



Deconstructing Patriarchal Legacies: The Human Right to Politico-Linguistic Existence as a Challenge to Female Genital Mutilation in Senegal

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Abstract

International human rights law defines female genital mutilation (FGM) as an acute violation of the rights of girls and women everywhere, but the age-old practice continues at a cosmic rate even when practising communities themselves have seemingly grown opposed to it. Upon investigating this malaise, the well-noted failings of Western missionaries to achieve abolition through informing practising communities of their intrinsic human rights of which FGM violates, coupled with bleak health warnings, painted a familiar picture as to the current limits of 'universal' human rights. However, whilst reading further on this topic, I stumbled upon one human rights organisation that stood out from the pack—Tostan. This Senegalese NGO does not inform communities of the perils of FGM or postulate the practice as a human rights violation or indeed even independently introduce the topic at all. Instead, they promote political equality and grassroots democratic participation which has, to Tostan's own surprise, sparked unprecedented local mobilisation against FGM.

Studying Tostan's work prompted me to think about FGM as a manifestation of broader political inequality, as opposed to a more isolated act of sexualised violence as it is commonly comprehended

within the human rights literature. I wondered, if political inequality is so central to the perpetuation of FGM, is the natural result of challenging political inequality that communities themselves move to deconstruct residual manifestations of that inequality (*vis-à-vis* FGM). By investigating this hypothesis, while drawing upon the philosophy of Hannah Arendt, this thesis improves understanding of the hitherto vastly under-explored relationship between political (in)equality and FGM, ultimately offering the first comprehensive political rights framework that explains the unique success of Tostan.

Keywords: FGM; Tostan; Political rights; Arendt; Grassroots activism; Feminist legal perspectives; Human rights education.