

'Drop that blade or I'll show you my pussy':

The visual (non)representation of the vagina in campaigns against female genital mutilation

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The author with *L'Origin du Monde*, Gustave Courbet, 1866.
Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France.

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ACRWC	African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child
African Charter	African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights
AU	African Union
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BCE	Before the Current Era
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CDP	Community Desensitisation Programme
CEP	Community Empowerment Programme
CMC	Community Management Committees
CLO	Community Led Outreach
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
FGC	Female genital cutting
FGM	Female genital mutilation
ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
Maputo Protocol	Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UN	United Nations
UNAIDS	Joint United Nations Programme on HIV and AIDS
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
Universal Declaration	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
WHO	World Health Organisation

Chapter 1

Introduction

“My art has been commended as being strongly vaginal. Which bothers some men. The word itself makes some men uncomfortable. Vagina. Yes, they don’t like hearing it and find it difficult to say. Whereas without batting an eye a man will refer to his ‘dick’, or his ‘rod’, or his ‘Johnson’.”¹

- Maude Lebowski in *The Big Lebowski*

1.1 Background

This study aims to analyse the visual representation of the vagina in anti-female genital mutilation (FGM) campaigns. The practice of FGM is mostly aimed at the concealment, deformation and removal of the outer female genitalia. A variety of campaigns are targeting countries in Africa where the practice is most prevalent as well as the diaspora in Europe, the United States of America and the United Kingdom. These campaigns mostly address FGM as an important women’s human rights issue. Anti-FGM campaigns focus on the harmful practice of deforming, removing and hiding female genitalia, rendering the vagina the main subject matter of the campaigns. The question arises whether these campaigns use the representation of the vagina as a visual element to confront and question the origins, purpose and legitimacy of FGM. Or do they steer away from displaying the vagina, since the vagina, vaginal imagery and discussions surrounding the vagina, are generally seen as taboo? This begs the question whether the intolerance and discomfort surrounding the vagina may paradoxically lead anti-FGM campaigns to inadvertently strengthen and reinforce the patriarchal practice of concealing women’s bodies, especially the vagina, from public display.

In this study, the practice of FGM is examined by providing an overview of the origins, rationale, methods and prevalence of the practice in the African context. The problematic nature and dire consequences of FGM locates it within the realm of women’s human rights and a number of international and regional human rights instruments may be implemented towards advocating for the abandonment and elimination of the practice. The female body politic is central to this research and the history of the vagina and its representation are crucial to contextualise its associated politics. An investigation into the history of the vagina illuminates the myths surrounding its representation and trace patriarchy’s role in perpetuating the stigma, discomfort and fear associated with the female form.

The vagina is simultaneously a challenging object and contested subject — there exists no singular notion about its biological, social, cultural and aesthetic significance.² Anxiety arising from the representation

1 E Cohen & J Cohen *The Big Lebowski* (DVD) (2005) 42m:08s.

2 V Braun & S Wilkinson ‘Socio-cultural representations of the vagina’ (2001) 19:1 *Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology* 26.

of the vagina may have adverse effects on the sexual and reproductive health of women, especially with the diagnosis of symptoms and the acquisition of medical knowledge and treatment³. There is a need to realign the vagina and its representation with feminist ideals in order to encourage a normative perception of the female form and women's human rights. Sexual and reproductive health rights can be supported, promoted and implemented through advocacy programmes to allow women to regain control of the visual representation and biological construction of their reproductive organs. A number of women's movements uses the female body (and in particular the vagina) as a tool of protest and resistance. Case-studies of these movements aid in formulating an argument for the normalisation and mainstreaming of the vagina in visual culture to advocate for gender equality and to realise women's human rights.

The representation of the vagina in anti-FGM campaigns lies at the heart of this study and these campaigns can be divided into four categories of representation, namely non-representation, symbolic representation, quasi-literal representation and literal representation. Visual examples of each of these four categories are critically analysed to determine why different campaigns use different types of (non)representation of the vagina. The promoters of the different types of campaigns also have a clear impact on the type of representation used, since larger global campaigns may use different visual methods than smaller localised campaigns.

Anti-FGM campaigns target audiences through a variety of different methods including education programmes, journalism, documentary film-making, advocacy materials, websites and protest art. In their efforts to raise awareness of FGM some campaigns steer away from challenging taboos and use more traditional visual imagery, such as chaste photographic portraits of the victims or activists. Others use conceptual and symbolic visual material such as sewn-up roses that allude to the severity of the practice without challenging the norms and visual complacency of the public sphere. Then there are campaigns that challenge these taboos by using more thought-provoking visual material such as vagina cupcakes and vulva quilts — an effort to try and encourage a shift in social norms in order to reduce stigmatisation. This study aims to assess whether the use of visual material that challenges and deconditions its audience will aid in addressing gender inequality. Will a more liberal attitude towards the representation of women's bodies advance the female body, including its reproductive system, to be celebrated instead of being tortured, feared and despised?

1.2 Research questions

The question whether a more liberal attitude towards the female body will eventually emancipate it from oppression depends on a number of other questions. Why is the image of the vagina a contested issue and a cultural taboo, especially in the African context? What are the roots of FGM, why is it practiced and what is the global and regional human rights response to it? What type of anti-FGM campaigns exist and how do they differ in the representation of the vagina? How can the representation of the female body address gender inequality? What impact can the representation of the vagina have on archaic perceptions of the female body?

1.3 Theoretical framework

This study looks at the history, myths and the politics that influences the perception and the representation of the vagina. The practice of FGM can be seen as the demonisation of the vagina, and its origins, rationale

3 Braun & Wilkinson (n2 above) 26-27.

and prevalence are investigated. Various international and regional legal instruments, as well as national legislation, are used to identify the legal (binding and non-binding) restrictions on the practice as well as the discrimination associated with it. Critical theory will form the main theoretical framework of the study with feminist theory and semiology as the main focus areas. These frameworks will be used to deconstruct perceptions of the vagina, the patriarchal ideologies that are rooted in FGM as well as the visual representational style of anti-FGM campaigns.

1.4 Proposed methodology

This study is based on hermeneutic research. The vagina is explored through its history, the myths that surround it and its associated politics. Literature on FGM is used to determine its rationale and a study of the legal framework forms the basis for establishing a rights-based approach to the practice. The critical analysis of available anti-FGM campaigns illuminates the trends and appropriate use of vaginal imagery. In an effort to align the power of the exposed vagina to feminist activism, the practice of ‘ana-suromai’ (ancient practice of skirt-lifting) is revisited to make recommendations for a more liberal attitude towards the vagina.

1.5 Delineations

This study aims to look at anti-FGM campaigns and the representational politics of the vagina. Campaigns that are available online, or which have been assessed in other studies are examined. A clear limitation of this study is the access to campaign materials that are not available online but only available to specific communities.

1.6 Assumptions

A core assumption of this study is that FGM is a harmful practice. A number of researchers and academics criticise the notion that FGM is exclusively a harmful practice and consider it as an important part of the cultural matrix. These studies argue that the notion that FGM is merely an act of sexual mutilation, is a fallacy, and that it has become a construct of Western discourse on sexuality and culture.⁴ FGM is often considered within the ‘cultural relativism versus universal rights’ debate and in some cases both sides of the debate are guilty of ‘oversimplified, condemnatory characterisations’ of culture and rights discourse.⁵ For the purpose of this study the practice is described, discussed and analysed as a patriarchal practice which discriminates against women and girls and violates their human rights. This study considers FGM as a tool that is used to perpetuate gender inequality through patriarchy.

The practice of FGM is sometimes referred to as ‘female circumcision’, ‘female genital cutting (FGC)’ or the hybrid term ‘female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C)’. The usage of the term ‘mutilation’ has been criticised for being automatically negative and judgmental, and some academics and organisations prefer to use the euphemistic and more respectful word ‘cutting’, making it more culturally sensitive.⁶ Many organisations insist on using the term FGM instead of FGC (or the compromise FGM/C), to illustrate and

4 MF Malström ‘The production of sexual mutilation among Muslim women in Cairo’ in Johnson M & O’Branski M (eds) *Circumcision, Public Health, Genital Autonomy and Cultural Rights* (2014) 108.

5 L Wade ‘Learning from “female genital mutilation”’: Lessons from 30 years of academic discourse’ (2011) 12:1 *Ethnicities* 42.

6 UNICEF ‘Female genital mutilation/cutting: A statistical overview and exploration of the dynamics of change’ (UNICEF: New York 2013) <http://data.unicef.org/resources/female-genital-mutilationcutting-statistical-overview-exploration-dynamics-change/> (accessed 19 October 2017) 7.

strengthen the message that the human rights of the victims of FGM have been violated. For the purpose of this study the term FGM will be used throughout as the practice is ultimately approached as a harmful violation of women's human rights.

1.7 Structure

This study is divided into six main parts. The rationale for the study is firstly introduced to provide the scope and purpose of the research. Second, the vagina's history and the politics of its representation over time is investigated. It is then also important to provide an overview of the history and rationale for the practice of FGM and to juxtapose that with the position of international and regional human rights law on the practice. An analysis of the four categories of representation of the vagina in anti-FGM campaigns highlights the different approaches to female genitalia. After an in-depth analysis of the four main approaches, the role of the liberation of the vagina and its possible impact on the reversal of gender inequality is examined, followed by a conclusion and recommendations.

Chapter 2

The vagina: History, myths and the politics of representation

2.1 A word on the c-word

Female genitalia are mostly seen as a sensitive, taboo and problematic topic and, not surprisingly, this is reflected in the language used to name and describe it. In her introduction to *The vagina: A literary and cultural history*, Emma Rees describes the perplexing relationship that exists between female genitalia and how it is denoted in the English language.⁷ ‘Vagina’, an anatomical and zoological term, is primarily defined as the ‘passage leading from the uterus to the vulva in certain female mammals’, and secondarily, as a ‘sheathlike part or organ’.⁸ The word ‘vagina’ is generally used as an umbrella term for female genitalia but in anatomy the term ‘vagina’ refers to the muscular tube between the external genitalia and the cervix.⁹ The correct term for the external female genitalia is ‘vulva’ (see Figure 1), but ‘vagina’ has become a type of hypernym, describing the whole system of the internal female genital organs (even though it is merely a passageway in the reproductive system) (see Figure 2). The lack of an inclusive term for both the internal and the external female genital organs already indicates the contentious nature of female genitalia – it is such a polemical subject that there exists no one ‘appropriate’ name for it in the English language. Except if you consider, as many feminists contend, the controversial word ‘cunt’.¹⁰

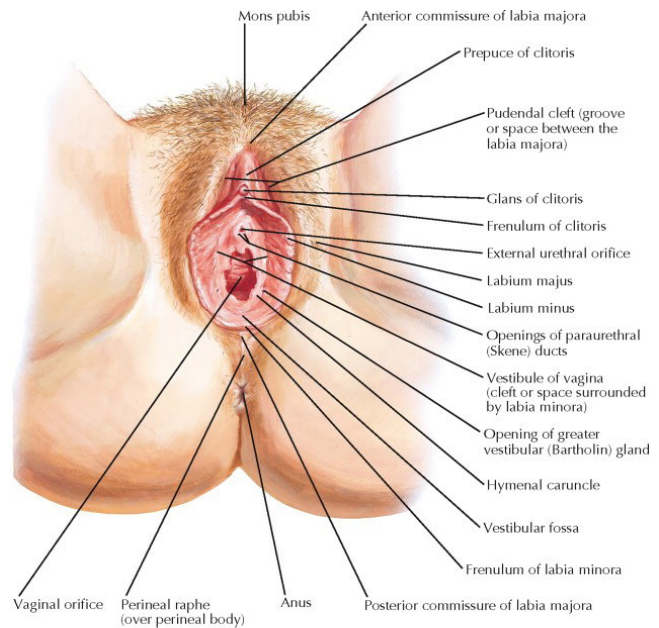


Figure 1: *The Vulva*, F Netter, 2011.

Source:

The Netter Collection of Medical Illustrations:
Reproductive System, Plate 6-1, 109-127.

‘Cunt’ can be regarded as one of the rudest words in the English language, as is evident according to Roget’s Thesaurus, where the word is classified as offensive, with the following usage notes:

7 ELE Rees *The vagina: A literary and cultural history* (2015) 6-7.

8 vagina. (n.d.). *Dictionary.com Unabridged*. Dictionary.com website <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/vagina> (accessed 7 February 2018).

9 Braun & Wilkinson (n2 above) 28.

10 Rees (n7 above) 7.

“All senses of this word are vulgar slang and are very strongly tabooed and censored. The meanings that refer to a woman and a contemptible person are used with disparaging intent and are perceived as highly insulting and demeaning. There are many words used to refer to people in sexual terms. However, to call a person a cunt, especially a woman, is one of the most hateful and powerful examples of verbal abuse in the English language.”¹¹

According to Rees, the word ‘cunt’ is the most appropriate, descriptive and inclusive English word to describe both the external and the internal female genitalia.¹² The BBC programme *Balderdash and Piffle* explores the history and origins of words and in the episode titled ‘The C Words’ the feminist author Germaine Greer looks at the etymology of the word ‘cunt’.¹³ Greer explores the lack of a ‘proper’ and socially acceptable word for female genitalia and points out that ‘vagina’ is an unsuitable word for two reasons. Firstly, ‘vagina’ is a Latin word used in the 17th century by male anatomists to refer to any muscle covering, not just the female genitalia. Secondly, the word ‘vagina’ literally translates from Latin as ‘sword sheath’, and Greer notes how problematic it is to equate female genitalia to being a ‘receptacle for a weapon’,¹⁴ in this instance, the penis. It is notable that the vagina, in its anatomical definition by Matteo Realdo Colombo in his manuscript *De Re Anatomica* (dated 1559), is described in terms of the penis, almost as if the vagina cannot be defined or exist on its own.¹⁵ Greer further points out that ‘cunt’ is the only word in the English language that refers to ‘the whole box and dice’¹⁶ and she calls for the word to be taken seriously.

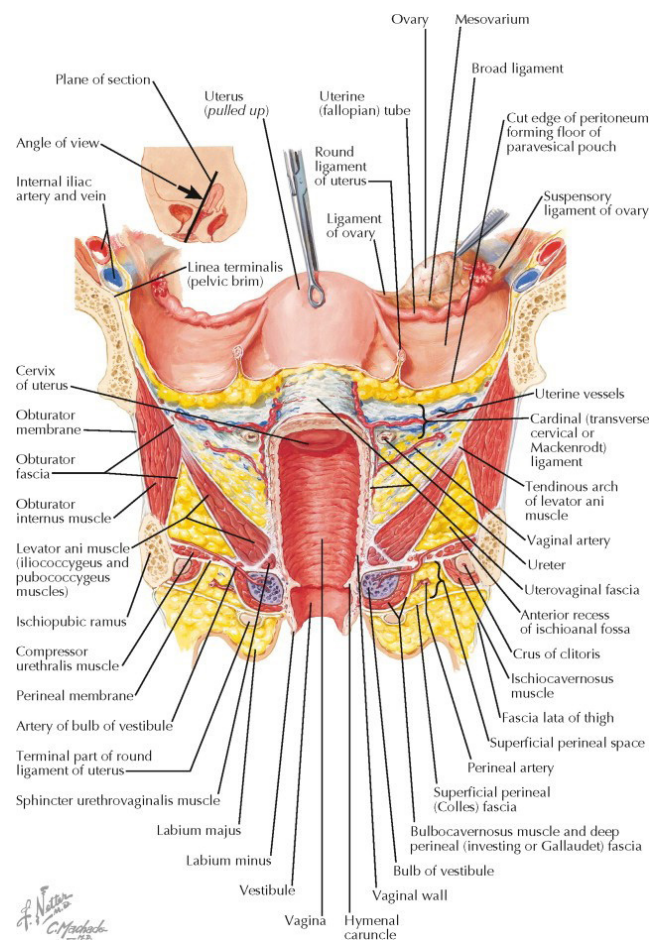


Figure 2: *The Vagina*, F Netter, 2011.

Source:

The Netter Collection of Medical Illustrations:
Reproductive System, Plate 7-4, 129-151.

In *Expletive deleted: A good look at bad language* the linguist Ruth Wajnrub refers to the so-called ‘numbing effect’ and how the overuse of rude words can have an inuring influence on the use and perception of a

11 cunt. (n.d.). *Roget's 21st Century Thesaurus*, Third edition. Thesaurus.com website <http://www.thesaurus.com/browse/cunt> (accessed 7 February 2018).

12 Rees (n7 above) 7.

13 Balderdash & Piffle ‘The c words’ Season 1 Episode 5 BBC Two (2006). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GDJutaFuVD0> (accessed 2 July 2016).

14 *Balderdash & Piffle* (n13 above).

15 C Blackledge *The story of V: Opening Pandora's box* (2003) 60.

16 *Balderdash & Piffle* (n13 above).

word.¹⁷ For a word to retain its status as offensive it must remain a taboo. The more one is exposed to a word, the weaker its taboo becomes and this results in the word losing its shock value.¹⁸ Not only is the word ‘cunt’ a taboo, but so is its referent. To initiate Wajnryb’s numbing effect, the word ‘cunt’ and its referent should both, linguistically and visually, first be mainstreamed for it to become normalised and de-tabooed.

This study uses the words ‘pussy’ and ‘vagina’ in its title for practical purposes. If this study is to be taken seriously and be discoverable in academic publications and databases, it is almost unthinkable to use the word ‘cunt’ instead of the more accepted terms ‘pussy’ and ‘vagina’. The author did contemplate using the more feminist and appropriate word ‘cunt’ but decided against it for fear of stigmatisation and perceptions of vulgarity. The numbing effect takes time and can be incremented slowly, and it is suggested that subsequent studies use the more descriptive word ‘cunt’. Rees criticises the title of Eve Ensler’s seminal work *The vagina monologues* as a misnomer¹⁹ and argues that if the work was titled ‘The cunt monologues’ it would have been more unifying, truthful, open and individualistic.²⁰ ‘Vagina’ can be seen as a more acceptable, normal and marketable word, demonstrating the struggle that exists within the realm of language and the female body politic. Rees aptly remarks that the euphemistic ‘c-word’ is in reality the ‘don’t see word’²¹ since the cunt/vagina is unseen and hidden (in more ways than one).

This study offers another example of a seemingly ‘enlightened’ author trudging carefully through a linguistic minefield in order to avoid a loss of respect and to ensure that the study is taken seriously. The female body and how it is perceived by society finds itself not only in a linguistic danger zone but its perception becomes more problematic when one looks at the manner in which women and their bodies have been depicted throughout the visual history and narrative of the world.

2.2 The representation of the vagina in art history

The linguistic disparity between the general description and technical classification of the female genitalia is echoed by visual narratives found in the history of art and popular culture. A difficult and awkward relationship exists across different civilisations and societies with the visual representation of human reproductive organs, especially those of the female genitalia. The portrayal of male reproductive organs is generally less contested and more acceptable than visual depictions of female reproductive organs. The male phallus, a symbolic representation of masculinity, virility, strength, health, power and fertility, has been an object of admiration since the dawn of humanity. In *Goddesses and monsters: Women, myth, power, and popular culture*, Jane Caputi equates the phallus to male superiority, authority and law²² and states that ‘while the phallus is deified, its female symbolic equivalent – which is largely unnamed but which we might think of as “the cunt” – is everywhere stigmatised.’²³ This stigmatisation becomes apparent when juxtaposing the depiction of male genitalia with that of female genitalia through specific periods in history. Although male reproductive organs are more visible externally than the generally more covert female reproductive organs, female genitalia are unfortunately perceived as being obscene when visually represented. In *The beauty myth*, Naomi Wolf illustrates a double standard surrounding sexual representation whereby female sexual

17 R Wajnryb *Expletive deleted: A good look at bad language* (2005) 70.

18 Wajnryb (n17 above) 72-73.

19 Rees (n7 above) 238.

20 Rees (n7 above) 238.

21 Rees (n7 above) 36.

22 J Caputi *Goddesses and monsters: Women, myth, power, and popular culture* (2004) 373.

23 Caputi (n22 above) 375.

curiosity is generally regarded as obscene but sexual violence against women is normalised.²⁴ According to Wolf the cross-cultural disparity between male and female nakedness is predominately centred on power relations in order to protect male sexual confidence while undermining and inhibiting that of women.²⁵ This inequality in the representation of nakedness, resulting from the inversion of and domination over female sexuality, reinforces and promotes the essence of patriarchy.²⁶

It is incredible that prehistorical depictions of male and female genitalia are on a more equal footing in terms of the extent and detail of representation. A tangible shift towards hiding the female genitalia seems to appear in later periods of artistic and cultural production. This shift might be ascribed to the development of Western philosophy and logical reasoning where masculine prejudice was codified and essentially proclaimed patriarchy as a virtue. Janet Rifkin²⁷ reminds us of the findings by Claude-Lévi-Strauss where in pre-state societies, patriarchy became the ruling dogma through the strengthening of ‘masculine political authority’ by kinship as well as ownership of women.²⁸ Rifkin continues by citing Aristotle,²⁹ who in *Politics* states that ‘as between the sexes, the male is by nature superior and the female inferior, the male ruler and the female subject’.³⁰ This patriarchal construct of ruler versus subject becomes evident when looking at the differences in the representation of the male and female body in art history and popular culture. There are countless examples where male genitalia are more representational and accepted in public art and cultural installations. This stands in contrast to the general covert nature of female bodily representations which is largely anatomically incorrect, incomplete and fundamentally censored. There exist, however, a number of examples where representations of female genitalia are more visible, although these representations are mostly met with shock, outrage and excessive criticism. In order to come to terms with the scope of the issue, the next section will explore visual examples of the representation of female genitalia in art history.

2.2.1 Venus figurines (Prehistoric art, 3.3 million BCE – 3600BCE)

One of the most fascinating sites of prehistory is the Hohle Fels cave in Germany, where a number of significant prehistoric artefacts were discovered. The Venus of Hohle Fels (Figure 3) is considered to be the oldest depiction of a human figure in the history of art and is estimated to be between 35 000 and 40 000 years old.³¹ The preserved portion of the mammoth ivory figurine is approximately 60mm in height and is thought to have been worn as a pendant on occasion.³² The main characteristics of this Venus, also visible in a number of later Venus figurines, include large breasts, emphasised buttocks and a vulva with extremely visible and distinct labia majora between the open legs. According to Conard, the project leader working on discoveries made in the Hohle Fels cave, these features deliberately exaggerate the female sexual characteristics of the figurine and might be seen as the symbolic manifestation of fecundity and sexual reproduction.³³ The Venus von Willendorf (Figure 4), another example of Palaeolithic female representation, is similarly characterised by visibly distinct labia. The Venus of Willendorf represents an almost risqué example of

24 N Wolf *The Beauty Myth* (1991) 138.

25 Wolf (n24 above) 139.

26 Wolf (n24 above) 158.

27 J Rifkin ‘Toward a theory of law and patriarchy’ (1980) 3 *Harvard Women’s Law Journal* 89.

28 C Lévi-Strauss *The elementary structures of kinship* trans JH Bell & J R von Sturmer; ed R Needham (1969) 116.

29 Rifkin (n27 above) 91.

30 Aristotle & H Rackham *Politics* (1932) 21.

31 NJ Conard ‘A female figurine from the basal Aurignacian of Hohle Fels Cave in southwestern Germany’ (2009) 459 *Nature* 248, 250.

32 Conard (n31 above) 250.

33 Conard (n31 above) 251.



Figure 3: *Venus of Hoble Fels*, T Parg, 2010.
Source:
Wikipedia (accessed 9 July 2016).



Figure 4: *Venus von Willendorf*, M Kabel, 2007.
Source:
Wikipedia (accessed 19 September 2017).

Palaeolithic art, while other statuettes of female figures from the same period do depict the female genitalia, but not in such detail.

There is an ongoing debate in prehistoric art theory around the purpose of Palaeolithic artefacts and whether they were literal representations or symbolic interpretations of ideas and emotions. According to Nicholas Chare different scholars ascribe different functions to these artefacts, with the Venus figurines being seen as erotic sex objects for young men (Desmond Collins and John Onians), teaching devices for young girls (Sarah M Nelson) or objects of self-representation by women (Catherine McCoid and LeRoy D McDermott).³⁴ A more traditional approach by archaeologists and palaeontologists has characterised Venus figurines as manifestations of male heterosexual desire with a specific emphasis on male pleasure.³⁵ It is only recently that these patriarchal interpretations and assumptions have been challenged³⁶ and the figurines are now thought to have been created as a manifestation of self-representation by women to explore and improve their reproductive health.³⁷ Whatever the intended purpose of these artefacts, it does not detract from the fact that the first known representational artefact of the human figure explicitly depicts the

34 N Chare 'Sexing the canvas: Calling on the medium' (2009) 32:4 *Art History* 665-666.

35 Chare (n34 above) 665.

36 L McDermott 'Self-representation in Upper Paleolithic female figurines' (1996) 37:2 *Current Anthropology* 227.

37 McDermott (n36 above) 247.

female reproductive organs. It may be that the representation of the vagina was more widely accepted, even normalised, in prehistoric times, in sharp contrast with the 21st century.

2.2.2 Baubo figurines (Hellenic art, 323 BCE – 31 BCE)

Baubo figurines (Figures 5 and 6), also known as ‘goddess figurines’, are examples of sculptures that display their genitalia,³⁸ and date possibly back to the Neolithic era.³⁹ Seven Baubo figurines were discovered in Priene, Turkey in 1896, and offer examples of Hellenic female genital display. According to Blackledge,⁴⁰ these vulva-revealing artworks were used to either enhance fertility or avert evil. Blackledge calls these figurines ‘vagina or vulva women’⁴¹ as their faces, abdomens and vaginas become unified in one form.



Figure 5: *Baubo figurine from Priene*,
400 – 301 BCE.

Source:

Travelswithpersephone.blogspot.co.za
(accessed 19 September 2017).



Figure 6: *Baubo, with a torch*,
400 – 301 BCE.

Source:

Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz /
Art Resource, NY (accessed 23 June 2017).

38 The apotropaic act of exposing the vagina was first recorded by Herodotus in ancient Egypt in 445 BEC, who coined the term ‘ana-suromai’ meaning ‘raising one’s skirt’. Ana-suromai is discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

39 M Gimbutas *The living goddesses* (2001) 28.

40 Blackledge (n15 above) 14.

41 Blackledge (n15 above) 26.



Figure 7: Egyptian terracotta figure of naked woman squatting, 300 – 101 BCE.
Source:
The British Museum
(accessed 19 September 2017).

The terracotta squatter (Figure 7) from the Ptolemaic period is adorned with a crown and a necklace, suggesting that the woman in the sculpture was highly regarded. Similar figurines have been discovered in Italy.⁴²

2.2.3 Sheela-na-gigs (Medieval art, 400 BCE – 1492 CE)

Sheela-na-gigs are medieval stone figures found in Ireland, Britain and some parts of Europe (Figures 8 and 9). The Irish term ‘sheela-na-gigs’ means ‘woman of the castle’⁴³ and the figures are found on churches, city walls and other buildings.⁴⁴ The Sheelas are characterised by a bold and exaggerated exhibition of female genitalia and described as bald, alien-like female figures opening their vulvas with both hands. A number of examples of Sheelas have been defaced and



Figure 8: *Kilpeck Sheela Na Gig*, Kilpeck Church, 12th Century.
Source:
Nessy Pic, The History Blog
(accessed 21 September 2017).



Figure 9: A woman clipping her pubic hair with shears, Milan, Italy 12th Century.
Source:
Giovanni Dall’Orto
(accessed 21 September 2017).

42 A Weir & J Jerman *Images of lust: Sexual carvings on medieval churches* (1986) 112.

43 Blackledge (n15 above) 31.

44 G Rhoades ‘Decoding the Sheela-na-gig’ (2010) 22:2 *Feminist Formations* 168.

removed, with some even circumcised, and their very existence, especially on holy and public areas such as churches and city walls, are puzzling and challenging. Georgia Rhoades gives a compelling overview of different interpretations of the Sheela-na-gigs, which include functions surrounding fertility, protection, misogyny, morality and witchcraft.⁴⁵ For Rhoades, a second-wave feminist, decoding the Sheelas is closely aligned with interpretations of the object itself without trying to align meaning with the intention of the encoder. Her interpretation regards the Sheela-na-gigs as ‘art with a political, feminist, and empowering message because I am influenced by the art of contemporary feminists and the work of feminist scholars’.⁴⁶

2.2.4 The Venus revisited (Renaissance art, 1700 BCE – 1300 BCE)

During the transition between the Middle Ages and the Modern Era the Venus continued to play an important role in the visual narrative of the art world. The Renaissance Venus resembled a combination of subjective aesthetics and natural science, of perception and realism. In accordance with religious morality, scientific reasoning and mathematic art practices (balance, perspective, harmony and the golden ratio), Renaissance Venuses and female nudes are typically more modestly painted and sculpted, with a mere pubic triangle, covered or concealed or containing no distinct detail of the labia or vulva. *The Renaissance of Venus* by Walter Crane (Figure 10) and *Les Trois Grâces* by Raphaël (Figure 11) demonstrate the hidden nature of female genitalia in Renaissance art. Although the Renaissance was a period of enlightenment there still existed a complex discourse surrounding the female nude body.⁴⁷ Leonardo da Vinci challenged the idea of producing art with the sole focus on aesthetics and perception. This is evident in his anatomical drawings,

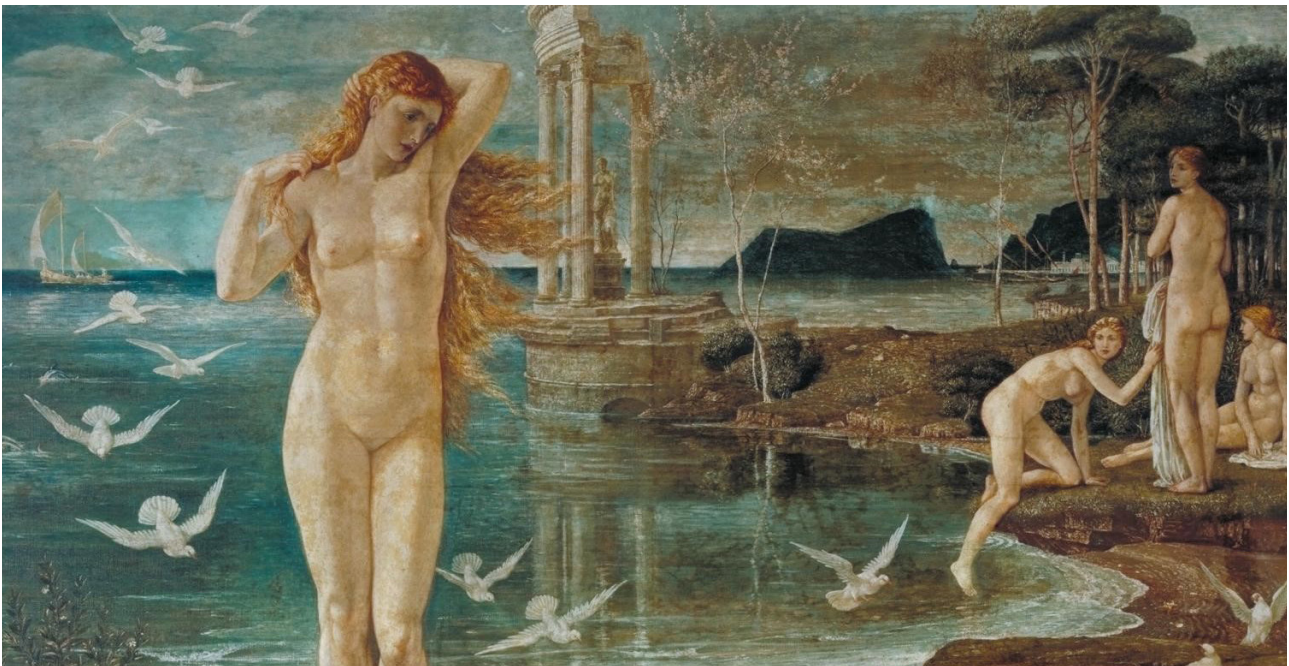


Figure 10: *The Renaissance of Venus*, Walter Crane, 1877.

Source:
 (Tempera on canvas): Tate
 (accessed 12 October 2017).

45 Rhoades (n44 above) 175-183.

46 Rhoades (n44 above) 185-186.

47 U Eco *On beauty: A history of a Western idea* (2004) 193-196.



Figure 11: *Les Trois Grâces*,
Raphaël, 1504 – 1505.

Source:
Oil on panel, Google Art Project
(accessed 12 October 2017).

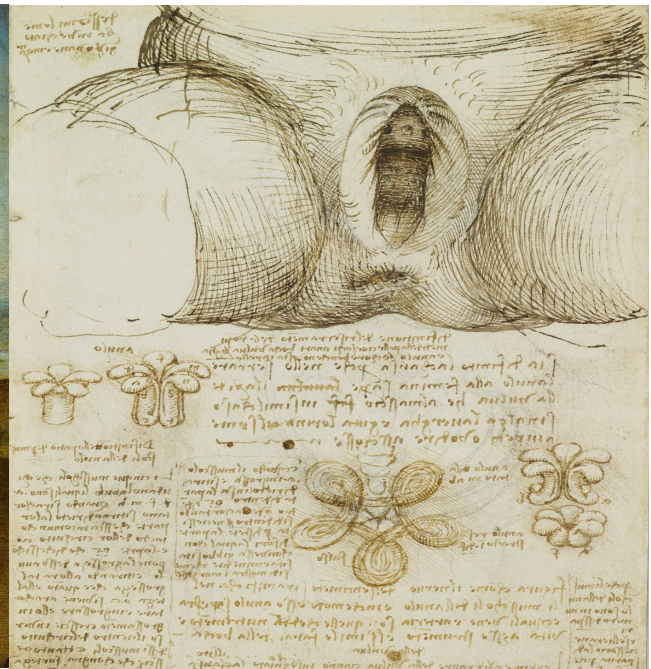


Figure 12: *The vulva and anus*,
Leonardo da Vinci, c.1508.

Source:
Pen and ink over black chalk, he Royal Collection
(accessed 20 September 2017).

which he made during the dissection of some 30 corpses.⁴⁸ These drawings are significant as they are realistic representations of the human figure, and in particular the anatomical depiction of female genitalia. Da Vinci was intrigued by man's 'instrumental figure' (*figura istrumentale dell' omo*) and his anatomical drawings *The vulva and the anus* (Figure 12) and *The male and female reproductive systems* (Figure 13) are incredible landmarks of scientific discovery and the representation of the human body.

2.2.5 The Origin of the World (Modern art, 1620 CE – 1945 CE)

Not much has changed concerning the attitudes towards the visual representation of genitalia since the Renaissance. Art themes represented in the Modern Era shifted away from the divine and the mythological to the

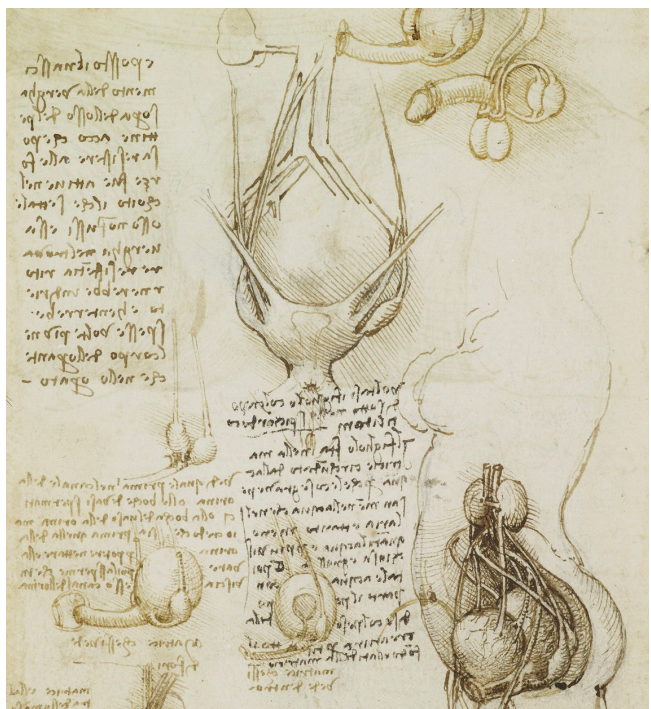


Figure 13: *The male and female reproductive systems*,
Leonardo da Vinci, c.1508.

Source:
Pen and ink over black chalk,
The Royal Collection (accessed 20 September 2017).

48 LH Heydenreich 'Leonardo da Vinci' 18 August 2017 *Encyclopædia Britannica* <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Leonardo-da-Vinci/Anatomical-studies-and-drawings> (accessed 20 September 2017).

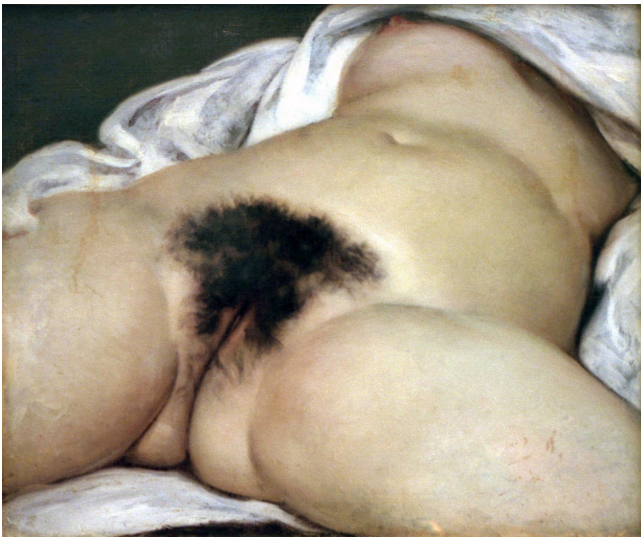


Figure 14: *L'Origine du Monde*,
 Gustave Courbet, 1866.
 Source:
 Oil on canvas, Wikipedia,
 (accessed 8 May 2015).

representation of reality, daily life and the mundane. Gustave Courbet's 1866 painting *L'Origine du Monde*⁴⁹ (Figure 14) depicts a realistic and provocative close-up view of the genitals and abdomen of a woman. The reception of this erotic work, by the self-proclaimed 'proudest and most arrogant man in France',⁵⁰ was in the public, legal and art historical domains dominated by a focus on the sexual and 'obscene' qualities of the work, eliciting reactions of disbelief, shock, outrage and censorship.⁵¹ The painting continues to evoke similar reactions today. As recent as 2015, the social networking website Facebook censored an image of the painting posted by French teacher Frederic Durand on the social media platform.⁵² The case went to court when Durand-Baissas sued Facebook, calling the social networking giant out for exhibiting

'extreme prudishness regarding the body and nudity'.⁵³ In an exposé published by *The Guardian* in 2017, the blueprint of Facebook's guidelines for moderators indicated that 'handmade' images of nudity and sexual activity are allowed but that 'digitally-made' art is not.⁵⁴ While some regard *L'Origine du Monde* as art, some regard it as pornography. This indicates how subjective the interpretation of art and visual material is and reinforces the ambiguity associated with the visual representation of human reproductive organs. Although explicit pornographic images are freely available on the internet and in print, the explicit depiction of female genitalia is still restricted to the private sphere and frowned upon in popular culture.

2.2.6 It's not vulgar, it's vulva (Contemporary and post-modern art, 1950 CE – present)

The post-modern era has seen a revitalisation of the candid vaginal representations of prehistory within the contemporary art sphere. With the representation of female genitalia traditionally ascribed to pornographers,

49 Literally translated as 'the origin of the world', and referring to the vagina as the giver of life, Courbet's painting is still regarded as daring and unfit for public consumption. The painting, previously belonging to Jacques Lacan, is housed in the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, France and is described as a paradox since it is very famous painting that is seldom seen. The author had the privilege to view the painting in Paris and it is truly a remarkable work of anatomical realism married with the traditional notions of the female nude. A copy of the painting hangs on the author's wall and the reactions it elicits varies from shock to joy. It is a paradoxical masterpiece, indeed.

50 KC Galitz 'Gustave Courbet (1819–1877)' *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (The Metropolitan Museum of Art) May 2009 http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/gust/hd_gust.htm (accessed 20 September 2017).

51 R Wagner-Pacifici *What is an event?* (2017) 36.

52 MJ Stern 'France wants to punish Facebook for censoring a painting of a vagina. Terrible idea.' 6 March 2015 http://www.slate.com/blogs/future_tense/2015/03/06/france_wants_to_punish_facebook_for_censoring_a_painting_of_a_vagina.html (accessed 19 October 2017).

53 R Embuscado 'French court rules against Facebook in Gustave Courbet lawsuit' 12 February 2016 *Artnet* <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/french-art-lovers-sue-facebook-426308> (accessed 19 October 2017).

54 N Hopkins 'Revealed: Facebook's internal rulebook on sex, terrorism and violence' 21 May 2017 *The Guardian* <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2017/may/21/revealed-facebook-internal-rulebook-sex-terrorism-violence> (accessed 19 October 2017).

erotic artists and feminists, more vaginal and vulvic artworks came into being and the production of vagina art slowly became more normalised in Western society. The *Hon-en-Katedral* (Figure 15) by Niki de Saint Phalle, Jean Tinguely and Per Olof Ultvedt, is a playful example of liberal vagina art.⁵⁵ Colloquially known as *HON* (literally meaning ‘woman’ in Swedish), the giant colourful installation resembles a reclining woman with her legs spread wide open, with her vagina forming the entrance to a temporary museum. The contents of the temporary museum includes a coin-operated telephone, a bar, a museum of fake paintings, a slide for children and a goldfish pond. The work was viewed by more than 100 000 people during its 3-month lifetime and was described as a type of temple that allowed visitors a festival-like return to the womb. The installation, except for *HON*’s head, was destroyed after the exhibition ended.

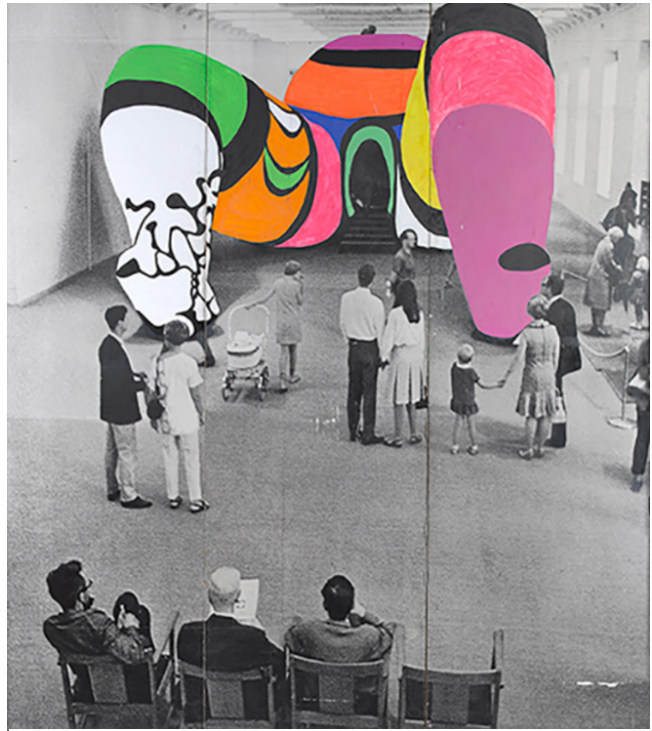


Figure 15: *Hon-en-Katedral*, Niki de Saint Phalle with Jean Tinguely and Per Olof Ultvedt, 1966.
 Source: Niki Charitable Art Foundation (accessed 21 September 2017).

A seminal work of the post-modern era, regarded by some as the apex of the Feminist Art Movement, is *The Dinner Party* (Figure 16 and Figure 17) by Judy Chicago. The carefully conceived and executed installation was at the time seen as extremely controversial and berated by many museums and critics.⁵⁶ The reception to the work was paradoxical as the work was something that everyone wanted to see but no museum wanted to exhibit it.⁵⁷ *The Dinner Party* consists of a triangular ceremonial table with 39 place settings for 39 female guests, both fictional and real, and the work is regarded to be vaginal to the core, proclaiming unashamedly the autonomy of female genitalia. Although it was so controversial at the time, it is estimated to have been seen by over one million people when it was exhibited on three continents.⁵⁸



Figure 16: *The Dinner Party*, Judy Chicago, 1974 – 1979.
 Source:

Mixed media, Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, Collection of the Brooklyn Museum (accessed 12 October 2017).

55 It is interesting to note that *Hon-en-Katedral* was exhibited exactly 100 years after Coubert painted *L’Origine du Monde*.

56 N McCauley ‘No sexual perversion in (Judy) Chicago’ 11:4 *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America* (1992) 177.

57 J Chicago *The Dinner Party: From creation to preservation* (Merrell: London 2007) 270.

58 It is currently housed in the Brooklyn Museum in New York where it continues to attract thousands of viewers.

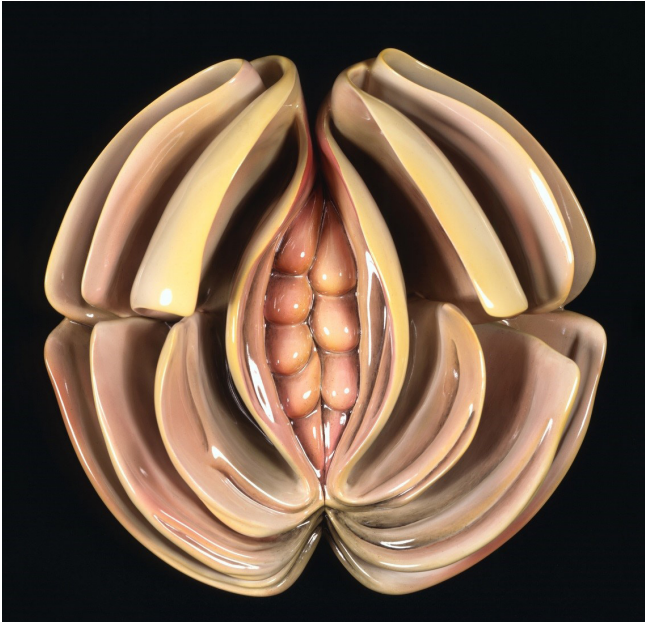


Figure 17: Virginia Woolf Plate from *The Dinner Party*, Judy Chicago, 1974 – 1979.

Source:

China paint on porcelain, Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, Collection of the Brooklyn Museum (accessed 12 October 2017).

Jamie McCartney's *The Great Wall of Vagina* (Figure 18) is explicit in its representation of female genitalia and aims to raise awareness of genital anxiety.⁵⁹ The exhibition is described as a vehicle for 'changing female body image through art'.⁶⁰ A 9-meter long polyptych consists of four hundred plaster casts of a multitude of vaginas of women from different backgrounds and ages ranging from 18 to 76. Plaster casts of transgender women and men are also included in the artwork, adding to the scope of the gender and body politics involved. Also dubbed the 'vagina monologues in sculpture form',⁶¹ *The Great Wall of Vagina* both celebrates the vagina and educates about its biological diversity in a creative and non-sexualised way.

The presentation and the perception of the vagina has made a backwards shift from prehistoric times but is gaining momentum

again in recent times. The truthful representations of the Palaeolithic Venuses, the Baubo figures and the Sheelana-gigs, are echoed by contemporary art found at our dinner tables, on our walls and inside our museums.

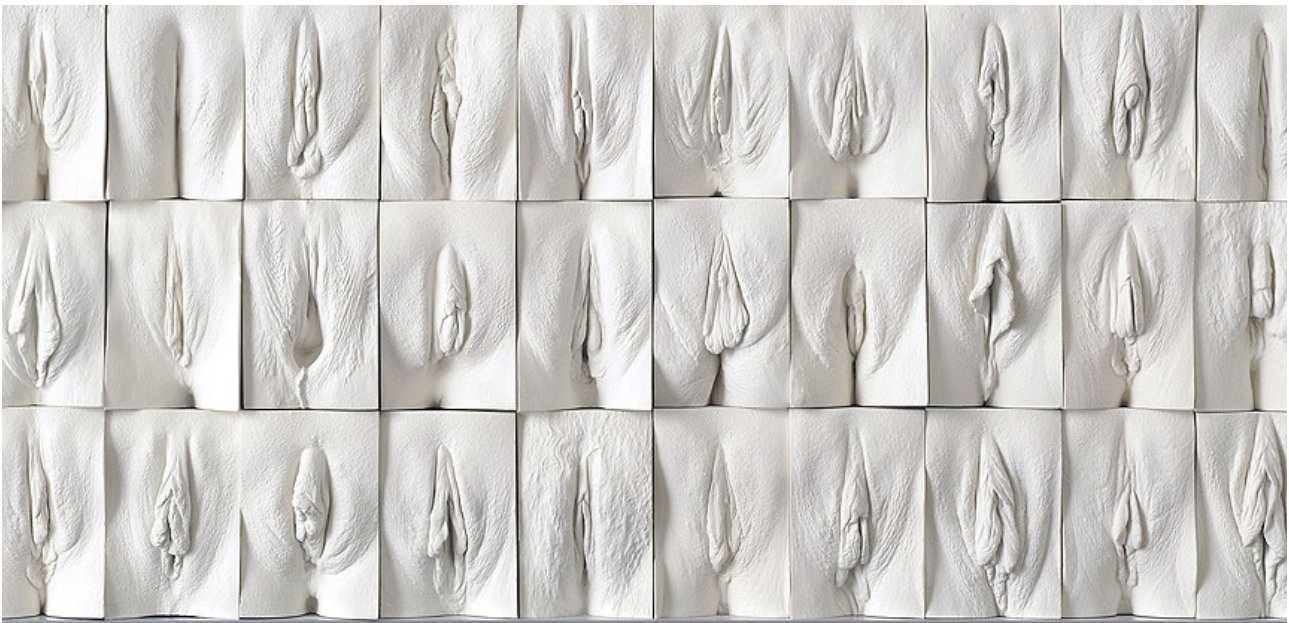


Figure 18: Panel 8 from *The Great Wall of Vagina*, Jamie McCartney, 2008.

Source:

Plaster casts on panel, Great Wall of Vagina website (accessed 12 October 2017).

59 According to the *Comprehensive Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* female genital anxiety, although not clearly and conclusively defined, is a set of concerns unique to female genitalia and usually develops from early childhood.

60 *The Great Wall of Vagina*. <http://www.greatwallofvagina.co.uk> (accessed 22 September 2017).

61 *The Great Wall of Vagina* (n60 above).

Vaginal art or ‘cunt art’ as Rees prefers to call it as a result of its anatomical inclusive spirit,⁶² is emerging as an art form that is actively challenging the concealed nature and perception of the vagina, and is fast becoming more widespread across the globe. There seems to be a resurgence to reclaim the vagina and to celebrate the origin of the world, by defying the taboo and revelling in its existence.

2.3 Toothed paradox: The demonisation of the vagina

Female genitalia (and the language used to describe it) are inherently hidden from view in the public domain. The ‘paradoxical hidden-ness’⁶³ and the politics surrounding the vagina attests to the varied perceptions of and reactions to female genitalia. Catherine Blackledge’s comprehensive account of the vagina, *The Story of V: Opening Pandora’s Box*, brings to the fore the politics and influence of the vagina. In her quest to demystify and understand the vagina better Blackledge argues that supposedly ‘hard’ sciences, such as medicine and anatomy, are marred by subjectivity and that decent objective scientific research of the vagina is extremely lacking.⁶⁴ Not only is obtaining funding for vagina-related research extremely difficult, but results from studying female genitalia are at best controversial, conflicting and confusing.⁶⁵ Equating the vagina to a ‘passive’ channel, where sperm travel in one direction and offspring travel in the other, is one of the reasons why female genitalia is so misunderstood and misrepresented.⁶⁶ In contrast to the perception that the vagina is a passive channel, the vagina is ironically also represented as an entity that is almost demonic in nature. Rees refers to this ‘almost sacred, totemic status’⁶⁷ of female genitalia and how it is paradoxically both pathologised *and* eroticised. The vagina is both loathed *and* loved, both feared *and* admired.

The ‘vagina dentata’ is the most common example of the ‘demonised’ vagina. Blackledge notes that the *vagina dentata* (literally ‘toothed vagina’ in Latin) is probably the most ‘anxious image’ of female genitalia and can be found in the folklore, art, mythology and literature of many cultures around the globe.⁶⁸ It is a castration myth where teeth inside the vagina are believed to either devour men or their genitalia and is recorded in North America, South America, Africa, India and Europe. Psychology suggests, according to Blackledge, that male fears of the ‘dark, unknowable, unseeable’⁶⁹ confines of the vagina is the main reason that sexual folklore such as the *vagina dentata* persists. The vagina, commonly demonised by rendering it with teeth, is also diabolised by imagery of demonic serpents, voracious eels and hungry dragons.⁷⁰ Blackledge calls the angry and terrified perceptions of women and their bodies ‘deeply disturbing’.⁷¹ She further suggests that sexual folklore, such as the *vagina dentata* is a result of male fears about the ‘unseeable’ or male angst before the ‘vortex of female sexual energy’. Fear of the vagina operates on many levels, but one of the most vivid ways female reproductive organs are demonised, is through the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM). The next chapter will give a brief overview of the harmful practice and look at the domestic, regional and international measures in place to tackle this controversial women’s human rights issue.

62 Rees (n7 above) 124.

63 Rees (n7 above) 37.

64 Blackledge (n15 above) 2, 4.

65 Blackledge (n15 above) 2.

66 Blackledge (n15 above) 3.

67 Rees (n7 above) 36.

68 Blackledge (n15 above) 165.

69 Blackledge (n15 above) 165.

70 Blackledge (n15 above) 168.

71 Blackledge (n15 above) 169.

Chapter 3

Female genital mutilation: A roadmap

3.1 Origins, rationale, methods and prevalence

Female genital mutilation (FGM) is defined as ‘all procedures involving partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons’.⁷² It is a scourge in society and a women’s human rights issue that needs to be addressed with a great deal of urgency.

In her ground-breaking investigation⁷³ of female genital circumcision⁷⁴ Hanny Lightfoot-Klein traces the origins of this practice to antiquity but finds that its roots are layered with obscurity and uncertainty. Lightfoot-Klein suggests that the procedure most likely originated from Egypt and the Nile valley and spread with Arab traders to the Red Sea coastal tribes and onwards into eastern Sudan.⁷⁵ Not only is the time and location of the practice’s origin uncertain, but its motivation and purpose varies across different regions and beyond different cultural groupings. Lightfoot-Klein identifies population control, classification (such as distinction, enslavement or subjugation), patriarchal mastery and the reduction of sexual desire and pleasure in women as the most likely motives for FGM. Other studies⁷⁶ suggest that the reasons for performing and supporting FGM can be divided into four categories: religious reasons, sociological reasons, aesthetic/hygienic benefits and psychosexual purposes.

Social practices are often encoded in religion and FGM is generally perceived as a Muslim practice. Islam’s strong focus on chastity and the suppression of sexuality might have played an important role in the development of the practice, especially in Sudan⁷⁷ but FGM is also performed by a variety of other groups.⁷⁸ These include Animists, African Coptic Christians, and the Ethiopian Jewish group the Fallashas.⁷⁹ Sociologically FGM is sometimes regarded as a rite of passage for young girls⁸⁰ and offers an official induction into womanhood, leaving those who do not undergo the procedure ostracised and isolated from the rest of the community.⁸¹ In some communities girls are seen as ‘unmarryable’ when they have not undergone

72 WHO *et al* ‘Female genital mutilation: a joint WHO/UNICEF/UNFPA statement’ (1997) 3.

73 H Lightfoot-Klein *Prisoners of ritual: An odyssey into female genital circumcision in Africa* (1989) 27.

74 Lightfoot-Klein uses the term ‘circumcision’ because the practice was, until recent times, equated to male circumcision. Female circumcision is, however, much more severe and invasive.

75 Lightfoot-Klein (n73 above) 28.

76 LA Trueblood ‘Female genital mutilation: A discussion of international human rights instruments, cultural sovereignty and dominance theory’ (1999-2000) 28 *Denver Journal of International Law and Policy* 437.

77 Lightfoot-Klein (n73 above) 41.

78 Trueblood (n76 above) 445.

79 Lightfoot-Klein (n73 above) 41-42.

80 Trueblood (n76 above) 447.

81 Lightfoot-Klein (n73 above) 38.

FGM.⁸² The supposed aesthetic/hygienic benefits of FGM relates to stigmas attached to female genitalia as some perceive it to be unattractive or even unclean.⁸³ The clitoris is considered by some to be ‘ugly genitalia’ and unpleasant to both sight and touch, and it has been reported that in Egypt, once it has been removed, a women achieves a certain sense of maturity.⁸⁴ FGM is performed for psychosexual reasons in societies where women are perceived as sexually deviant and promiscuous by nature. By removing the clitoris and the sensitive outer tissue of the genitalia, these women will supposedly experience sex as less pleasurable, therefore protecting them from unwanted teenage pregnancies and ostensibly preventing them from cheating on their current or future husbands. It is also suggested that sex with a woman who has been mutilated may be more pleasurable for the man, illuminating the patriarchal ideological intentions of this harmful practice.⁸⁵

There are different types of FGM and the World Health Organisation (WHO) categorises the practice into four types of procedures.⁸⁶ Type I FGM (clitoridectomy) refers to the partial or total removal of the clitoris. Type II FGM (excision) refers to the partial or total removal of the clitoris and the labia minora with or without excision of the labia majora. Type III FGM (infibulation) refers to the narrowing of the vaginal orifice by creating a covering seal. Type IV FGM refers to all other procedures performed on the female genitalia for non-medical reasons, including, but not limited to, piercing, pricking and cauterising.⁸⁷

FGM occurs throughout the world but is most prevalent in Africa (especially in the Sudanic belt, a band of countries located in the North Western to North Eastern part of Africa), areas of the Middle East (Iraq and Yemen) and Asia (Indonesia).⁸⁸ UNICEF identifies 30 countries where FGM is pervasive while 27 of these (90% of the total) are African.⁸⁹ Currently, it is estimated that more than 200 million girls and women have undergone FGM in these 30 countries, while 44 million of these girls (approximately 22%) are below the age of 15.⁹⁰ The research by UNICEF suggests that there has been an overall decline in the practice of FGM in the last thirty years, but not all countries have made progressive strides in the reduction of the practice.⁹¹ Burkina Faso (-29%), Egypt (-30%) Kenya (-30%), Liberia (-40%) and Togo (-8) have shown a fast decline over the past three decades.⁹² As a result of migration, the practice is also performed in parts of Europe, Australia and North America but data collection remains a massive challenge.⁹³

3.2 FGM, human rights and the law

The practice of FGM (Type I – Type III)⁹⁴ holds a number of serious risks for the victim. These include short-term and long-term complications such as severe pain, shock, excessive bleeding, difficulty in passing

82 Trueblood (n76 above) 447.

83 Trueblood (n76 above) 448.

84 Lightfoot-Klein (n73 above) 38.

85 Trueblood (n76 above) 448-449.

86 UNAIDS *et al* ‘Eliminating female genital mutilation: an interagency statement’ (2008) 4.

87 UNAIDS *et al* (n86 above) 4.

88 United Nations Children’s Fund ‘Female genital mutilation/cutting: A global concern’ (UNICEF) New York 2016 https://www.unicef.org/media/files/FGMC_2016_brochure_final_UNICEF_SPREAD.pdf (accessed 19 October 2017) 2.

89 UNICEF (n88 above) 2.

90 UNICEF (n88 above) 2.

91 UNICEF (n88 above) 1.

92 UNICEF (n88 above) 1.

93 UNICEF (n88 above) 2.

94 Limited data is available for practices included in Type IV FGM.

urine, infections, urinary and menstrual problems, contracting HIV, reproductive tract infections and sexually transmitted diseases, painful sexual intercourse, psychological consequences, unintended labia fusion, birth complications, danger to the new-born, infertility and, in severe cases, even death.⁹⁵ The health risks associated with FGM illustrates why it is a violation of women's human rights and many international and regional human rights instruments are available to advocate for the protection of women from FGM and to support its eradication.⁹⁶

3.2.1 Elimination of sexual discrimination

It is suggested that one of the primary ideological aims of FGM is for men and elders to garner and enforce control over the lives of young girls and women, as in some instances an uncut women will be deemed unsuitable for marriage.⁹⁷ One way to dominate and disempower women is to exercise patriarchal power over women's bodies with practices such as FGM, rape and other forms of domestic violence. A number of international and regional treaties prohibit gender-based discrimination. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) unequivocally states that no 'distinction, exclusion or restriction' shall be made on the basis of sex and that men and women are equal in the 'political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field'.⁹⁸ This right is underscored by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Universal Declaration) which states that all rights contained in it shall be enjoyed by all without distinction of any kind, such as sex.⁹⁹ The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (African Charter) requires the protection of the human rights of women while discrimination against them must be eradicated.¹⁰⁰ In order to strengthen women's human rights in Africa, the African Union developed the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (also known as the Maputo Protocol) which entered into force in 2005. The Maputo Protocol supplements the African Charter to address discrimination against women and to support and protect women's human rights. The Maputo Protocol requires State parties to ensure that women's human rights are promoted, realised and protected and that harmful practices are prohibited and condemned through legislative, institutional and other measures.¹⁰¹ The Maputo Protocol deals primarily with the elimination of harmful practices, and explicitly condemns FGM.¹⁰² This echoes the Maputo Protocol's Preamble where it states that any practice that hinders or endangers the normal growth and affects the physical and psychological development of women and girls should be condemned and eliminated.¹⁰³ In order to eliminate harmful practices, the Maputo Protocol requires that public awareness must be increased, legislative measures and sanctions must be put in place, support should be provided to victims and women at risk should be protected. Discrimination against women should be eliminated through the promotion of gender equality in legal frameworks, by gender-mainstreaming policy decisions and other initiatives, and by

95 UNAIDS (n86 above) 33-35.

96 UN Women 'Sources of international human rights law on female genital mutilation' [sa] <http://www.endvawnow.org/en/articles/645-sources-of-international-human-rights-law-on-female-genital-mutilation.html> (accessed 4 May 2015).

97 S Hopkins 'A discussion of the legal aspects of female genital mutilation 30:4 *Journal of Advanced Nursing* (1999) 927.

98 CEDAW Article 1.

99 Universal Declaration Article 2.

100 African Charter Article 2 and Article 18(3).

101 Maputo Protocol Article 5.

102 Maputo Protocol Article 5

103 Maputo protocol Preamble.

taking positive and corrective action to reverse gender-based discrimination.¹⁰⁴ The Maputo Protocol is also a strong proponent for sensitisation measures surrounding issues of women's human rights and calls for educational and other appropriate structures to bring attention to the rights of women,¹⁰⁵ while integrating gender sensitisation and education programmes at all levels of the education system.¹⁰⁶

3.2.2 Freedom from torture / violence against women

FGM is almost always associated with some violence and even torture. Some victims of FGM are young whose genitalia are forcibly deformed, maimed and removed by sometimes septic instruments such as razor blades or even broken glass.¹⁰⁷ More often than not the procedure is performed without consent and, as Lightfoot-Klein recorded, more than half of urban women interviewed did not receive any form of analgesic.¹⁰⁸ The sexual experiences of the victims after FGM might also be violent and torturous if parts of the genitalia have been removed, especially where only a small opening for urination exists after the procedure (one case reported that the size of the vaginal opening could be compared to the size of the head of a matchstick).¹⁰⁹ The Universal Declaration clearly prohibits the type of violence and torture associated with FGM and the sexual penetration of victims post-FGM.¹¹⁰ These acts are a transgression of the dignity of the victims, referred to in many international treaties such as in the Preambles of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the Universal Declaration and CEDAW. The African Charter prohibits torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading punishment,¹¹¹ while the Maputo Protocol addresses violence against women including unwanted or forced sexual intercourse and state parties are obliged to enact and enforce laws that prevent violence against women.¹¹² It also requires education and social communication to eradicate elements in traditional and cultural beliefs that aid the legitimisation and exacerbation of violence committed against women.¹¹³

3.2.3 Right of the child

A report by UNICEF indicate that in The Gambia, Mauritania and Sudan, FGM is extremely prevalent among girls below the age of 14.¹¹⁴ Trends suggest that performing FGM on younger girls might be easier because it is practised more discreetly, there is less resistance from the victims and it is believed that younger girls heal quicker after the procedure.¹¹⁵ The violation of children's rights strikes at the root problem of this practice: the absence of informed consent. Young girls are often forced by their mothers, family members, elders and even future family members to undergo the procedure. It has been reported that the girls are sometimes taken to a remote location where they are cut and kept as 'prisoners' while their wounds heal. The violation of their rights does not stop at FGM. Some of these girls are also forced into child marriages where they have to endure painful sexual intercourse with much older men, and

104 Maputo Protocol Article 2.

105 Maputo Protocol Article 8.

106 Maputo Protocol Article 12.

107 Trueblood (n76 above) 443.

108 Lightfoot-Klein (n73 above) 57.

109 Trueblood (n76 above) 444.

110 Universal Declaration Article 5.

111 African Charter Article 5.

112 Maputo Protocol Article 4(2)(a).

113 Maputo Protocol Article 4(2)(d).

114 UNICEF (n6 above) 27.

115 UNICEF (n6 above) 111.

eventually give birth under extreme conditions that are dangerous to their own health, as well as that of their infant(s).

The Convention on the Right of the Child (CRC) is very clear on issues such as discrimination on account of sex,¹¹⁶ the best interest of the child,¹¹⁷ development of the child,¹¹⁸ limitations on beliefs to protect health and safety,¹¹⁹ torture and cruel treatment,¹²⁰ promotion of physical and psychological recovery of a child victim of abuse and torture¹²¹ and the dignity of the child.¹²² The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) states that the best interest of the child should be the primary consideration for all actions concerning the child¹²³ and deals with rights involving issues such as survival, development, privacy, health, protection against abuse and torture as well as the protection against harmful practices. The scope of the Maputo Protocol extends to protect the rights of girls¹²⁴ and is therefore another regional instrument which condemns and prohibits the practice of FGM on children.

3.2.4 Right to health

FGM is performed by a variety of practitioners: untrained family members, elder women, midwives and even medical practitioners such as nurses or even doctors.¹²⁵ Should some medical malpractice occur or the procedure go wrong, the operators are often free from culpability because the practice is shrouded in secrecy. Medical complications following FGM are numerous, even when the procedure is performed in a medical facility. According to Lightfoot-Klein these include infection, haemorrhage, shock, septicaemia, tetanus, retention of urine due to occlusion, trauma to adjacent tissues, and psychic trauma.¹²⁶

The ICESCR,¹²⁷ the Universal Declaration,¹²⁸ and the African Charter¹²⁹ recognise the right to the enjoyment of physical and mental health. This right is guaranteed in CEDAW¹³⁰ and the Maputo Protocol,¹³¹ where women have the right to have adequate, affordable and accessible health care services, education and information. This right is especially applicable to women who live in rural areas as UNICEF¹³² found that the practice of FGM is more prevalent in these areas. The right to health for women include the respect and promotion of women's sexual and reproductive well-being and the Maputo Protocol explicitly requires that the sexual and reproductive health rights of all women should be respected.¹³³

116 CRC Article 2.

117 CRC Article 3.

118 CRC Article 6.

119 CRC Article 14.

120 CRC Article 37.

121 CRC Article 39.

122 CRC Preamble.

123 ACRWC Article 4.

124 Maputo Protocol Article 1.

125 Lightfoot-Klein (n73 above) 55.

126 Lightfoot-Klein (n73 above) 57.

127 ICESCR Article 12(1).

128 Universal Declaration Article 5.

129 African Charter Article 16.

130 CEDAW Article 12(1) and Article 14(2)(b).

131 Maputo Protocol Article 14(2)(a).

132 UNICEF (n6 above) 38.

133 Maputo Protocol Article 14.

3.2.5 Domestic structures and recent developments

FGM is a human rights issue but, more specifically, a women’s human rights issue. Many international instruments require state parties to protect the rights of young girls and women and to address FGM directly. This might not be enough to reduce and eradicate FGM on its own. Many African countries (twenty-six in August 2018) have declared the practice to be illegal. According to UNFPA¹³⁴ and 28 Too Many¹³⁵, national legislation outlawing FGM has been adopted in Benin (2003), Burkina Faso (1996), Central African Republic (1996/2006), Chad (2003), Côte d’Ivoire (1998), Djibouti (1995/2009), Egypt (2008), Eritrea (2007), Ethiopia (2004), The Gambia (2015), Ghana (1994/2007), Guinea (1965/2000), Guinea Bissau (2011), Kenya (2001/2011), Liberia (2018, by one-year executive order), Mauritania (2005), Niger (2003), Nigeria (1999 to 2015 in some states), Senegal (1999), South Africa (2000), South Sudan (2008), Sudan (state of South Kordofan 2008, state of Gedaref 2009, state of South Darfur 2103), Tanzania (1998), Togo (1998), Uganda (2010) and Zambia (2005/2011). Later dates reflect amendments to the original law or new laws. Figure 19 shows that most of the countries where the practice is prevalent, have outlawed FGM, with the exception of Sierra Leone, Mali, Cameroon¹³⁶ and Somalia. Preventative measures have been taken by South Africa and Zambia, where FGM is not prevalent but has been banned.

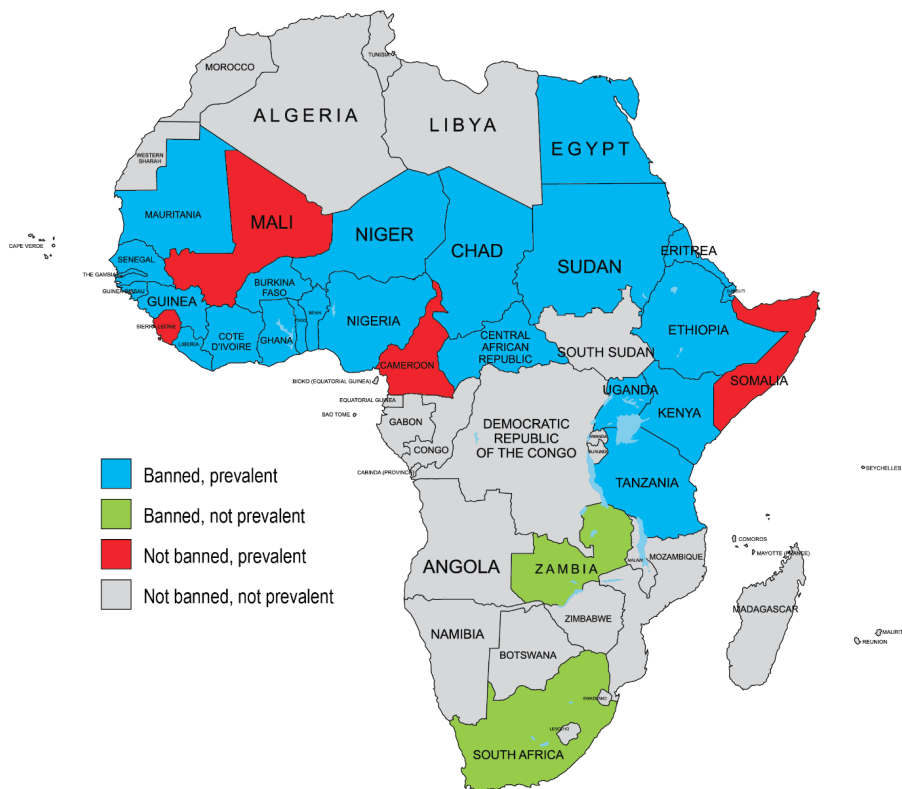


Figure 19: Africa: Banning and prevalence of FGM, 2018.

Source:

Banning of FGM (UNFPA), Prevalence of FGM (UNICEF).

Graphic by the author.

134 UNFPA ‘Female genital mutilation (FGM) frequently asked questions’ (January 2017) <http://www.unfpa.org/resources/female-genital-mutilation-fgm-frequently-asked-questions> (accessed 11 May 2018).

135 28 Too Many ‘Country Profiles’ (sa) <https://www.28toomany.org/research-resources/> (accessed 1 August 2018).

136 According to the 28 Too Many website, Cameroon does not have an explicit law banning FGM but Section 277 of the Cameroon’s Penal Code states that if any organ or member or sense is permanently deprived from its full use, the perpetrator shall be punished by imprisonment from ten to twenty years. <https://www.28toomany.org/country/cameroon/> (accessed 1 August 2018).

Banning FGM does not necessarily mean it will be reduced or eradicated since it may be performed in secret, making it difficult for states to police or for agencies to report on. Laws may also not be effectively enforced, which challenges eradication efforts. Meaningful strides have been taken in efforts to combat, eradicate and abandon FGM: in December 2012 the United Nations (UN) adopted a resolution on ‘intensifying global efforts for the elimination of female genital mutilation’ at its 67th General Assembly. This resolution is a milestone in the struggle to eradicate discrimination and violence against women and to strive towards a society where the right to the highest attainable standard of mental and physical health must be promoted and protected. In December 2014, another resolution was adopted by the UN, to reaffirm the continued efforts of the international community to fight FGM. In September 2015, with the introduction of a new set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs),¹³⁷ a target¹³⁸ was set under Goal 5 to eliminate all harmful practices, including child, early and forced marriage as well as FGM globally by 2030.

3.3 Non-legal measures to eradicate FGM

International, regional and domestic instruments that address harmful practices focus primarily on the legal regulation of the elimination of sexual discrimination, freedom from torture and violence against women, the right of the child and the right to health. This places the onus on states to act on measures relating to practices such as FGM. Non-legal measures are also provided for, apart from legal prohibition. International treaties, such as the Maputo Protocol¹³⁹ require the social, political, economic and cultural spheres to proactively and explicitly promote gender equality, address gender stereotypes and eliminate sexual discrimination. Gender sensitisation efforts, public awareness and educational programmes are required to extend the agenda of eliminating discrimination of any form against women.

State parties achieve this through gender-mainstreaming activities such as reviewing and amending educational materials, updating social communication strategies, rolling out training programmes, implementing institutional transformation policies and promoting gender sensitisation programmes. An effective way of publicising the gender-mainstreaming agenda is to actively campaign for women’s human rights. The use of effective campaign strategies has the potential of changing social and cultural patterns and may include prominent dissemination of campaign goals, strong messages from prominent advocates, eye-catching and easily obtainable campaign materials, social media integration, informative educational materials and coordinated campaign events. Awareness-raising is part and parcel of human rights advocacy and the anti-FGM agenda, to a large extent, benefits from these endeavours.

One of the greatest challenges of addressing harmful practices such as FGM rests on the desensitisation of issues surrounding the practice. Desensitisation efforts through campaigning play an important role in challenging taboos, especially where issues such as gender stereotyping, body autonomy and self-representation are involved. These issues lie at the heart of the FGM paradigm. The next chapter will look specifically at the representation of the vagina in campaigns dealing with FGM, shedding some light on novel representation strategies extending beyond current and more traditional educational programmes and awareness-raising activities.

137 UNICEF (n88 above) 1.

138 Sustainable Development Goal Target 5.3.

139 Maputo Protocol Article 2(2), Article 4(2)(d) and Article 5(a).

3.4 Criticism against the anti-FGM agenda

The debate around FGM is extremely sensitive and, according to some, even hazardous.¹⁴⁰ Campaigns against the practice started to appear around the 1980s and focused on the risks surrounding health and well-being.¹⁴¹ Mottin-Sylla and Palmieri view this approach as problematic since discussions around FGM were triggered from outside and considered judgmental, condemnatory and not introspective.¹⁴² Another problem of the 1980s anti-FGM rhetoric was that the campaigns were at the mercy of community leaders and members who were very often the driving force behind the practice of FGM. Victims were marginalised by the health-based approach and although it did demonstrate some advantages it did have its limitations.¹⁴³

Over the last thirty years the anti-FGM discourse has primarily been framed in a rights-based approach – which some find questionable, due to its portrayal of FGM as a ‘victimising’ practice.¹⁴⁴ By stigmatising FGM as violent, discriminatory and sexist, Mottin-Sylla and Palmieri contend that ‘victimhood’ becomes difficult to transcend psychologically.¹⁴⁵ The global outcry against FGM, posited within the feminist school of thought and intersecting with rights-based approaches, excludes vital role-players from important discussions and interventions.¹⁴⁶ Mottin-Sylla and Palmieri call for anti-FGM movements to become a gender issue, including men, boys, women and girls, which should be based on ‘a positive, holistic, participatory vision relying on shared human rights values and collective negotiation’.¹⁴⁷

Transforming a harmful practice into a positive and participatory custom that will satisfy both traditional and human rights agendas is a challenge. FGM is in essence a rite of passage, and history has shown that harmful rites of passage can be successfully abandoned. Foot binding in China, a harmful practice for more than 1000 years, was successfully abandoned in 1912¹⁴⁸ as a result of outside pressure and inside transformation. According to Gerry Mackie, both FGM and foot binding are practices aimed at controlling ‘sexual access to females and ensure female chastity and fidelity’¹⁴⁹ and three steps must be taken to abandon FGM. Firstly, the advantages of natural, intact genitalia should be highlighted to both women and men. Secondly, the international community must deplore the bad health consequences and convey it tactfully. Thirdly, associations that condemn the practice must be formed and parents should pledge not to allow their daughters to undergo FGM, and discourage their sons from marrying women who have undergone FGM.¹⁵⁰ These recommendations have been implemented to some extent over the last few decades through advocacy tools, sexual health education, legal strategies and community action,

140 MH Mottin-Sylla & J Palmieri *Confronting female genital mutilation: The role of youth and ICTs in changing Africa* (2011) 5.

141 Mottin-Sylla & Palmieri (n140 above) 6.

142 Mottin-Sylla & Palmieri (n140 above) 6.

143 Mottin-Sylla & Palmieri (n140 above) 7.

144 Mottin-Sylla & Palmieri (n140 above) 7.

145 Mottin-Sylla & Palmieri (n140 above) 7.

146 Mottin-Sylla & Palmieri (n140 above) 7.

147 Mottin-Sylla & Palmieri (n140 above) 8.

148 AM Wilson ‘How the methods used to eliminate foot binding in China can be employed to eradicate female genital mutilation’ (2013) 22:1 *Journal of Gender Studies* 19.

149 G Mackie ‘Ending footbinding and infibulation: A convention account’ (1996) 61:6 *American Sociological Review* 1001.

150 Mackie (n149 above) 1015.

but the prevalence of the practice is not declining rapidly enough. According to UNICEF¹⁵¹ increasing population growth will slow progress made and it is even anticipated that the overall numbers will rise in the next 15 years, making the realisation of the SGDs, and in particular Target 5.3, even more challenging and highly unlikely.

Mottin-Sylla and Palmieri call for positive and participatory methods, echoing the approaches described by Mackie, to highlight the benefits of abandonment and place the role of the youth (from all genders) at the centre of the debate. The Tostan model¹⁵² is an example of a positive and participatory strategy and the Community Empowerment Programme includes Mackie's recommendation on public condemnations and pledges. Sylvia Tamale agrees that a respectful, informed and dignified approach is needed to negotiate sexual rights with cultural practices. She regards rights and culture not as binary oppositions but as fluid constructs.¹⁵³ Tamale points out that the concept of human rights itself is derived from particular historical circumstances and automatically inherited a culture of its own.¹⁵⁴ She cautions against a so-called top-down approach to end harmful practices where the West dictates on the issues surrounding cultural relativism.¹⁵⁵ Female African sexuality, according to Tamale, was traditionally viewed in negative terms¹⁵⁶ and regarded as a spectacle. This is demonstrated by the way that Sarah Baartman, the so-called Hottentot Venus, was treated. Another case in point where practices are classified as 'harmful' and where female Africa sexuality is controlled by the West, is the elongation of the labia minora¹⁵⁷ among the Baganda.¹⁵⁸ The tension between the rights culture and traditional culture is exacerbated by 'othering' female African sexuality but Tamale calls for using the 'liberating potential'¹⁵⁹ of African culture to promote women's human rights. She suggests that 'creative thinking'¹⁶⁰ should be employed with regards to women's sexual rights and freedoms and that the liberating aspects of culture should transcend the oppressive ones. Trends in recent campaigns are assessed below to ascertain what the different approaches are to promote sexual rights within the anti-FGM narrative, and to determine whether a new approach that focus on liberation, rather than oppression, is perhaps the 'creative thinking' that Tamale has in mind.

151 UNICEF (n88 above).

152 The Tostan model is discussed in more detail Chapter 5.

153 S Tamale 'The right to culture and the culture of rights: A critical perspective on women's sexual rights in Africa' (2008) 16 *Feminist Legal Studies* 50.

154 Tamale (n153 above) 50.

155 Tamale (n153 above) 48.

156 Tamale (n153 above) 52.

157 Tamale (n153 above) 62.

158 The elongating of the labia minora, as practiced in Uganda, is not that different from vaginoplasty, mostly practiced in the West and which has not been classified as FGM by the WHO.

159 Tamale (n153 above) 53.

160 Tamale (n153 above) 53.

Chapter 4

Campaigns against FGM: Where is the vagina?

4.1 An introduction to campaigns against FGM

A number of anti-FGM campaigns target affected countries in the North Western to North Eastern part of Africa towards the Middle East, and the United Kingdom, Europe and the United States. The main goal and purpose of anti-FGM campaigns is to reduce and ultimately eradicate the practice. These campaigns create awareness by distributing information about the practice, educating women, men and children in the affected communities about its consequences and by focusing on the enactment and effective implementation of legislation against FGM.

It is important to note that one of the problems encountered during any research into anti-FGM campaigns is poor accessibility to materials for advocacy purposes. None of the campaign websites visited offer resources allowing users to download visual materials, print them out, share them or physically distribute them. Providing an anti-FGM toolkit that can aid in the dissemination of posters for schools, community centres, libraries, churches, clinics and other public places, can spread the message of anti-FGM even wider.

An analysis of recent and accessible anti-FGM campaigns and their use of visual imagery to convey the message of the harmful consequences and social stigmas that are attached to FGM follows. There are a number of graphic symbols and icons that are used to represent the vagina, most commonly, organic imagery such as butterflies, flowers, shells and fruit. Hearts and ovals are also used to denote the vagina. Some campaigns avoid anything that resembles a vagina while others use ostensibly 'respectful' imagery to allude to the vagina. Yet other campaigns are deliberately more explicit and bold about the representation of the vagina.

The visual components used in these campaigns are analysed against a visual culture framework and are divided into the following four categories: non-representation, symbolic representation, quasi-literal representation and literal representation.

4.2 Category 1: Non-representation of the vagina

Campaigns that do not portray the vagina attempt to convey subtle messages by using pictures of girls and women looking morose and pensive, sometimes challenging the viewer by looking directly at the camera. The girls and women are most often dressed in traditional attire and in much of the visual material they don headscarves, inferring religious influences and a cultural prescription on the practice. Other methods of non-representation include images of tools that are used in the harmful practice of FGM as well as images of educational drives within communities.

4.2.1 The Girl Generation

www.thegirlgeneration.org

The Girl Generation is an Africa-led global collective using positive stories for social change to raise awareness about FGM. The aim of The Girl Generation is to help end the harmful practice in this generation and the movement focuses on the ten worst affected countries in Africa (Burkina Faso, Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan and The Gambia). One of their campaigns concentrates on girls who have refused to undergo FGM and their stories are shared to inspire and encourage other girls to do the same and to stand up for their human rights. The campaign uses photographs of these girls dressed in traditional clothing (Figure 20, 21 and 22), alongside slogans and stories in line with the objective of the campaign. This campaign also utilises documentary style reporting, where photographs and descriptions are used to aid in the storytelling process.



Figure 20: Jane, 13, refused FGM and now dreams of becoming a doctor, [sa].

Source:

The Girl Generation website (accessed 9 October 2017).



Figure 21: Serina, 13, was only 10 when she said no to FGM and now aspires to be a pilot [sa].

Source:

The Girl Generation website (accessed 9 October 2017).

Figure 22: Doris, 13, is part of the generation that ends FGM. [sa].

Source:

The Girl Generation website (accessed 9 October 2017).

4.2.2 United Nations / *The Guardian* Global Media Campaign

www.theguardian.com/end-fgm

This joint campaign was launched on 30 October 2014 in Nairobi with the support of *The Guardian*. The campaign's visual resources are hosted on *The Guardian* website and contain mostly thumbnails of news articles and links to videos and related stories. The campaign content is displayed in a typical news-style grid layout (Figure 23) with news-related photos as the main visual imagery. The logo of the End FGM campaign symbolises a razor blade, the tool that is the most commonly used in performing FGM (Figure 24). The razor blade is fragmented into smaller pieces and cut in half by the text 'End Female Genital Mutilation' – both the campaign name and campaign objective. This illustrates how this campaign aims to ultimately stop FGM by 'breaking' the harmful practice.

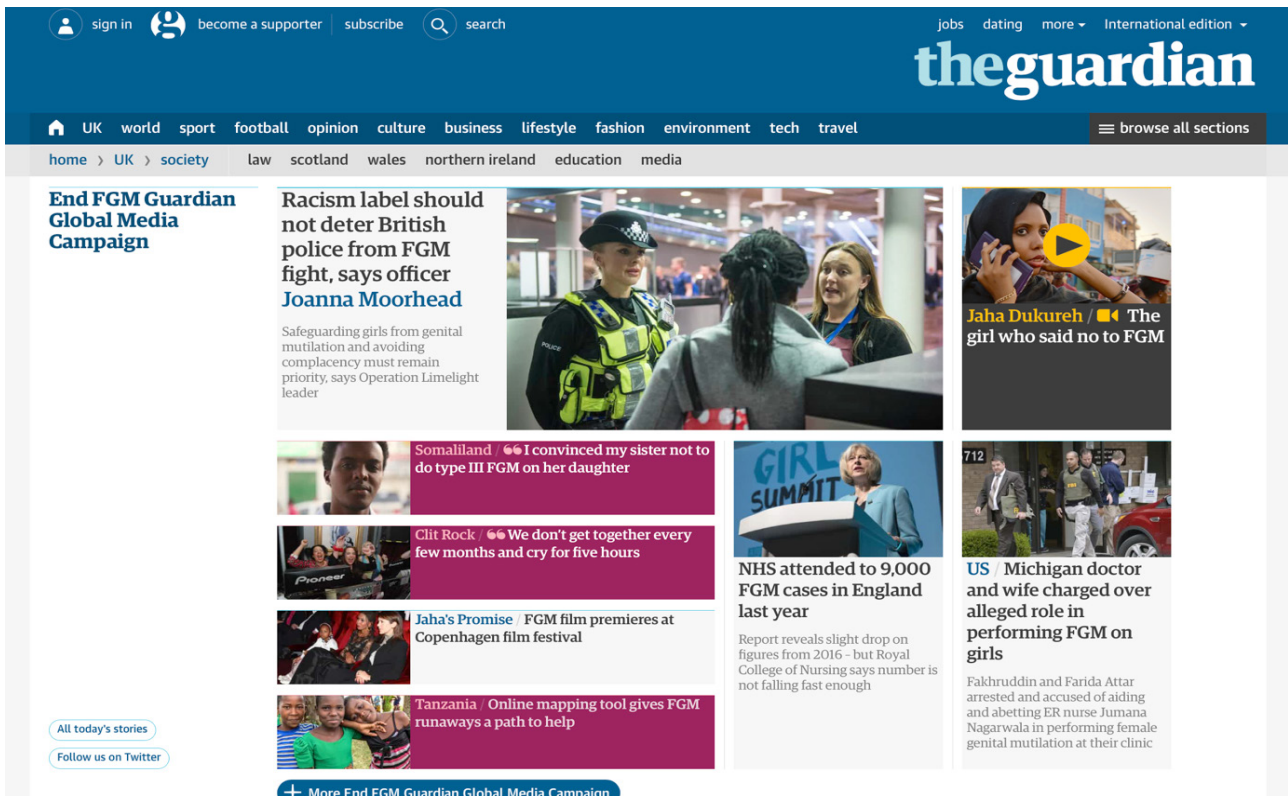


Figure 23: Landing page of the End FGM *Guardian* Global Media Campaign, [sa].

Source:

The Guardian End FGM website (accessed 9 October 2017).

4.2.3 Family Planning Association of Uganda (Reproductive Health Uganda)

www.rhu.or.ug

This road-side campaign also uses images of the tools used to perform FGM as graphic elements. The road sign (Figure 25) that was erected by the Family Planning Association in Uganda (currently known as Reproductive Health Uganda) uses an illustration of a razor blade and cutting tool, used for excision, scraping and cutting. The big pink cross over these tools with the accompanying text



Figure 24: End Female Genital Mutilation logo, Erik Ravelo, 2014.

Source:

The Guardian End FGM website (accessed 7 May 2015).

‘Stop female circumcision it is dangerous to women’s health’ makes the message bluntly clear. The visual depiction of these tools may have a disturbing effect on the viewer and highlights the violent nature of the practice.

4.3 Category 2: Symbolic representation of the vagina

These campaigns use images to represent the vagina and are more explicit than campaigns which fall into the non-representation category. This approach employs visual placeholders for the vagina that are deemed appropriate for public consumption. Using symbolic imagery to represent the vagina in anti-FGM campaigns may evoke empathy by encoding the traumatic and violent associations to FGM into a socially acceptable object such as a rose, or a mouth, or an ear.

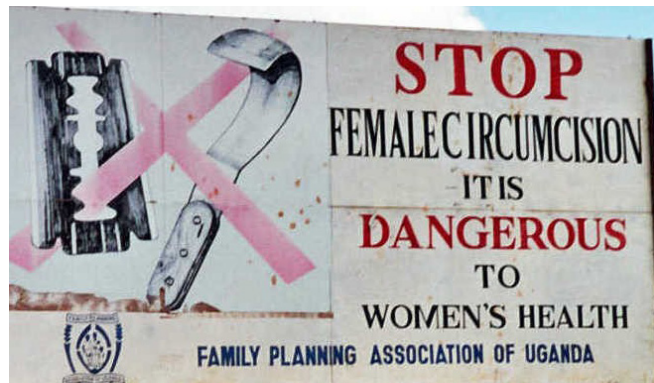


Figure 25: A campaign against female genital mutilation – a road sign near Kapchorwa, Uganda, Amnon Shavit, 2004.

Source:
Wikipedia (accessed 7 May 2015).

4.3.1 Amnesty International/ End FGM EU www.endfgm.eu

In 2009 Amnesty International launched a campaign against FGM and violence against women. The campaign uses images of roses (Figure 26), with the petals sewn together, to represent the outcome of infibulation (Type III FGM) where the outer genitalia are completely removed. This is one of the most graphic representations of FGM that can be deemed ‘safe’ for public display. This visual image attempts to create awareness and elicit emotion about the effects of FGM. The implied meaning of the rose, its petals and the way it is has been sewn so that the rose cannot open further, is trying to communicate what an infibulated vagina would look like. The image of the sewn rose has become iconic for the anti-FGM movement and is used as the logo of the End FGM European Network.



Figure 26: Amnesty International FGM rose poster, 2009.

Source:
Design and Violence website (accessed 7 May 2015).

4.3.2 Needlecraft (featured and inspired by *The Guardian* Global Media Campaign)

www.youtube.be/bgbvZzCZU_4



Figure 27: Screenshot, 'Needlecraft', 2016|

Source:

ForwardUK Youtube Channel
(accessed 9 October 2017).

One of the videos featured on *The Guardian* Global Media Campaign landing page is the award-winning animated short video 'Needlecraft'(2015), directed by Ruth Beni and Daniel Greaves. When performing Type III FGM (infibulation), the genital opening is sometimes sewn shut, leaving only a small opening for the excretion of menstruation blood and urine. This sewing metaphor, also employed by Amnesty and End FGM European Network, is the main theme of 'Needlecraft'. Beni explains that the use of animation enabled them to depict the impact of the harmful practice whilst respecting the dignity and anonymity of the victims.¹⁶¹ 'Needlecraft' depicts the cutting of a girl's ears and nose, followed by the sewing of the ear orifice (Figure 27) and eventually the mouth.



Figure 28: Screenshot, 'The True Story of Ghati and Rhobi', 2016.

Source:

ForwardUK Youtube Channel
(accessed 9 October 2017).

¹⁶¹ M Carson 'Guardian-inspired anti-FGM film wins festival award' 2 May 2016 *The Guardian* <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/may/02/guardian-inspired-anti-fgm-film-needlecraft-wins-new-york-festivals-award> (accessed 1 August 2018).

The message of the film is provided by the narrator who states that ‘a girl is perfect, why cut her?’. ‘The True Story of Ghati and Rhobi’ (Figure 28), another animated short film, also co-directed by Beni, is a Tanzanian advocacy video to teach youth that they do have a choice and that the involvement of community elders can help accelerate change. However, this video employs the non-representation method which is more conservative and deemed to be more appropriate for its intended audience, who dictates the category of representation: ‘Needlecraft’ can be categorised as symbolic (global audience) while ‘The True Story of Ghati and Rhobi’ is non-representational (local audience).

4.3.3 It Happens Here (28 Too Many)

www.28toomany.org

The UK-based charity 28 Too Many was established in 2010 and works towards the awareness and eradication of FGM in the United Kingdom. The charity won the 2015 Advertiser of the Year Award at the 56th Annual Clio Awards in New York,¹⁶² with their campaign ‘It happens here’. The provocative and heavily criticised¹⁶³ anti-FGM campaign was developed by Ogilvy and Mather London. Other anti-FGM campaigners, such as the End FGM European Network and Daughters of Eve, responded negatively to the type of imagery used in the awareness campaign. ‘It Happens Here’ depicts European flags, smeared with blood and stitched together (Figure 29), using the sewing metaphor as seen in the ‘Needlecraft’ and Amnesty campaigns that alludes to the practice of Type III FGM (infibulation). According to reports¹⁶⁴ the images were criticised for being disgusting, too graphic and stigmatising. It is interesting to note that the critics of these supposedly explicit images hosted campaigns that allude to the same Type III FGM but without the suggestion of violence, gore or blood. This contrast reiterates how the vagina, and specifically in its representation, is a political and polarising concept, even within the anti-FGM community. Critics



Figure 29: ‘It Happens Here’ campaign, 2015.

Source:

Ogilvy Mather London website (accessed 9 October 2017).

162 M Perrett ‘28 Too Many’s FGM awareness campaign impresses at Clio awards’ 1 October 2015 *Campaign Live* <http://www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/28-manys-fgm-awareness-campaign-impresses-clio-awards/1366765> (accessed 9 October 2017).

163 R Sanghani ‘Disgusting’ FGM campaign wins prestigious advertising awards at Cannes’ 26 June 2015 *The Telegraph* <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-life/11699603/FGM-Ogilvy-campaign-wins-Cannes-Lion-awards.html> (accessed 9 October 2017).

164 Sanghani (n163 above).

feel that the bloodstained images can stigmatise and alienate victims, while the proponents of a more bold approach feel that a ‘hard-hitting’ issue warrants a hard-hitting response, which includes the use of challenging images, albeit gruesome.¹⁶⁵ According to Dr Ann-Marie Wilson, Executive Director of 28 Too Many, the campaign successfully communicated the message that FGM is not an ‘out of sight, out of mind’ problem.¹⁶⁶ Campaigns that hide the gruesome effects of the practice, may fail to communicate the physical and emotional trauma that is associated with the practice.

4.3.4 Art against FGM

www.art-against-fgm.com

The ‘Art against FGM’ project was a global campaign that opposed FGM and specifically used illustrations and comics to raise awareness. Female European artists were individually invited and all artworks submitted were made available in a booklet, which was available online.¹⁶⁷ These pictures of protest are creative statements that aimed to reduce the number of incidences of FGM and aimed to fight for human rights over and above any cultural or religious tradition. One of the examples (Figure 30) uses the sewing metaphor reminiscent of the ‘Needlecraft’ video, Amnesty International’s roses and the ‘It Happens Here’ campaign. Anna Karina Birkenstock created an artwork titled ‘Verschlossen’ (locked), depicting a doll whose mouth has been sewn closed. The metaphor of the doll represents a girl, who is not only silenced, but who is also imprisoned in a room, where the windows, doors and even the book on the floor is sewn shut. The symbolic

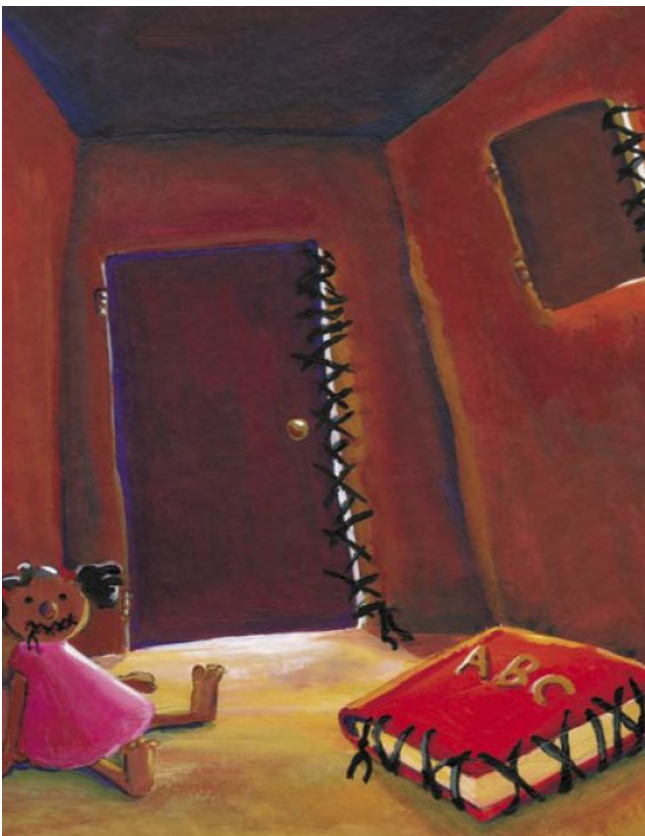


Figure 30: *Verschlossen*,
Anna Karina Birkenstock, 2006.

Source:

Art against FGM website (accessed 11 May 2015).



Figure 31: *Stop FGM*
Carolin Ina Schröter, 2006.

Source:

Art against FGM website (accessed 11 May 2015).

¹⁶⁵ Sanghani (n163 above).

¹⁶⁶ Sanghani (n163 above).

¹⁶⁷ See <http://art-against-fgm.com/downloads/dont.pdf> (accessed 11 May 2015) for more information.

NOTE: The website is no longer available but the PDF booklet can be accessed here: <https://goo.gl/8j7Bcb>

reference to infibulation touches on more than just the physical and mental consequences. It illustrates how disabling this practice is to the freedoms and opportunities of young girls and women on a number of levels. Carolin Ina Schröter's 'Stop FGM' is also symbolic (Figure 31). Her artwork shows the image of a young girl, squatting with her legs open, bleeding profusely. Her clothes are smeared with blood, especially in the area of her genitals, and a razor blade is suspended above her head. On the right-hand side two dates are listed, suggesting that the girl was 6 years old when she died. The artwork clearly implies the worst possible outcome of FGM. The visual imagery does not explicitly depict the vagina but uses blood, body language and the razor as graphic elements to imply that the girl has just been cut and that she is dying from her wounds.

4.4 Category 3: Quasi-literal representation of the vagina

In quasi-literal campaigns, the chosen visual material aims to break the cultural taboo surrounding the vagina by representing female genitalia more explicitly. In some of these campaigns, the issue of FGM is addressed in a more playful manner, most likely to render it more accessible and socially acceptable. By using almost whimsical representations, the message can have two functions: speaking out against the practice but also calling for the celebration of the vagina and its beauty.

4.4.1 Daughters of Eve

www.dofeve.org/stopping-fgm.html

The Daughters of Eve project focuses on providing support to young people who are at risk of FGM or who have undergone FGM. This women's human rights organisation also campaigns for the eradication of FGM and aims to change the attitudes that surround the practice. The project tries to combat the shame and secrecy that is associated with FGM and to fight the taboo by letting women speak bravely about their experiences to inform and educate others. One of their campaigns uses cupcakes that have been decorated to look like vaginas (Figure 32). In one of the campaign's videos these vagina cupcakes are smashed up to symbolise the destruction and violence associated with FGM. Although no real vaginas were used in the promotional video, the cupcakes visually resemble female genital organs. This is a 'tasteful' manner in which to convey the harm that FGM can cause and it argues against hiding the vagina and stigmatising it further.



Figure 32: Screenshot, 'Female Genital Mutilation' video, 2012.

Source:

Daughters of Eve website, (accessed 11 May 2015).

4.4.2 The Shoreditch Sisters

www.shoreditchsisterscampaigns.tumblr.com/embroideriescampaign

The Shoreditch Sisters Women’s Institute is a non-profit volunteer organisation in the United Kingdom. Members of the institute initiated a drive where the horrors of FGM are exposed while celebrating the beauty, diversity and power of the female body. The Shoreditch Sisters requested patchwork items to be posted to them that have been handcrafted to specifically showcase the beauty and uniqueness of the vulva. These patches are assembled into a larger ‘vulva quilt’ (Figure 33), creating a provocative artwork that supports the aims of the campaign to break down taboos about women’s vaginas and, ultimately, to celebrate women’s bodies.



Figure 33: Vulva quilt, [sa].

Source:

Guerrilla Science website, (accessed 11 May 2015)

4.5 Category 4: Literal representation of the vagina

Literal representations of the vagina in anti-FGM campaigns are extremely difficult to find. FGM is a sensitive issue and the majority of campaigns opt for sanitised and safe representation in their visual material. Literal representations of the vagina in anti-FGM campaigns that could be sourced are mostly technical (medical) illustrations to aid in the explanation of the four different types of FGM (Figure 34). The reason why mostly medical illustrations are available and used, might be because FGM was initially framed within a clinical/health discourse, which in turn makes it more prone to being hidden and contained within a specific discipline. The

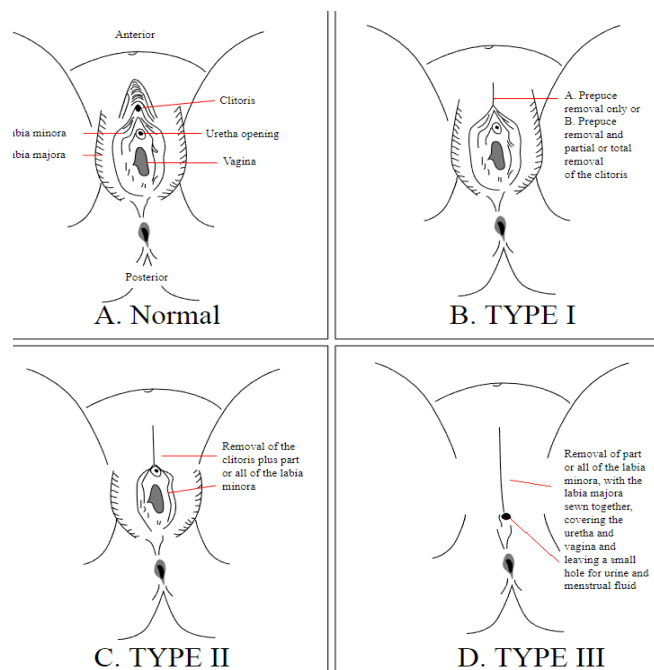


Figure 34: Classification of female genital mutilation, WHO, 2014.

Source:

Wikipedia (accessed 1 August 2018).

lack of visually explicit or literal representations of the vagina indicates that not only is the practice hidden, but the campaigns that try to expose the practice, suffer from being secretive themselves. Because the topic matter is classified as taboo, this has an effect on campaigns trying to eradicate similarly taboo practices. On the WHO website¹⁶⁸, a visual reference and learning tool for health care professionals¹⁶⁹ is accessible via a few clicks through to the Wolters Kluwer database, limiting the resource to medical professionals and academics.



Figure 35: Screenshot, 'The Cruel Cut', 2013.

Source:
 'The Cruel Cut', Channel 4 Documentary
 (accessed 10 October 2017).



Figure 36: Screenshot, 'The Cruel Cut', 2013.

Source:
 'The Cruel Cut', Channel 4 Documentary
 (accessed 10 October 2017).

4.5.1 The Cruel Cut

[www.channel4.com/
 programmes/the-cruel-cut](http://www.channel4.com/programmes/the-cruel-cut)

'The Cruel Cut' (2013), presented by FGM victim and anti-FGM activist Leyla Hussein, is a Channel 4 documentary on the practice of FGM in the United Kingdom and is an example of how the literal representation of the vagina can be used in anti-FGM campaigns. Warnings about the graphic images and descriptions of FGM appear before you can watch the documentary on the Channel 4 website and you have to be older than 16 and accept the terms and conditions to view the film.

As part of the campaign, Leyla and her team sets up a pink 'vagina pop-up booth' on the South Bank of the Thames in London and hands out vagina cupcakes to get participants interested in her 'vagina talk'. Inside the vagina tent, the practice of FGM and the different types of FGM are explained in graphic detail and Leyla remarks that although the images are graphic and disturbing, 'people need to see it'. Leyla uses photos of real victims (Figure 35) in an effort to bring the seriousness of the issue home.

In the documentary, Leyla takes a group of young men, who are part of African communities living in the United Kingdom, to a curated vagina exhibition in an effort to educate them about FGM. Their tour starts by looking at the *Great Wall of Vaginas* (discussed in Chapter 2) (Figure 18 and Figure 36) and then huge oversized clay models of vulvas that demonstrate the different types of FGM (Figure 37). One of the participants was so

168 WHO 'Classification of female genital mutilation' (sa)
<http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/topics/fgm/overview/en/> (accessed 1 August 2018)

169 J Abdulcadir, C Lucrezia et al 'Female genital mutilation: A visual reference and learning tool for health care professionals' (2016) 128:5 *Obstetrics & Gynecology* 958–963.



Figure 37: Screenshot, 'The Cruel Cut', 2013.

Source:

'The Cruel Cut', Channel 4 Documentary
(accessed 10 October 2017).

repulsed by the representation of the practice that he needed to leave the room. What is interesting to note is that these participants discussed FGM before the demonstration and claimed that it was a good practice, even though they seemed not to know what the practice actually involved. After demonstrating the different types of FGM, Leyla shows the young men real photographs of FGM being performed, explaining to them that the subjects are real people, who have to live with the consequences every day. The demonstration makes a real impact on the men and they make a 360 degree turn on their opinions of FGM. What was once hidden now makes a visual impact and the real consequences of the practice hits home. The young men who have been interacting with Leyla now wants to join the campaign and pledged that they will not let their daughters one day be harmed by the undergoing the procedure.

One of the participants remarks that not a lot of people will get to see these explicit visual representations of the practice and they want to become involved and be a part of the campaign to disseminate them. This illustrates how powerful representational material, especially from the literal category, can be. The responses from 'The Cruel Cut' demonstrates that there is a need for more explicit visual materials to combat FGM. An interesting point made by one of the commentators on the documentary was that, if vaginas of white women were being cut, the issue of FGM would have been taken more seriously, suggesting that the human rights of African, Middle-eastern and Asian women are less important than the human rights of Western women.

By looking at the initial visual impact of FGM campaigns, it is notable that different campaigns work in different settings. The non-representation and symbolic representation of the vagina is more acceptable in the public domain where large organisations and media companies operate. The quasi-literal and literal representations of the vagina are more in line with the aims of smaller and niche campaigns, or hard-hitting documentaries for which Channel 4 is known. The power of visuals and education through exposure demonstrates that although difficult, the literal presentation method is perhaps the most powerful. This can be substantiated by the practice of ana-suromai and the power of using the female body as a political tool.

4.6 The negative impact of visualising the violated vagina

The educational interventions by Leila Hussein and her team demonstrate that literal and graphic representations and descriptions can have a positive impact on the audience. The use of Category 4 representational methods may have the potential to change perceptions of and attitudes towards harmful practices. FGM is an invasive, traumatic bloody intervention of the genital organs and is associated with torture, child abuse and violence against women.¹⁷⁰ Graphic materials of the violated vagina, in its post-FGM state, can shock, horrify and even traumatise the viewer.

According to Sue Tait, internet spectatorship has increased the access to images that can be classified as body horror – images and videos that contain graphic depictions of war, violence, suffering and even death.¹⁷¹ Internet sites that display images of accidents, suicides, explicit medical material, war and crime scene photographs transcends the autonomy of traditional mainstream media and provide unrestricted access to material that is normally concealed from public consumption.¹⁷² Tait labels this type of spectatorship as the ‘reframing of looking’ and while some may see disturbing images as voyeuristic or even pornographic, audiences of body horror imagery have stated that images that are uncensored and not mass produced, do appear more ‘real’.¹⁷³ Explicit imagery ‘signifies the real’ and may have a visceral response and emotional impact on the viewer, which can be interpreted as either positive or negative. The viewing of the horrific imagery, such as the violated vagina, can have a wide range of spectatorial positions and reactions. These images can be consumed as an amoral fascination with violent body gore, or they can be seen in isolation with no moral or ethical meaning, or they can have a harmful effect on vulnerable viewers.¹⁷⁴ The mode of ‘really looking’ at the post-FGM vagina may either elicit a response devoid from intervention, or it can be seen as a catalyst that galvanizes action. The hope can only be that even when these horrific images of victims are shared or viewed, the latter will be the most common response.

The call for revealing the vagina in anti-FGM campaigns does not necessarily mean the use of explicit and violated images of post-FGM victims. Leyla Hussein’s campaign uses a combination of a guided documentary style presentation of horrific images and stories, with vagina clay models to elicit initial reactions of shock, followed by a strong urge to do something to end the harmful practice of FGM. Many of the respondents to Hussein’s campaign demonstrated traumatic reactions coupled with tangible urges to effect change.

170 M Reyners ‘Health consequences of female genital mutilation’ (2004) 4:4 *Reviews in Gynaecological Practice* 245.

171 S Tait ‘Pornographies of violence? Internet spectatorship on body horror’ (2008) 25:1 *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 91.

172 Tait (n171 above) 92.

173 Tait (n171 above) 108.

174 Tait (n171 above) 108.

Chapter 5

Ana-suromai: The power of the exposed vagina

5.1 Pussy power and genital cursing: The female body as political tool

The controversial nature of the vagina in art and cultural history is evident. The fear, hatred and disdain that female bodies endure are manifested in various ways, with FGM being one of the most violent practices with the most severe consequences. The female body is arguably more challenged today than ever, rendering the ‘personal’ extremely ‘political’. This is evident in the number of feminist activist movements such as Pussy Riot as well as the MeToo and Time’sUp movements.¹⁷⁵ The corporeal shift from the personal (private) to the political (public) encapsulates the practice of ana-suromai and the perceived political power of the female genitalia.

The vagina is sometimes a bold, proud, potent and defiant active role-player in society.¹⁷⁶ Imagery of the vagina in Western societies is mostly associated with sex, pornography and female submission to male desire.¹⁷⁷ Ironically, female genitalia in the ‘liberal’ West are not generally associated with female pleasure or reproduction but, more often, with male pleasure and female subordination. In some non-Western societies, vaginas can be symbols of sensuality, pleasure, fertility and even the aversion of evil.¹⁷⁸ This apotropaic or evil-aversion ability of the vagina, when a woman intentionally reveals her naked vulva, is anecdotally evident in a number of non-Western societies.¹⁷⁹ There are accounts of women calming turbulent seas, scaring away lions, exorcising demons and chasing off bears by the deliberate exposure of their vaginas.¹⁸⁰

The representation of vagina or vulva is historically either associated with enhancing fertility (sexual) or averting evil (political). Evidence shows that, in ancient times, female genitalia were revered and venerated. The origin of female genital mutilation practices such as female circumcision, infibulation and clitoridectomy also dates back to the early beginnings of humanity,¹⁸¹ demonstrating that the vagina was both celebrated and persecuted. The first report of female circumcision is attributed to Herodotus who, around 500 BCE, suggested that the custom originated in either Egypt or Ethiopia.¹⁸² It is also Herodotus who first records the political act of ana-suromai, translated as ‘to raise one’s clothes’ in Greek.¹⁸³ Herodotus, bemused by seemingly more egalitarian (reversed) gender roles in Egypt (women took on more prominent business

175 Rees (n7 in chapter 2 above) 38.

176 Blackledge (n15 above) 8-56.

177 Blackledge (n15 above) 9.

178 Blackledge (n15 above) 5.

179 Blackledge (n15 above) 8.

180 Blackledge (n15 above) 8.

181 Lightfoot-Klein (n73 above) 27.

182 Lightfoot-Klein (n73 above) 27.

183 Blackledge (n15 above) 12.

roles while the men stayed at home and weaved), noted that ana-suromai played an integral role in religious rituals.¹⁸⁴ There seems to be a paradox within the politics of vaginal or vulvic representation during ancient Egypt when Herodotus was recording his observations. According to Lightfoot-Klein, circumcision became a replacement for human sacrifice in ancient times, and states that it is unknown when the obsession with virginity and chastity became the focus of the practice.¹⁸⁵ It may be argued that, while the customs of female circumcision and ana-suromai were being practised, female circumcision became a patriarchal tool to reject and overcome the political strength of the female body, in particular the female genitalia. Female genital mutilation is currently particularly prevalent in Egypt¹⁸⁶ and the practice was also legally performed by surgeons in public hospitals from 1994 to 1997.¹⁸⁷ It begs the question: what caused the celebratory and liberating practice of ana-suromai to be replaced by the dangerous and debilitating custom of female genital mutilation?

Reports¹⁸⁸ indicate that across a number of regions in Africa, women from various groups (such as the Kom, the Bakweri¹⁸⁹ and the Balong in Cameroon, the Azande in the Northern parts of Central Africa, the Kikuyu in Kenya, the Pokot in Kenya and Uganda, the Itsekiri in Nigeria¹⁹⁰ and the Khoisan in Southern Africa¹⁹¹) deal collectively with social nudity when confronted with gender-based insult, voyeurism and shaming. This practice is not restricted to regions in Africa and there exist reports of similar genital shaming practices in Papa New Guinea amongst the Ilahita Arapesh and Mountain Arapesh women.¹⁹²

Elsewhere in Africa there are a number of examples where the display of female genitalia is used as a political tool. For example, the Kom women¹⁹³ from Western Cameroon practice 'anlu', a traditional collective ritual genital display dance, used as an apotropaic, or evil-averting, technique to repudiate an offender.¹⁹⁴ According to anthropologist Ritzenthaler 'anlu' is used to draw attention to offenders who are guilty of the abuse of old or pregnant women, genital grabbing or insulting parents using genital references.¹⁹⁵ Instead of being ashamed of their exposed vaginas, the Kom women use their genitalia to actively shame others and affect change in society.¹⁹⁶ In 1958 approximately 7 000 Kom women forced the government to change regulations that would have negatively impacted on farming practices by employing a massive collaborative performance of 'anlu'.¹⁹⁷ This defiant act of ana-suromai illustrates that, instead of being ashamed of their vaginas, women have used their naked genitalia to challenge patriarchy and power relations that impeded on women's human rights.

184 Blackledge (n15 above) 12.

185 Lightfoot-Klein (n73 above) 27.

186 UNFPA (n134 above) contends that in 2014, 92% of women and girls that are aged between 15 and 49 have undergone some form of FGM in Egypt.

187 28 Too Many 'Country Profile: FGM in Egypt' (April 2017)
<https://www.28toomany.org/country/egypt/> (accessed 18 May 2018).

188 SG Ardener 'Sexual Insult and Female Militancy' (1973) 8:3 *Man* 422-440.

189 Ardener (n188 above p422) describes the Bakweri use of the expression 'titi tikoli', which refers to a woman's genitals and the secrets associated with it. It also refer to an insult, a reference to the apotropaic qualities of ana-suromai in Cameroon. It is also translated and described as literally meaning 'beautiful', which is an uplifting and refreshing take on the practice of skirt-lifting.

190 P Stevens 'Women's Aggressive Use of Genital Power in Africa' (2006) 43:3 *Transcultural Psychiatry* 597.

191 Blackledge (n15 above) 18.

192 Blackledge (n15 above) 18.

193 The Kom women's descent is traced matrilineally, and Blackledge (n15 above) notes that social positions in this society is directly linked to vagina from which one is born.

194 Blackledge (n15 above) 16.

195 RE Ritzenthaler 'Anlu: a women's uprising in the British Cameroons' (1960) 19:3 *African Studies* 151.

196 Blackledge (n15 above) 16.

197 Blackledge (n15 above) 17.

A recurring theme in Yoruba art and a visual reminder that nudity is often used as a weapon by women, is the image of a naked older woman, holding her breasts and kneeling in such a way that her vulva is visible.¹⁹⁸ An older woman might only expose her genitalia publicly and deliberately as part of a paradoxical extreme and desperate appeal to restore dignity and justice.¹⁹⁹ It is seen as a desperate act and her very dignity of womanhood is endangered, yet she may see no other alternative than to resort to the practice of exposing her vagina.²⁰⁰ An example of concrete political change because of apotropaic genital display is the case of 600 Itsekiri women from the Niger Delta in Nigeria. These women shut down operations for 10 days at Chevron-Texaco's Escravos oil terminal by threatening to undress if their demands for social justice were not met.²⁰¹ Bastian defines the promised or actual practice of collective nudity as 'genital cursing', a common and well-understood practice in some Western and Central African countries.²⁰² Notions of nudity, gender relations and the male gaze in the Western world differs starkly from regions such as Cameroon and Nigeria, where the politics of undressing and gazing upon the undressed varies; it depends on who is naked, who is clothed and who is looking.²⁰³ The practice of genital cursing can be a vocal promise, which in many instances is enough to effect change and force the hand of the opposition to accede to the will of the women, or it can be exercised in full.²⁰⁴ Genital cursing endorses African women's pride²⁰⁵ and advances women's rights by transcending the notion of 'gender complementarity'²⁰⁶ into a 'gender solidary position', rendering the women powerful, fearless and unified.²⁰⁷ These women lose their private identities and personal shame to become one single force of fecundity, 'an undifferentiated, female, reproductive mass, representing, in a graphic manner, the wrath of the earth goddess herself'.²⁰⁸

Among Western women, the practice of revealing 'taboo' parts of the female body is also a sanctioned response to patriarchy. FEMEN, a feminist activist organisation based in the Ukraine and France, states on its website that it is 'an international women's movement of brave topless female activists painted with the slogans and crowned with flowers'.²⁰⁹ The FEMEN ideology is based on 'sextremism' (a non-violent but aggressive form of feminist actionism to undermine old political ethics and patriarchal culture), atheism and feminism – the movement's goal is 'complete victory over patriarchy'.²¹⁰ FEMEN claims that their protest weapon of choice is bare breasts but they define their approach as 'naked attacks' on the 'historic women-system conflict' which they claim is the most visual and appropriate illustration to support the 'new aesthetics of women's revolution'.²¹¹ Some of their activities targeted Russian President Vladimir

198 Stevens (n190 above) 597.

199 Stevens (n190 above) 597.

200 Stevens (n190 above) 597.

201 Stevens (n190 above) 597.

202 ML Bastian 'The naked and the nude: Historically multiple meanings of *Oto* (Undress) in Southeastern Nigeria' in A Masquelier (ed) *Dirt, Undress, and Difference: Critical Perspectives on the Body's Surface* (2005) 45.

203 Bastian (n202 above) 35.

204 Bastian (n202 above) 46.

205 Blackledge (n15 above) 17.

206 Gender complementarity is derived from the traditional and biblical notion that men and women have different strengths and that men are assigned certain roles, such as heading a household, while women are assigned other roles, mostly of a supportive nature to the man.

207 Bastian (n202 above) 46.

208 Bastian (n202 above) 46.

209 FEMEN Official Blog <https://femen.org/about-us/> (accessed 27 June 2017).

210 FEMEN (n209 above).

211 FEMEN (n209 above).



Figure 38: Topless FEMEN activist ‘hangs’ herself on Paris bridge to protest Iran’s President visit, 2016.

Source:
Art-Sheep.com website (accessed 1 August 2018).



Figure 39: Time Magazine cover of pussy hat, 6 February 2017.

Source:
@womensmarch on Twitter (accessed 1 August 2018).

Putin (topless protest when Putin met with Angela Merkel in Hanover, Germany²¹²), French far-right leader Marine Le Pen (topless protest at a Front National election speech in Paris²¹³) and Iranian President Hassan Rohani (Figure 38) (topless protester staged a mock hanging from a bridge in Paris when Rohani visited the capital of France²¹⁴).

The Pussyhat Project, another Western feminist activist movement, focuses on raising awareness about women’s rights issues through dialogue, the arts, education and intellectual discourse.²¹⁵ In 2017, the movement campaigned for women’s rights in a creative and impactful way by wearing handmade pink hats at the Woman’s March.²¹⁶ The idea of the pink handmade knitted hats (Figure 39) resembling ‘pussycats’ is a direct message to President Donald ‘grab-them-by-the-pussy’ Trump, who was inaugurated the day before the march. The project aims to re-appropriate the word ‘pussy’ as a positive term and to support women’s

212 Associated Press (AP) ‘Putin laughs off topless protest by women’s rights group Femen’ 8 April 2013 *Independent* <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/putin-laughs-off-topless-protest-by-womens-rights-group-femen-8564917.html> (accessed 21 June 2018).

213 C Mortimer ‘French Elections: Topless Femen protester storms Front National stage and gets within a few feet of Marine Le Pen’ 18 April 2017 *Independent* <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/femen-marine-le-pen-topless-front-national-stage-storm-protester-paris-french-elections-a7688196.html> (accessed 21 June 2018).

214 J Lilywhite ‘France: Topless Femen activist ‘hangs’ herself to protest against Iran’s Hassan Rouhani visit to Paris’ 28 January 2016 *International Business Times* <https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/france-topless-femen-activist-hangs-herself-protest-against-irans-hassan-rouhani-visit-1540609> (accessed 21 June 2018).

215 The Pussyhat Project <https://www.pussyhatproject.com/> (accessed 6 June 2018).

216 The Pussyhat Project (n215 above).

human rights.²¹⁷ The Pussyhat Project also enables those who cannot attend activism events to join in their efforts wherever they are, through virtual activism and to connect and share a universal goal: support and solidarity for women's rights around the globe.

5.2 Vagina dialogues: Popularising and deconditioning the perception of the vagina

The practice and culture of FGM is an example of the politicisation of the female body. In her discussion of the medicalisation of FGM in Kenya, Christoffersen-Debb alludes to two instances where the female body becomes a political vehicle.²¹⁸ The first instance is how FGM is described by international organisations, such as the WHO, and how the framing of the practice has endured a metamorphosis from being a non-issue, to a cultural issue to a medical issue to a violence against women and reproductive rights issue.²¹⁹ The second instance where the politicisation of FGM is evident, is where the practice is being described as a prominent feature in the political evolution of the State of Kenya. FGM evolved from an 'act of purification' during colonial times, to appropriating the practice as 'cultural' during the independence movement, to becoming 'political' during secularisation and eventually becoming 'criminal' and 'prohibited' in current times.²²⁰ Throughout various political and ideological fluctuations in Kenya, FGM remained a significant issue within the traditionalism/modernism dichotomy. This transformation illustrates how the female body politic is at the mercy of the current global trends and will always be part of the broader political discussion – since it remains a heavily politicised issue.

The taboos surrounding the female body are currently more evident in global political movements than ever before, since there is a growing number of women's rights movements, campaigns and advocacy efforts on a global scale. There are currently more images of the vagina available for public consumption than ever before and it begs the question whether these images are produced as art, pornography, protest or activism

The global political landscape is looking increasingly dire for women's human rights – funding cuts to sexual and reproductive health programmes are on the rise. The Trump administration's expanded gag rule, which was initiated only four days after taking up office, will have a broad impact not only on issues of family planning, but also for maternal and child health efforts.²²¹ One example of how the 'global gag rule', also known as the 'Mexico City Policy', is impacting on the reproductive health rights of women in Africa, is the case of the Mozambican Association for Family Development (AMODEFA). As a result of the executive memorandum signed by Trump, AMODEFA will have to close down 10 to 20 of its clinics and it will have to let 30 percent of its staff go.²²² Liberal approaches to women's reproductive health is under siege, which require us to perhaps reinvestigate, reinvent and reuse the apotropaic qualities of the vagina, as utilised in the ancient practice of ana-suromai. Is it not time to learn from the ancient Egyptians, the

217 S Hamasaki 'Pussyhat Project tops off Women's March on Washington' 20 January 2017 *CNN Politics* <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/01/20/politics/pussyhat-project-washington-march-trnd/index.html> (accessed 27 June 2017).

218 A Christoffersen-Debb "'Taming tradition": Medicalized female genital practices in Western Kenya' (2005) 19:4 *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 404.

219 Christoffersen-Debb (n218 above) 404.

220 Christoffersen-Debb (n218 above) 404.

221 B Crane & E Maguire 'First: Aid: The future of US foreign aid in the Trump administration' (2017) 38:1 *Conscience: The News Journal of Catholic Opinion* 17.

222 C Finnegan 'Trump's 'global gag rule' cutting off health care in Africa: Report' 6 June 2018 *ABC News* <https://abcnews.go.com/International/trumps-global-gag-rule-cutting-off-health-care/story?id=55680213> (accessed 21 June 2018).

Kom, the Bakweri the Balong, the Azande, the Kikuyu, the Pokot, the Itsekiri, the Khoisan, the Arapesh, the FEMEN and the Pussyhats to claim autonomy of the female body by using that is what is feared the most – its nakedness – as a weapon against patriarchy. If patriarchy invented FGM, radical feminism should obliterate FGM.

The vagina – the vulva, the pussy, the cunt, female genitalia – is in itself heavily politicised. Are women and their vaginas going to remain the static receptacles and puppets in political games, as currently observed in global politics, country ideology and identity? Or should women say no to the mutilation of their genitals, and proudly use them again as political tools, like brave women have been doing since ancient times?

Perhaps there is no better time than now to undemonise the vagina, to desensitise female genitalia, and to empower the female body. Sylvia Tamale calls for creative ways, especially familiar African ways, to use the potential emancipatory power of culture to reclaim women's rights.²²³ Ana-suromai, the cultural and ancient practice of skirt-lifting, is perhaps the ideal vehicle to replace the harmful practice of genital cutting with the powerful cultural practice of genital cursing. There exists a need to find innovative ways to celebrate the vagina and to explore alternative rites of passage, which celebrate womanhood, motherhood and the role of women in the context of African societies.

5.3 Liberating the vagina: The importance of the representation of the vagina in campaigns against FGM

The efficacy of desensitisation is demonstrated by FGM victim and anti-FGM activist Leyla Hussein in the BAFTA nominated documentary film 'The Cruel Cut'. Harmful practices can be transcended by speaking frankly about them and by literally showing what the damaging effects of these practices are.

One of the most celebrated FGM abandonment programmes in Africa is called the Tostan model. It was developed in Senegal and the word 'tostan' means breakthrough in the Wolof language. Tostan focuses on community-led and respectful interactions to change behaviours and values based on human rights principles.²²⁴ The Tostan model has a three pronged approach: a Community Empowerment Programme (CEP) that offers a holistic, human rights-based education programme; Community Management Committees (CMC) that aid in implementing development projects within communities; and Community Led Outreach (CLO) that strengthens social networks to assist with extending the reach of the programme beyond the involved communities.²²⁵ The Tostan method, presented as an alternative to criminalisation, tries to address FGM by being culturally sensitive with a holistic approach to women's human rights.²²⁶ It has been applauded for the great work that it has done, but progress is slow.²²⁷ The programmes take approximately three years to conclude but their efficacy is measurable. By using the three pronged approach, paired with public declarations of abandonment, Tostan has reduced the mutilation rate from 69% to 30% in Senegalese villages since the programme started to operate in 1998.²²⁸

223 Tamale (n153 above) 64.

224 For more information on Tostan visit www.tostan.org.

225 S Kopper 'Female genital cutting in The Gambia: A case study of Tostan' 1 June 2010. Unpublished Master of Public Policy essay submitted to Oregon State University. <http://ir.library.oregonstate.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/1957/18595/kopper.pdf;sequence=1> (accessed 10 October 2017).

226 L Muzima 'Towards a "sensitive" approach to ending female genital mutilation/cutting in Africa' (2016) 3:1 *SOAS Law Journal* (2016) 73.

227 P Shetty 'Slow progress in ending female genital mutilation' (2014) 92:1 *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* 6-7.

228 Shetty (n227 above) 7.

Public pledges to strengthen community-led behaviour is an integral part of dealing with abandonment.²²⁹ Mackie's classification of FGM as being a 'Schelling convention' illustrates how behaviour is influenced by a certain sense of group 'mentality' and the role that the actions of a 'critical mass' can have on the rest of the community.²³⁰ Leyla Hussein's use of visual interventions in 'The Cruel Cut' shows its potential to accelerate community-led behavioural change. Perhaps another breakthrough can be added to the Tostan model, a creative cultural potential, a fourth prong to the approach, which should be carried out with the same respect and dignity as with the rest of the programme. The fourth prong can be named the Community Desensitisation Programme (CDP) where, combined with the other three programmes, women are not only vocal about abandonment, but also explicit about the reason why the practice should be abandoned. CDP should focus on the celebration of womanhood, motherhood, sexuality and the power of the pussy.

Leyla Hussein advocates for honest conversations that do not tiptoe around the issues that call FGM exactly what it is, namely violence against women. She calls for the abuse to stop and for FGM to be removed from the shroud of cultural practice that it has been hiding behind.²³¹ Dialogue, paired with art and activism, can be used to engage those influenced by FGM and to speak out clearly, bluntly and without fear. Hussein states that we need to speak clearly about what FGM is, and that language is the most powerful way to fight it. Language is not only a verbal or written conversation, but it is also visual. Desensitisation of the vagina is integral, but it should also include education to popularise the vagina. Imagery of the vagina should be used to celebrate its existence and to celebrate its life giving force, but also to demonstrate its strength and its right to exist in the world.

229 G Mackie 'Female genital cutting: The beginning of the end' in Rienner L (ed) "*Female circumcision*" in *Africa: culture, controversy, and change* (2000) 253.

230 Mackie (n229 above) 255.

231 Shetty (n227 above) 7.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

Female genital mutilation is a serious women's human rights issue in Africa and numerous global efforts are underway to reduce its prevalence and eradicate the harmful practice. A number of global campaigns target the issue using education, journalism, documentary videos, advocacy posters and protest art. Some of these campaigns steer clear of challenging taboos and use more conservative visual material in their efforts to raise awareness of FGM. Others use sophisticated graphics to allude to the severity of the practice without challenging the norms and visual complacency of the public sphere. Explicit campaigns challenge taboos by encouraging a shift in social norms in order to reduce stigmatisation. International, regional and domestic human rights instruments require state parties to promote educational and sensitisation programmes challenging social and cultural patterns to promote women's human rights. Visual material that challenges and deconditions its viewers may therefore enhance the efforts by states to educate and share information with regards to female sexual health and reproduction.

Challenging images that provoke and elicit outrage and shock are more readily used by smaller campaigns (such as the Daughters of Eve and the Shoreditch Sisters). Global leaders, such as *The Guardian*, and international organisations, such as the United Nations and the World Health Organisation, steer away from using explicit content which may ostensibly backfire and ruin a campaign because of social and religious taboos in its target communities. If the bigger role-players start to challenge audiences with more provocative campaigns, the message might be more striking. The only way for social norms to change is by challenging consensus and re-education.

Will more explicit depictions of the vagina in anti-FGM campaigns lead to a deconditioning of social norms, where women's bodies will be celebrated instead of being tortured, feared and despised? Or will it prove to be less successful as some societies may find it difficult to overcome the stigmatisation? It may be argued that non-representational campaigns that hide the vagina might possibly reinforce the taboo by strengthening the concept that the vagina is something that is tortured, maimed and feared – and that it must remain unseen.

In order to foster a more liberal attitude towards the female body, the first obstacle that needs to be overcome is the notion of the vagina as taboo. Once the vagina is a more accepted and less contested part of the female body (and not just a non-presence of the penis) it will be possible to overcome patriarchal and negative connotations to female genitalia. The global response to FGM has been mostly rights-based but one of the issues and main critiques against the West's involvement is that communities are not given enough opportunity to eradicate or replace the practice in their own terms. The majority of anti-FGM campaigns are sensitive, even sensitised. From the examples discussed in Chapter 4, it seems that the controversial interventions where the vagina is accurately represented, may produce positive results. Global campaigns make use of imagery that falls within Categories 1 and 3, while local and smaller campaigns make use of imagery that falls within Categories 3 and 4. With the change of attitudes towards women's rights and reproductive

health, especially in the conservative camp of Trump administration, and with the advent of the #MeToo movement, a more progressive approach to challenging imagery may become more normalised. The practice of ana-suromai can be revived to use the female body as a political tool. It is possible that the representation of the vagina can have an impact on archaic perceptions of the female body, and this can be done by using inventive and liberal images of the female body to desensitise, normalise and educate. One such an example is the animated documentary *Le Clitoris* (2016) by Lori Malépart-Traversy. *Le Clitoris* (Figures 40 to 42) tells the ‘herstory’ of the clitoris and the unrecognised anatomy of the only human organ that exists exclusively for pleasure.²³² The documentary, which have been viewed more than 7 million times online, has received thirteen awards and selected to be screened at more than 115 international film festivals.

Perhaps it is time to fight the ancient practice of FGM with the ancient practice of ana-suromai. The blades should be replaced with skirts that are lifted and the cutting must make way for the cursing. It is time for a V-war that stands for the liberation of the vagina. The female body, once perceived as a political landscape, should be transformed into an active political tool. The locus of body politics should become the weapon in the war against violence and abuse against women and children. We can no longer let the campaigns do what the practice itself does so well: hide and ignore the vagina. It should be de-tabooed, undemonised, revealed and celebrated. It is time to take the pussy power back.



Figure 40: Screenshot, ‘Le Clitoris’, 2016.

Source:

Lori Malépart-Traversy website
(accessed 21 June 2018).



Figure 41: Screenshot, ‘Le Clitoris’, 2016.

Source:

Lori Malépart-Traversy website
(accessed 21 June 2018).



Figure 42: Screenshot, ‘Le Clitoris’, 2016.

Source:

Lori Malépart-Traversy website
(accessed 21 June 2018).

232 L. Malépart-Traversy *Le Clitoris* (2016)
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