from generation to generation. In Mandar’s tribe, the female toddler is always circumcised; it means automatically she becomes a Moslem.” (Hodijah and Indraswari, 2018: 121)

The strong standpoint towards FGM practice reflects a strategic attempt to negotiate different standpoints between the promotion of liberal (Western) values and the preservation of traditional and cultural-based communal values, which usually originate and are

situated in non-Western contexts, such as in Indonesia. The liberal Western values which promote rationalism, individualism, autonomy, and rights are not always compatible with traditional and cultural-based communal values practiced by many ethnic groups in Indonesia. If negotiation means loosening the ties that bind individuals with their communities, then FGM would not be as persistent a cultural practice as it is today.

Nevertheless, many FGM-impacted Indonesian women are still embedded within their local communities (ethnic groups) and their sense of self (selfhood) is heavily influenced by their upbringing in environments practicing cultural rituals and *adat-istiadat*. Therefore, it is crucial to learn some Indonesian macro socio-political contexts to address the complexity of the FGM issue in its entire landscape of the ‘historical materialism struggle.’

## FGM PRACTICES IN POST-REFORMATION (1998) AND REGIONAL AUTONOMY ERA (2004)

With the fall of Soeharto’s authoritarian regime in May 1998, the FGM practices in the post-Reformation era, especially since the establishment of the Regional Autonomy Law in 2004, have increased and been maintained conservatively. One of the socio-political impacts after the authoritarian fall is strengthening the conservatism ideology in regional politics and communities at the grassroots level. As a political ideology, conservatism is understood as “opposition to the idea of total or radical change,” (Andreasson, 2014), and the rise of conservatism in Indonesia is to some degree influenced by the role of the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) in practical political issues whose *fatwas* were not in line with promoting democratic values (Hasyim, 2020). In the case of FGM, the Fatwa MUI No. 9A, the Year 2008, states that: Circumcision, both for men and women, is considered as *fitriah* (regulation) and *syiar* (broadcast/mission) in Islam. Moreover, circumcision for women is *makrumah* (a recommended act of worship).

The point for feminists’ critical awareness is the parallel interplay between the rise of conservatism and the politicians’ manipulative political actions to legalize this conservatism into regional policies, such as *Peraturan Daerah (Perda)*. For example, FGM practices are supported by Perda No. 2, the Year 2012 on Public Health services’ retribution in Jambi Province. In this *Perda*, The Provincial Governance of Jambi states that the public health retribution fee for performing female circumcision is Rp. 35.000 in *Puskemas*, clinics and general polyclinics. When amended into PERDA No.

8/2015, the retribution fee for female circumcision increases twice to Rp. 70.000 (Ira R., 2017; Hodijah & Indraswari, 2018).

The challenges from this conservatism manifested in legal documents made it difficult for feminist scholars and anti-FGM activists to transform FGM's material base and cultural practice in grassroots communities. In the following section, the author analyzes FGM using the FST perspective, evading the trap of legalism and countermovement in legal attrition.

### **FGM SEEN FROM THE FST'S PERSPECTIVE**

Learning from Hartsock (1983), FST was conceptualized in line with Marxist historical materialism. It emphasizes the proletariat class's interest in permanent conflict with the bourgeoisie-capitalist class as the leitmotif for social and structural change towards a more just order (society). Hartsock's analysis renders space for gender sensitivity in the labor class amidst class struggle/conflict. Hartsock's contribution to foregrounding FST is well-appreciated due to its theoretical foundation on the close relationship between 'embodied female activities and necessary political struggle' in order to realize a complete and holistic human community instead of a partial society whose structure is determined by male interests (Hartsock, 1983: 304-305).

Hartsock's version of FST is believed to strengthen feminists' consciousness on the nature of 'standpoint' as struggled and earned with blood and tears instead of taken for granted (in the case of eradicating FGM practices in Indonesia and globally). Even more telling, FST-paradigm feminists are fighting on two fronts: the patriarchal social structure oppressive towards women and the 'false consciousness' instilled in the minds of those considered guardians of cultures/traditions assuming the public roles of parents/midwives/elders.

Some critical voices from circumcised women based on their own experiences and 'standpoint' to affirm FGM as 'free choice' fuel the debate (Njambi, 2004). Women's autonomy and speaking 'in her own voice,' although suppressed, gets louder and stronger, confirming Gruenbaum's study, "women's sexuality, autonomy, reproductive abilities, and economic rights are usually subordinated to the control of fathers, brothers, husbands, and other men in their societies." (Gruenbaum, 2001) Nevertheless, many FGM practices in Indonesia are not 'free choice' but rather the result of a structurally forced decision made by parents or elders based on religion, traditions, or cultures (Susilastuti et al., 2017; Nurmila,

2019; Pratiwi, 2022).

Learning from Harding's 'strong objectivity,' employing FST as a conceptual tool would enable both policymakers and civil society groups (as watchdogs) to examine and become aware of sexist and androcentric biases in knowledge production and existing knowledge-based policies and regulations, including, but not limited to, the medicalization of female circumcision/FGM legitimized by state's regulations. Such as those formerly released in the form of Regulation of the Minister of Health of the Republic of Indonesia No. 1636/MENKES/XI/PER/2010 about Female Circumcision, which was then revoked and replaced by Permenkes No. 6 (2014) concerning the Revocation of Regulation of the Minister of Health Number 1636/Menkes/PER/XII/2010 about Female Circumcision. Even though the regulation was later revoked, after heavy criticism, the consideration factor that says "the implementation of female circumcision must be carried out following religious provisions" is the kind of knowledge production opposed to the standpoint of marginalized women groups.

From these theoretical trajectories of FST, we come to the fuller realization of female selfhood: what it means to become a woman with physical, psychological, moral, and spiritual integrity. Initially, we recognize that the self-concept of women who are critically questioning power relations, not accepting clichéd assumptions and expectations of society for themselves, and being able to make free choices with all their encultured rationality is not an ideal-normative-mainstream concept of female selfhood as imagined by the so-called guardians of old traditions and cultures in Indonesia. It also happens in some low-and-middle income and developed countries, as exemplified in caregiving practice (Wood, 1994).

Due to women's minority position and marginalized knowledge, the continuous struggle to eradicate FGM/C practices carried out passionately by survivors of FGM/C practices and their supporters will then 'transmit this awareness' to their surrounding environments. The credo runs: FGM/C is a harmful practice and injures the integrity of female selfhood, as individuals and, as community members, as members of certain cultural or religious groups! Despite possible hindrances, we need to be more appreciative of and encourage Anti-FGM activists and academics alike to continue campaigning, both conventionally and digitally, by using various analog and digital technology tools, such as pamphlets, flyers, websites and blogs, social media accounts, and video sharing apps, such as YouTube, TikTok, and others. The use of digital apps to spread this newly found and theoretically robust awareness to Millennials and post-

Millennials (the digital natives) generations is timely. They are the torchbearers of the next wave of Anti-FGM issue campaigners (Julios, 2019).

Nevertheless, FST is not pretending to become a panacea for social issues as complex as FGM. Theoretical analysis of FST from Hartsock, Harding, and some other feminists is not practically adequate to work with due to some deficiencies. Therefore, FST should be enhanced to be more suitable as an analytical tool. The author will elaborate on these points in the following section.

### **A NEW THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION TO FGM FROM COMMUNICATION SCIENCE PERSPECTIVE**

Communication theories and scholars are relatively silent about FGM/C issues and practices whose ‘victims’ have reached hundreds of millions of women worldwide mainly because of these two related factors. First, the location of the emergence, birth, and development of this relative latecomer social science branch of disciplines is in the United States of America, characterized mainly by its positivistic (quantitative and experimental) approach to social science research. Secondly, the pioneering experts in Communication Science were dominated by white middle-class men, such as Norbert Wiener, Wilbur Schramm, Paul Lazarsfeld, Harold Lasswell, Claude Shannon, Warren Weaver, Carl Hovland, Kurt Lewin, Everett Rogers, and David Berlo. Within this context, it is unsurprising that Communication Science is slow to respond and tends to be silent about ‘women’s experiences.’ Harding’s (1986, 1992) and other fellow feminist scholars’ (Keller, 1985; Longino, 1990) concerns and critiques of the sexist and androcentric biases found in the scientific ‘body of knowledge’ and institutions precisely capture the spirit of FST.

To address the genealogical and field’s trajectory limitations above, Communication Science as a practical discipline should triangulate the dialogue in three layers of engagement: in empirical and practical affairs (with social activists, for example), at socio-legal and public policy levels (such as with house representatives), and in theoretical and academic level (with feminists, social scientists, and others). The courage to bridge different methods, disciplines, and concerns in shedding light on a highly complex social problem such as FGM practice should echo Rakow’s reflection on the current state of the art feminist communication and media scholarship, that the field of communication “(are) built on the experiences of white men.” (Rakow, 2022: 64) In the Indonesian context, the challenge is more complex

since the Communication science as an academic discipline is imported from Western academic milieu. The feminist-cum-communication scholars are rarely trained in indigenous and local wisdom models of situated knowledge.

Second, FST would be more effective to operationalize if it employs some communicative skills and sensitivities derived from the communication perspective. Women’s collective agency based on situated knowledge will empower their communicative skills as enablers of transformation to eradicate FGM. This new theoretical contribution to FGM from a Communication Science perspective would best be addressed within the framework of critical intercultural communication (CICC), whose main strength lies in building intercultural competence based on empathy, mindfulness, and dialogue. The most vital point of contribution from CICC would be to maintain critical distance toward essentialized and reified culture(s) and to respect significant values that culture (including rituals, traditions) brings to interpersonal growth and intergroups interactions.

Shell-Duncan et al. (2018) research on FGM/C practices in Senegal and the Gambia (West Africa) is a good example of CICC contextual implementation. Their research findings show the unique role of some older women (the wisdom of elders) to bridge two different interests involved in the continuing practices of FGM/C, namely, to respect tradition and to negotiate change. These older women, typically seen as guardians of tradition, realize their respected authority over the younger girls entrusted to their care. They also wield their accumulated wisdom, a fluid kind of power, to negotiate structural change. The practical wisdom of the elders opens the path toward bringing forth the shared responsibility for the sake of the younger generation’s future, free from the bondage of fear and the traumatic scars of FGM practice.

The author considers three main things to bridge feminist theory with the communication perspective. The communication perspective in feminist theory deals with socially contextualized attitudes, situated knowledge, and a gendered division of labor. The practice of FGM is a cultural practice conveyed through communication behavior. Some messages transmitted in these cultural practices are passed down from previous generations. Women in the environment will interpret those messages differently, depending on the three things mentioned above.

Communication is responsible for shaping our attitudes to the extent that we learn our place in society



through interactions with others (Vernet, Vala & Butera, 2011; Walther, 2022). The vital contribution of the communication perspective to feminist theorizing is to build women's point of view (standpoint) in different cultural contexts that entail intercultural sensitivity, cultural adjustment (Curtin, 2010), and mindfulness or reflexivity (Halualani, 2019). How women interpret these different cultural contexts using common sense is perceived as an obligation and believed to be the standard norm for women to comply. This compliance to cultural/religious rituals perceived as common sense--even though some of them, such as FGM, are physically and mentally harmful in the short or long time for women's selfhood---is the latent sociocultural problem in Indonesia.

FGM practice in the context of women's marginalized position is detrimental. To respond, they convey their attitude through communication practices and behaviors. Attitude theory emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between communication behavior and attitudes. It is another way of looking at the relative position of experience and communication of various social groups. It tends to be a politically and critically clear message to show the significance of power dynamics in social life. Nevertheless, it also entails recognizing differences in the communication behavior of different social groups.

In this particular example and context, communication from other people will form a different perspective, and the content will develop an attitude of agreeing (positive) or disagreeing (negative). Those with the same attitudes will also have similar communication styles and practices. Women who take care of children will speak in a motherly way. Meanwhile, men who are not responsible for this will not do the same. The communication of the *ustadz* or other religious leaders about certain religious and cultural practices will shape the attitude of some uncritical women to accept the norm of women's purity and perform the FGM practices towards their toddler daughter(s).

The ACT Framework for Intercultural Justice, starts from A (*awareness* of the contexts and structures in our lives that we have taken for granted), moves to C (considering, questioning, and *critiquing* invisible dimensions of power), and finally, goes to T (thoughtfully *taking* action, individually and collectively), "represents a way to counteract and challenge forces of power that affect our intercultural lives" (Halualani, 2019: 22). Using ACT Framework is strategic to empower women in all levels of contestation (macro, mezo, and micro), without departing from their cultural and community

roles and standpoints, to stand up against and eliminate FGM practices.

## CONCLUSION

Despite all the debates about their cultural and ethical relativism, it is realized that FGM practices are serious violations of women's rights, as the Human Rights Council adopted resolution 44/16 (2020) on the elimination of FGM. More specifically, FGM practices undermined the integrity of female selfhood, women's conception of 'self' in her complex interrelatedness of body, mental (psyche), and mind, individual and collective, embodied and abstracted. The author perceives and believes that expanded and enhanced, qualitatively aligned, and creatively converged Communication Theory can positively illuminate the complex issue of FGM. FST stands out to provide a solid starting point for speaking from the experiences of women based on situational knowledge, empowering women and other minority groups who have been marginalized, and grounding the solidarity movement between women amidst their diversity of experiences.

*Komnas Perempuan* report (2018) summed up these processes by emphasizing the knowledge building from women-victims of FGM/C to serve and to fulfill victims' rights such as getting protection, the right to the truth, and getting justice done (Hodijah and Indraswari, 2018: ii). The fulfillment of victims' rights to truth and justice is a shared noble goal that needs to be fought for and, therefore, requires a solid theoretical foundation. A foundation that is not taken for granted (given) results from collective agency and persistent struggles coming from women's diverse experiences. The foundation is logically (epistemologically), ethically, and methodologically formulated by FST. The cycle is described as the journey from women's experience, then abstracted as thoughts (ideas), flowing to struggle (actions), formulated as policies/regulations, which will then be monitored and evaluated.

Offering some alternative agendas to prevent the perpetuation of FGM/C practices does not always have to depend on the state's intervention with its legislative power. We need more to facilitate community empowerment and education at the grassroots level to eliminate practices that endanger the integrity of female selfhood in their individual and collective (cultural) level while also promoting women's control and integration (Galeotti, 2007). At this very point, the contribution from critical intercultural communication (CICC) complements the practical deficiencies of FST, making



it a stronger and proper analytical tool.

## ENDNOTES

- 1) The heartbreaking story of Salsa Djafar's genital mutilation is retrieved from <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/gaya-hidup/20170329211043-279-203558/mengikuti-tradisi-sunat-perempuan-di-gorontalo/2>
- 2) Not all researchers agree with using the term P2GP (*Pemotongan/Pelukaan Genitalia Perempuan*) or Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) because of its allegedly judgmental word, 'mutilation.' The controversial term 'mutilation' was coined for the first time in 1979 by Fran Hosken in her book, *The Hosken Report: Genital/Sexual Mutilation of Females*. Hosken was a renowned feminist, the founder of WIN (the Women's International Network), and a social activist in women/gender issues. Afterward, the term FGM has been used for more than three decades by internationally recognized bodies like WHO and UNICEF. In 2012, the UN General Assembly designated February 6th as the International Day of Zero Tolerance for FGM to amplify and direct the efforts to eliminate this practice by 2030 (<https://www.un.org/en/observances/female-genital-mutilation-day>). In the Indonesian context, *KOMNAS Perempuan*---one of Indonesia's National Human Rights Institutions whose primary duty is to push for the fulfillment and advancement of women's rights---also use the term FGM or P2GP in their published documents and public reports. Nevertheless, Norma Claire Moruzzi, a feminist and political scientist from the University of Illinois at Chicago, prefers to use the term 'female circumcision' (FC) because she emphasizes the existence of this practice as a contextually cultural practice (Moruzzi, 2005: 204). The choice of diction and term is never neutral. The author chose FGM instead of FC because FGM shows a feminist standpoint to eradicate the globally practiced and culturally justified discriminatory acts towards women.
- 3) It is not the space for the author to elaborate this issue here; the least to contribute is to inform some references on 'bodies of knowledge' on intercultural communication theories which the readers can independently learn from influential figures such as Bennett & Bennett (2004), Bührig and ten Thije (2006), Kotthoff and Spencer-Oatey (2007), Asante, Miike, & Yin (2008), Deardorff (2009), Martin & Nakayama (2010), Nakayama and Halualani (2010), Paulston, Kiesling, and Rangel (2012), Samovar, Porter, and McDaniel (2012), Jackson (2012), and Hua (2016).

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