

# Rethinking Female Genital Cutting: From a Culturalist to a Structuralist Framework for Challenging Violence Against Women

## *Introduction*

Since the beginning of the international campaign against it, not only Female Genital Cutting (FGC) but also the way these practices should be challenged has been subject to considerable debate. This chapter contributes to this debate by arguing for the need to move beyond culturalist explanations of FGC as they overlook the sociological complexity of violence against women. This chapter discusses the findings of qualitative research which has interrogated the continuation of FGC in Scotland from a migration perspective. By tracing FGC-affected women's trajectories of violence through their journeys from the Global South to the Global North, the findings illustrate the shared global failures in recognizing how FGC is rooted in and sanctioned by the systematic, intersectional discrimination of women. In an effort to challenge simplistic representations of migrant women's journeys from the patriarchal South to the emancipatory West, this chapter traces the societal conditions which perpetuate violence and trauma in the lives of displaced women. In doing so, the chapter demonstrates the possibilities that adopting a structural inequality perspective can provide for challenging both FGC-practices and the colonial representations of the anti-FGC discourse.

## *Tensions in constructing FGC*

Since the 1970s, Western feminists have not only taken the lead in challenging Female Genital Cutting (FGC), but also in largely defining the terms in which the practice has and continues to be condemned. Early feminist activism framed FGC in terms of patriarchal hegemony and sexual politics and, still today, the practice is considered to be an extreme form of discrimination against women (Obiora, 1997; WHO, 2018). Western feminist opposition was marked by a commitment to global sisterhood, which has been critiqued for conveying “a sense of entitlement to define African women’s interests, intervene on their account and dismiss their resistance” (Wade, 2011, p. 39). Western feminists assumed the duty to speak for their “mutilated sisters” (Daly, 1978, p. 101), constructing a simple binary between male perpetrators and female victims whom they perceived as being “mentally castrated” (Daly, 1978, p. 106) and as prisoners of ritual (Lightfoot-Klein, 1989). In doing so, feminists produced an image of a woman who for reasons of her gender is sexually constrained and, as being from the “Third World,” is traditional, poor, and “still-not-conscious-of-her-rights” (Mohanty, 1984, p. 352). The influence of these feminist constructions of FGC-affected women can still be seen in the legislation of many Western countries, which set widely different standards for genital modifications depending on women’s ethnicity (Johnsdotter & Essén, 2010).

It has been argued that “campaigns against FGM, which have relied heavily on demonization, have picked up where European colonial missionaries left off” (Mutua, 2001, p. 226). By culturalizing violence, radical feminists turned FGC into a symbol of the savagery and backwardness of Third World cultures (Volpp, 2001). These representations live on in modern public discourse, where accounts describing FGC in terms of barbarity and torture have become more the rule than the exception. By disproportionately emphasizing the most extreme manifestations of FGC, the popular discourse evokes images of African barbarism which Western audiences have consumed since the time of the Empire. In doing so, the international campaign against FGC has partaken in the neo-colonial project to reinforce inequalities between the Global North and the Global South. The global community began addressing FGC as a health issue, assuming that the practice would end when affected communities were made aware of its health consequences (Shell-Duncan, 2008). Blaming the continuation of FGC on blind adherence to tradition bears uncomfortable resemblance to the colonial stereotyping of backward Africa.

The prevailing human rights approach has the same undertones; the discourse on universal human rights has enforced the notions of FGC as inhumane and of practicing communities as lacking humanity, whilst remaining largely uncritical of the lack of meaningful participation from non-Western countries in the creation of the global human rights corpus (Mutua, 2001).

Western feminists argued that “beyond racism is sisterhood, naming the crimes against women without paying mindless respect to the ‘social fabric’ of the various androcratic societies” (Daly, 1978, p. 111). In contrast, Black feminists have called for contextual analysis of women’s subjugation, arguing that for Black women, “beyond sisterhood there is still racism, colonialism and imperialism” (Mohanty, 1984, p. 348). Religio-cultural explanations of FGC have been criticized for concealing the structural forces which play part in shaping gender-based violence (McKerl, 2007):

To fight against genital mutilation . . . without questioning the structures and social relations which perpetuate this situation is like ‘refusing to see the sun in the middle of the day.’ [Association of African Women for Research and Development in Lewis, 1995, pp. 32–33].

Black feminists have located gender subjugation in the context of wider societal conditions and global interconnections, calling for intersectional analysis of women’s vulnerability (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Abusharaf, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991). Black feminists have argued that violence against women is shaped not only by gender but also other axes of difference, including race and class (Abusharaf, 1995, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991; Mohanty, 1984). Rather than placing FGC at the pinnacle of the hierarchy of oppressions, Black feminism has reconfigured FGC as a “symptom rather than a cause of women’s troubles in a society” (Abusharaf, 2000, p. 156). It has been argued that women will not openly resist FGC, if doing so compromises their own material security (Abusharaf, 1995). Therefore, rather than to begin with women’s sexual liberation, which played a prominent part in Western second-wave feminist agenda, African feminists have approached FGC by strengthening women’s social, economic, and political standing in society in order to give women themselves the weapons to fight FGC (El Amin in Abusharaf, 2000, p. 158). This call for a structural analysis of FGC is not new; since the beginning of the global movement Black scholars have asserted that FGC should be treated not as an isolated phenomenon, but should be located in the context of women’s

wider welfare needs, including access to resources, control over food production and financial independence (Women's Caucus of African Studies Association, 1983). Regardless, although programs such as Tostan have adopted a more holistic approach to address FGC as part of women's overall empowerment, the role of women's wider socio-economic subjugation, or Western complacency in this has rarely been recognized in the public discourse.

Anthropologists have also called for a structural analysis of FGC, arguing that women's participation needs to be analyzed in terms of women's social and economic vulnerability (Gruenbaum, 1982). Research has tied FGC to women's socio-economic survival by illustrating women's dependency in marriage for long-term security (Gruenbaum, 2001). It has also been framed as a strategy for accessing social capital, as uncut women face bullying, restricted access to resources, and exclusion from attending and participating in social functions (Bettina Shell-Duncan, Wander, Hernlund, & Moreau, 2011). Contexts of poverty and underdevelopment make people heavily reliant on social networks, thus making FGC a matter of survival also in a very different sense than the anti-FGC imagery often suggests (Gruenbaum, 1982; Bettina Shell-Duncan et al., 2011). Social researchers have argued for the need to reframe FGC-affected communities as active cultural agents who have the potential to not only reaffirm but also negotiate practices and values (Gruenbaum, 1996; Hernlund & Shell-Duncan, 2007; Johnsdotter, Moussa, Carl-bom, Aregai, & Essén, 2009). Reconceptualizing FGC from deviance to strategy resists the dominant representations of affected women by recognizing the agency women exercise within patriarchal structures, as "mothers choosing female circumcision for their daughters in a specific situation are doing this to optimise their daughters' future prospects" (Johnsdotter & Essen, 2016, p. 20).

Although Black feminists and anthropologists have been participating in this debate since the start of the global anti-FGC campaign, these perspectives are regularly overlooked in favor of a more sensationalist narrative. The public debate continues to construct practicing communities as "bearers of tradition," conveying an imagery of a hidden, pervasive practice (Johnsdotter et al., 2009, p. 130). Research suggests, however, that the process of cultural change in relation to FGC is underway both in Africa and among diasporic communities (Gele, Johansen, & Sundby, 2012; Gruenbaum, 1996; Johnsdotter et al., 2009).

### *FGC in Scotland*

Along with many European countries, Scotland lacks reliable estimates for the prevalence of FGC. The national anti-FGC campaign has been informed by research that estimates there to be around 24,000 “potentially affected” men, women, and children who had been born in FGC-practicing countries, living in Scotland (Baillot, Murray, Connelly, & Howard, 2014). As the authors themselves note, however, whilst this estimate can guide prevention work, the inclusion of men, and the inability to control for factors such as ethnicity and the influence of migration mean that the estimate has to be interpreted with caution (Baillot et al., 2014). There has been limited research on FGC in Scotland, and existing studies have primarily focused on health consequences, attitudes, and experiences of FGC (Mhoja, Azong, & Lawson, 2010; O’Brien, Baldeh, Hassan, & Baillie, 2017). To date, there has been no FGC prosecutions in Scotland. Furthermore, between April 2013 and September 2016, there were 52 referrals or child welfare concerns made to the police regarding FGC, but investigations revealed cutting had not occurred in any of the cases (Scottish Government, 2019). Regardless of lack of evidence and prosecutions, there has been a growing narrative of FGC being on the rise in Scotland. This trend is encompassed by newspaper headlines such as “Female Genital Mutilation ‘rising in soft-touch Scotland’” (Adams, 2013), “Scotland has to wake up to reality of FGM abuse” (Scotsman, 2017) and “Glasgow midwife sees 150 FGM cases a year” (*The Times*, 2017). A closer scrutiny of these headlines, however, shows that they rely on anecdotal evidence and, in the case of the last headline, the increase in the number of migrant women who have undergone FGC before their arrival to Scotland. Regardless, the hypervisibility which has been afforded to FGC has built considerable political pressure and public outrage to prosecute perceived perpetrators of the practice. Much like in the Scandinavian discourse on FGC (Johnsdotter, 2019), the lack of prosecutions in Scotland has often been attributed to the hidden nature of the practice and the complacency of statutory services, rather than to cultural change among migrant communities.

### *Researching FGC through a structural inequality framework*

This chapter discusses a PhD study which examined FGC and cultural change in Scotland from a migration perspective. The research built on the limited evidence on FGC in Scotland by interrogating how migration and resettlement conditions

shape women's vulnerability and experiences of violence. The violent experiences which the research captured are not limited to FGC and other forms of inter-personal harm; this chapter further describes women's interlinked experiences of structural violence, that is state facilitated forms of violence that prevent women from meeting their basic needs (Canning, 2017; Galtung, 1969). Following Johan Galtung's definition, for the purposes of this research structural violence is defined as "the cause of the difference between the potential and actual, between what could have been and what is" (1969, p. 168). The conceptual framework of the research has been informed by anthropological and Black feminist conceptualizations of FGC as a strategy and the affected communities as cultural actors whose behaviors respond to the wider social conditions and institutional settings. The analysis has drawn from Kimberlé Crenshaw's work on structural intersectionality (1991) and Liz Kelly's conceptualization of conducive contexts (2007). These have been particularly useful for conceptualizing how FGC-affected women's positions at the crossroads of race, class, culture, and immigration status can place them simultaneously at a greater risk of violence and at a further disadvantage in seeking help for their situations. Rather than to dismiss culture as unimportant in the continuation of FGC, these analytical concepts have informed the analysis in moving beyond community attitudes to exploring the social, economic, and political conditions which facilitate women's exploitation and violence against women.

The findings presented in this chapter were derived from a sub-sample of FGC-affected adult women who participated in individual and focus group discussions during the spring of 2018 in Glasgow, Scotland. The nine women originated from Sudan (n=2), Nigeria (n=3), Malawi (n=3) and The Gambia (n=1), and their stay in Scotland ranged from three to fifteen years. The limited previous research on FGC in Scotland led to a selection of a culturally diverse sample over focusing on one national group. Rather than to undermine the cultural intricacies which are often overlooked in discourses about "Africa," the diverse sampling proved fruitful in facilitating detailed reflections on women's vulnerability, as the participants readily compared differences between cultures and women's positions in different countries. In addition to the interviews with FGC-affected women, this chapter draws from two of the nine key informant interviews which were conducted as part of the study. The interviewed key informants worked in women's support organizations that engaged in FGC-awareness raising and support work with women who had experienced gender-based violence.

All interviewed women disclosed that they had been subject to either some degree of cutting or elongation/stretching of the labia. The inclusion of elongation under the umbrella of “FGM/C” has been debated; it has been argued that elongation does not constitute mutilation and thus should not be targeted through human rights legislation as a form of violence against women and children (Bagnol & Mariano, 2008). The decision to include elongation in this chapter is two-fold; first, all the interviewed women who had experienced elongation viewed themselves as victims of “FGM.” Second, as the next sections highlight, the research identified considerable similarities in both the reasons that underpin the continuation of cutting and elongation, and the wider conditions which sustained women’s vulnerability to these practices. I argue that disregarding elongation on the basis of lesser health consequences inadvertently reaffirms the discourse of barbarity that authors including Bagnol and Mariano (2008) strive to challenge; using the yardstick of “mutilation” as an inclusion criterion conveys a hierarchical construction of gender-based violence whereby FGC manifests an extreme form of violence against women. This approach dismisses women’s intersectional vulnerability and continuums of violence (Kelly, 1987). Rather than constructing violence as a single episode, this chapter locates different forms of FGC on a continuum of control over women’s bodies and livelihoods (Kelly, 1987). It has also been argued that women’s decision to participate in both cutting and elongation can manifest their agency and sexual determination (Bagnol & Mariano, 2008; Njambi, 2011). Rather than to dismiss these diverse meanings, this chapter advocates a conceptualization of women’s agency that goes beyond the binaries between empowerment and oppression to accommodate the role cutting and elongation play in women’s negotiations of patriarchal values and structures.

Before commencing the data collection, the research was granted ethical approval from the University of Strathclyde Ethics Committee. All participants gave written informed consent to be interviewed by the researcher. As part of this consent process, all participants were informed about the law on FGC in Scotland and the researcher’s ethical responsibility to report any disclosures of imminent risk of FGC or other forms of violence. Although the interview questions framed FGC as a cultural practice rather than as a form of violence against women, these steps made it unlikely for participants to express favorable opinions about FGC. During the data collection FGC was introduced as a topic of interest following the increased media and policy attention towards these practices in Scotland. Questions

on FGC broadly focused on community attitudes and women's perceptions of what factors influenced these attitudes in different contexts. The interviews and focus groups focused on women's experiences of migration and resettlement and the participants were asked to reflect on the changing role of culture in their lives and how moving to Scotland had influenced family relationships, gender roles, and cultural practices such as FGC. This comparative focus on women's lives before and after migration encouraged the participants to locate FGC in the wider context of women's rights, opportunities, and position within family and society. Further, as illustrated in the next sections, the wider research focus on changing culture and relationships directed many of the participants to discuss FGC in the context of other forms of gender-based violence and abuse. Additionally, the key informant interviews focused on participants' perspectives on the cultural and resettlement challenges affecting African migrant communities in Scotland. FGC was discussed as part of this, in the context of asylum applications, changing gender roles, and community attitudes.

The key informant interviews were semi-structured and were held at the participants' places of work. The interviews with migrant women were also semi-structured, in order to give the participants an opportunity to direct the discussion to the topics which they perceived had crucially influenced their experiences. This flexibility afforded the participants more control over how, and at what stage, they chose to reflect on their personal experiences of violence, displacement, and loss, resulting in a more cathartic approach to addressing deeply personal and difficult experiences. The interviews were conducted in English and held in a third-party location the women attended regularly in order to provide a safe space for disclosure. This third-party provider had previously organized FGC-awareness workshops which all the women had attended. This meant that the interviewed women had already formulated a negative opinion about FGC, as the awareness-raising work had heavily informed their conceptualizations of FGC as gender-based violence. However, as these workshops had mainly focused on cultural attitudes and health complications arising from FGC, it is nevertheless likely that the participants' emphasis on locating FGC in the wider social, economic, and political contexts was informed by their own experiences rather than these workshops. Crucially, addressing FGC with women who already had prior knowledge of these practices meant that the women had had the opportunity to begin to make sense of their own experience of FGC. As discussed later in this chapter, realization



about the different meanings attached to FGC can be traumatizing to women who are suddenly faced with the task of recrafting their identity in relation to gender and culture. Overall, whilst this sampling procedure influenced the data, it crucially enabled me as an “outsider” to gain insight into personal experiences, which many previous studies have explored by using community interviewers.

By reflecting migrant women’s trajectories of violence from the Global South to the Global North, this chapter will illustrate the ways women’s experiences of FGC are shaped by intersecting inequalities before and after migration. The following sections will illustrate the complex ways institutionalized and normalized gendered inequalities perpetuate violence and trauma in the lives of FGC-affected women. The first part of the chapter reflects women’s accounts of violence and vulnerability before migration, problematizing the usefulness of addressing FGC solely through a culturalist framework. The second part illuminates how Western structures can also be complicit in perpetuating harm in the lives of FGC-affected women. By reflecting women’s experiences at the aftermath of violence, the chapter begins to untangle what structural perspective can offer for developing our understanding of FGC in migration contexts.

### *Structural causes of violence against women*

In the focus group discussions, gender-based violence and gendered inequalities were central in women’s narratives about their pasts. All women discussed their experience of FGC in relation to other forms of gender-based violence that had contributed to their subordination within their families and community. Other forms of violence, including child and forced marriage, domestic abuse, and rape had preceded, accompanied, and directly followed their experiences of FGC. Therefore, whilst I do not intend to conflate FGC with other forms of gender-based violence as their dynamics are distinct, throughout this chapter I will draw parallels across the conditions which maintain women’s vulnerability to these different forms of violence.

In line with existing research, women discussed how normative constructions of womanhood and female sexuality came to legitimize FGC. In different communities, FGC was associated with beauty, cleanliness, respect, and longevity of marriage. Regardless of the type, resistance to FGC mandated bullying, social exclusion, and harassment. The pressure to undergo FGC was experienced from multiple directions within and outwith the family, including from female peers who

constructed FGC, marriage, and childbirth as transition points which demarcated boundaries of friendship groups. In the case of FGC, and particularly elongation, being excluded from friendship groups contributed to the pressure for girls to start stretching their labia. Although women had done this to themselves, they had been instructed and pressured to elongate their labia by older women at a young age. Whilst the different FGC practices were said to make women marriageable for different reasons through impacting premarital and marital relationships, participants described elongation and cutting in similar terms. First, both practices were said to enforce restrictive gender roles; cutting was said to curb premarital relations by constraining sexual desire and preventing access, whereas elongation formed part of initiation rituals which informed girls in assuming their culturally prescribed roles as submissive wife and caregiver. Second, cutting was said to make women marriageable by ensuring virginity, whereas elongation was described as a strategy for ensuring lasting marriage through heightened male sexual satisfaction. Crucially, these restrictive gender roles and the cultural and socio-economic significance of marriage also underpinned women's sustained vulnerability to other forms of violence. The gendered cultural and material restrictions which women experienced within the family and society acted as a justification for other forms of violence, as women's conformity to marital rape and domestic violence was constructed as a "normal" part of woman's role as a wife.

Crucially, the cultural values underpinning FGC were not discussed in isolation, but all women situated FGC and other forms of violence against women in the context of women's wider socio-economic dependency. Women's focus on reflecting on FGC in the context of gendered inequalities was likely informed by their experience of the asylum process. As further discussed in the next section, most of the women had made derivative asylum claims to protect their daughters from FGC, which had required them to provide evidence of the barriers to mobility, protection, and independence they would face if returned to their countries of origin:

They [UK Home Office] say I can go back home and go stay in another city or in another area, where I can't get in contact with my partner's family. But I say to them, in Malawi, you need family, family we help each other, nobody else can help you. (Star, Malawian woman)

Having undergone FGC after being married into a practicing family at the age of fourteen, Star endured prolonged abuse by her husband and his sisters until she fled from Malawi to the UK. In discussing her on-going asylum application, Star illustrates the ways social and economic conditions converge, leaving women vulnerable to culturally normative forms of violence; in contexts of limited welfare provision and pronounced gendered labor market inequalities, resistance to FGC can be exercised only at the expense of women's socio-economic survival. Situating FGC in the context of wider socio-economic injustices allows us to see women's compliance with violence as a choice, but not of their own choosing (Kelly, 2007). The limited opportunities for women to gain financial independence maintain women's dependency in the family unit and, thus, the forms of violence marking established age-based and gendered hierarchies. This financial dependency also constrained women's help-seeking opportunities:

Living in the other city is difficult, it's not like moving from Edinburgh to Glasgow and I'll be okay. If I want to move, I have to go meet the owner of that land and tell them why I am there. But it doesn't matter, that man will say, if you want to live with us, you must pay and then we will give you this land to stay. But even then, I won't be safe.  
(Joyce, Malawian woman)

As Joyce argues, the wider disregard for gender-based violence, together with lack of established safe havens, forces women to pay for their own protection, creating further barriers to help-seeking. This was also discussed in relation to other financial transfers, including bride price, which was described as a barrier to family support. Women related how, in patrilocal contexts, the custom of bride price could become both a "ticket for abuse" for the husband, and a symbol of departure from the paternal family, leading them to turn away daughters who are fleeing from domestic violence. This happened to Star, whose family told her to return to her husband when she first tried to flee abuse. In her case, the cultural stigma surrounding divorce and women's financial dependency converged to sustain her inability to survive independently from her husband's family, which had perpetuated FGC and continued to abuse her.

In addition to economic dependency, the participants also described the prevailing political conditions that undermine women's abilities to challenge FGC in either private or public spheres. The women argued that the lack of national (and

in the case of Malawi, international) recognition of the existence of FGC limited women's abilities to resist the practice:

In Malawi, they don't accept that FGM is being practiced. But it is being practiced in the villages where we come from. The police will tell you no, it's not done here, but it's happening. (Star, Malawian woman)

In countries such as Nigeria, where FGC has been outlawed, women argued that the wider disregard for "women's issues" had sustained the continuation of FGC by shifting the practice underground. The participants argued that the exclusion of FGC and other forms of gender-based violence from the political priorities not only undermine national efforts to end violence against women, but further limits women's help-seeking opportunities in the private sphere:

If you are a rich person you can do FGM on your child... if you're a wife of a rich man and the husband wants you to do the FGM, but you are not going to do it and you are going to call the police, then even the police will leave it, or you may be in prison at the end of the day. You may be victimised. It's lawless. (Chibundu, Nigerian woman)

Chibundu described widespread corruption as a barrier to state protection. This was compounded by prevailing perceptions about gender-based violence as a private matter which meant that women not only had little to gain in seeking help from the authorities, but by doing so could in fact expose themselves to further violence, imprisonment, and victimization. This suggests that the silence surrounding FGC is not only a cultural issue but is maintained through the normalization of gender-based violence, which represses women's calls for action. Women's accounts locate FGC in the context of "multi-layered and routinised forms of domination that often converge in women's lives, hindering women's ability to create alternatives to the abusive relationships" (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1245). Focus on women's wider subordination explains why some women continue conforming with FGC or at least will not openly resist the practice if doing so endangers them further. This highlights the need for more nuanced conceptualizations of women's agency and participation, as their actions do not exist in a vacuum, but are instead exercised both in relation to and as a response to specific conditions.

Reflecting FGC-affected women's experiences through an intersectional lens casts light on the social, political, and economic structures that make the position

of women at the crossroads of gender, class, and culture one of vulnerability and multi-dimensional subordination. As argued by Rogaiya Abusharaf, “women are not merely subordinated because their genitals have been excised, in other words not because of the practice itself, but because of the values, ideologies, and the politics attached to the practice” (1995, p. 53). The participants’ accounts of barriers to help-seeking demonstrate how women’s inferiority is deeply ingrained in the economic and political spheres, legitimizing and naturalizing violence against women. Women’s accounts illuminate the way corruption, police violence, poverty, and women’s financial dependency create a conducive context (Kelly, 2016) for violence against women, including FGC. This suggests that challenging FGC necessitates moving beyond community education and awareness-raising to dismantling the social, political, and economic barriers women face in challenging their own situations.

### *Structural violence in the asylum system*

For the participants, relocation to the UK offered critical distance to the peer and family pressures maintaining FGC and other forms of violence against women. Although some women had heard anecdotal accounts of FGC continuing in other parts of the UK, or children being taken to be cut in their countries of origin, none of the women considered their own daughters to be at risk in Scotland. Nevertheless, women’s experiences of resettling to Scotland challenge the assumption of their migration trajectories from Global South to Global North as journeys from oppression to emancipation. Rather, seeking asylum in the West became characterized as the lesser of two evils:

I would sacrifice anything, I don’t mind Home Office taking me to detention, but I prefer that than my children to be cut. And I am ready for that. Even the Home Office would take me to jail for life, I am fine with that, but my children will not experience that, no.  
(Isatou, Gambian woman)

Although women had relocated to a context which was no longer conducive to particular cultural manifestations of violence, their new context afforded them fewer resources to deal with the aftermath of the violence (Kelly, 2016). In crossing borders, the control over women’s lives shifted from their communities to the UK asylum system. The women’s lives became tightly controlled by a system which restricted their income, employment, places of residence, and living conditions.

These restrictions illustrate how the continuum of structural violence characterizes women's lives even after migration. When discussing their resettlement experiences, the participants' descriptions of torture shifted from physical violence to being tortured by a system that imprisoned them in a state of uncertainty. Women described how the "fear of the brown letters" characterized their long wait for the decisions on their asylum claims:

You are even scared to open your own door, because you don't know what letter is behind that door... because they might be like, you're supposed to be going back home. (Joyce, Malawian woman).

Many of the interviewed women had been waiting years for their asylum decision. The asylum system was "trapping women in limbo" (key informant 1), where both the asylum restrictions and fears of being deported stood in the way of women's ability to settle and find closure after violence. As emphasized by another key informant, "it's very difficult to recover from something if you don't know whether it's over" (key informant 2).

Many of the women had conflicted feelings about engaging with communities from their own countries due to their experiences of violence. Regardless, women considered community support and meeting people essential in integrating into Scottish society. The asylum system limits women's access to social capital, leading to emotional and material disadvantages. The participants felt that the asylum process was consuming all their energy and resources, leading them to deny themselves new romantic relationships. Women also felt that having no right to remain was damaging their relations within their own community, because they were seen either as a "burden" or a "threat." Settled migrants were said to fear that helping those without status would compromise their own resources, welfare entitlements, or immigration status. The extended family support and sense of community that had previously characterized women's cultures had come to an end, as heightened fears within communities contributed to "breaking down families and friendship from the BME [Black and Minority Ethnic] communities" (Vera, Malawian woman). These fears reflect UK's hardened approach to immigration. The profound sense of isolation, lack of resources, and resulting mental health difficulties all stood in the way of women's ability to build their lives in Scotland.

By failing to address the migrant women's aspirations beyond their mere everyday survival, the asylum system has become a barrier to the women's reclaiming their lives and sense of self in the aftermath of violence:

Having been through the issue of domestic abuse, which was a very terrible situation that I went through, it really affected my overall well-being. This situation now adds, it makes it worse for me to do anything, except when I come out of this, that is when I can really move forward, you know. But when you keep someone's hands tied, you tie the person's hands and legs and then you ask the person to jump and to walk, how possible is it? It's just impossible. (Chibundu, Nigerian woman)

Chibundu's story was one of violence; she was cut at the age of eight in Nigeria and, years later, became a victim of domestic abuse and controlling behavior by her partner in the UK. Chibundu was further traumatized upon giving birth to her daughter when she came to discover that FGC was not a norm in the UK. She found the medical professionals' shocked reactions deeply unsettling, as she was given little information about FGC at the time. Her experience of the aftermath of all this violence reflects the struggles and structural violence faced by women who are forced to depend on the restrictive system. Although Chibundu was able to separate from her abusive partner, she continued to experience the effects of interpersonal violence as the long wait for her asylum decision exacerbated her feelings of anxiety and depression. By restricting her abilities to provide for her daughter and pursue her own employment aspirations, she felt that the system kept her "hands and legs tied," whilst expecting her to "jump and to walk," that is, to move on and find closure to her experiences of violence. For Chibundu, the asylum restrictions inhibited her from regaining control over her life, which had long been denied by her abusers. This illustrates how the asylum regime normalizes social and economic inequalities, enforcing the continuation of loss of control triggered by interpersonal violence.

### *Culture of disbelief*

Although the limited recognition of FGC as grounds for asylum has been criticized (Beety, 2007), less attention has been given to the lived experiences of FGC-affected women who are negotiating the asylum process. The participants who had sought asylum in order to protect their daughters from FGC said that the Home Office had questioned why they had not relocated elsewhere in their countries of

origin. When it comes to FGC, a successful asylum claim requires women to prove that they cannot relocate or seek protection for themselves or their daughters from the local authorities (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2015). In pushing women to relocate, the Home Office failed to recognize the ways oppressive gender norms are institutionalized in political and economic structures, thus limiting women's abilities to resist and evade patriarchal practices:

They say this country goes against FGM, but if somebody then has a case of FGM, they refuse to believe the person is going through that process. Because they will tell you, we know they are doing FGM in your country, but you can say no to it. But we don't have the power to stop the tradition... So, in other words we try to escape to a country that goes against it, and that same country will tell us no... (Olufunke, Nigerian woman).

This failure to recognize how women's lives are marked by intersecting social, economic, and political inequalities in their countries of origin meant that much like their own communities, the Home Office framed gender-based violence as a private matter. The emphasis on FGC as violence inflicted by communities and "culture" masks the way FGC and other forms of gender-based violence are condoned by state institutions and state actors. Yet, FGC-affected women struggle to provide evidence for the barriers to internal relocation, including how poverty, corruption, and gendered inequalities maintain women's vulnerability to violence. This was the case for women fleeing countries such as Malawi where women's place in the public sphere is limited but not explicitly restricted by law, but also countries such as Nigeria where FGC is outlawed but the law is not effectively enforced.

Participants described how Home Office interviewers had accused them of lying about their circumstances. Interviewers had questioned forced marriage as the basis of Joyce's asylum claim because she was in her thirties. In discussing this, Joyce contrasted the self-determination which Western cultures afford women entering adulthood with African respect for parental authority; for her, the latter would continue to place her at risk of forced marriage regardless of her age, whilst the Home Office's failure to question the universality of the former stood in the way of her right to be granted protection. This demonstrates a failure to recognize the effect overlapping gendered and age-based hierarchies have on African women's vulnerability to violence. The dominant representations of forced marriage and FGC affecting younger girls mask a diverse set of practices, contributing



to the failure to recognize the varied profile of victims of cultural manifestations of gender-based violence.

The culture of disbelief is nothing new; researchers and campaigners have been critiquing the performance of immigration law for operating from a presumption of guilty until proven innocent (Anderson, Hollaus, Lindsay, & Williamson, 2014; Souter, 2011). The lengths to which the Home Office has gone to question FGC-affected women's circumstances manifests the growing pressures to reduce and restrict immigration to the UK. After giving birth to a daughter in the UK, Star began receiving letters from her husband's family urging her to return to Malawi to have her daughter cut. Firstly, the Home Office disputed her own experience of undergoing FGC, arguing that her medical certificate sounded like she had dictated her story to the doctor without undergoing a medical examination. Then, the Home Office interviewers not only pushed her to relocate elsewhere in Malawi to protect her daughter, but also constructed Star as a deviant mother in attempting to refute her inability to do so:

When I said, if you send me home, my daughter is going go through FGM and my husband is going to do this [domestic abuse], they [Home Office] were like:

'Does your husband know you are here?'

I said I don't know, because I left in 2005. If he knows I don't know, but I never told him. Even my kids don't know that I'm here. But if I go home, I would want to see my kids. And they asked:

'Why would you want to see your kids?'

(Star, Malawian woman)

The treatment of gender-based violence as grounds for asylum has been criticized for requiring women to conform to essentialist representations of a powerless woman, making women complicit in the reproduction of their own victimization (Kea & Roberts-Holmes, 2013). Prevailing gender expectations mean that women who are forced to leave their children behind to escape abuse do not fit the representation of a deserving asylum seeker. The imagery of an oppressed woman works against women who experience a persistent failure by the authorities to recognize seeking asylum as a means for women to exercise their agency. Isatou, a Gambian woman had also sought asylum in the UK in order to protect her daughter whom she had left behind. In her case, she continued to receive pressure from her family to return to the Gambia so her daughter could be circumcised. The community required the mother to be present for the cutting in order to care for the child

afterwards, so by staying away, Isatou was protecting her daughter. Her story resists the dominant interpretations of a deserving asylum seeker, powerless victim of FGC, as well as the common narrative regarding how FGC is practiced, making it even harder for her to navigate the narrow state interpretation of a genuine asylum seeker.

The increased public pressures to safeguard girls and prosecute perpetrators of FGC in the UK have led the asylum regime to frame FGC-affected women simultaneously as victims and as a threat. The requirement to prove well-founded fear of persecution means a woman's own experience of undergoing FGC is not sufficient grounds for asylum. However, disclosing (and more controversially, proving) their experience of violence may carry weight in convincing the Home Office of their need to protect their daughters from violence. Yet, by disclosing their own trauma, women open themselves up for scrutiny as potential perpetrators of the practice. As described by key informants, particularly for new arrivals with little exposure to the differing cultural norms, women's disclosure of undergoing FGC in asylum screening interviews can lead to multi-agency safeguarding procedures regardless of whether the perceived risk for the child is imminent. Key informants described how, even for women who had declared they would not continue FGC in the UK, responses which conveyed the normality of FGC in their home countries had led to urgent police and social work interventions. Key informants argued that rushed safeguarding procedures could lead to hostility towards statutory agencies among communities. Emergency responses were described as retraumatizing for women, particularly if women had migrated from contexts where police regularly abused its power by perpetuating violence. Such unmerited emergency responses are fundamentally insensitive to the confusion, exhaustion, and instabilities experienced by women who have been affected by interpersonal violence, displacement, and multi-layered loss. The interviewed key informants emphasized the need to address FGC in ways that enable women to adjust to their new context, allowing them to "re-evaluate what is normal... .. and to provide the space and the scope to evaluate what has been done to them" (key informant 1).

### *Concluding remarks*

By interrogating women's simultaneous vulnerability to physical and structural violence, I have made a case for rethinking the common approaches to challenging

culturally normative forms of violence against women. In illustrating the interconnections between interpersonal and structural violence, I have argued that, whilst FGC is a cultural practice, our understanding of it should not be limited to cultural terms. The participants' experiences suggest that the established imagery of FGC as a cultural issue has done few favors for women whose experiences of interpersonal violence are intrinsically intertwined with structural violence they face on the account of their gender, race, and class. As the women's experiences highlight, social orders and economic and political conditions can not only give license to violence against women, but also directly facilitate further interpersonal violence. Too often women's inability to challenge FGC has been framed as characteristic of the affected women, rather than as reflective of the spaces they occupy. Supporting women in bringing down the barriers to changing their situations requires going beyond the focus on community values to challenging the ways cultural constructions of womanhood become normalized in wider social orders and economic and political systems. The way FGC and other forms of violence connect with wider economic and political inequalities suggests that eradication efforts focusing on choice and attitudinal change may not lead to lasting social change if the measures do not extend to challenging the ways oppressive gendered expectations become institutionalized to limit women's wider opportunities in the society. Since the early feminist activism, the global community has recognized the ways FGC enforces gender discrimination but given less attention to the ways gendered inequalities contribute to the continuation of FGC. Rather than to seize aid to apply pressure to end FGC as was suggested by Fran Hosken (Women's Caucus of African Studies Association, 1983), wider societal inequalities ought to be addressed as a means of facilitating women's resistance.

Although women's reflections suggest that the continuation of FGC may not be a widespread issue in Scotland, increasing migration from affected areas warrants further attention to women's experiences in the aftermath of violence. Women's journeys of migration illustrate that even though they may no longer be as vulnerable to culturally normative forms of gender-based violence after migration to the West, Western societies may nevertheless operate in violent ways. This demonstrates the need to conceptualize FGC as a process rather than a one-off event, as women's experience of FGC is continuously shaped in response to their surroundings. In a new context, women's subordination at the intersection of gender, class, and culture becomes reconfigured to a position of multiple disadvantage

on the account of their gender, race, and immigration status. The participants' experiences of the asylum system suggest that even when women relocate to contexts where the violence against them is no longer culturally sanctioned, structural violence comes to sustain their vulnerability to the ongoing effects of trauma. The very system which was built to allow women to seek safety inflicts harms which prevent relocation from violence from becoming actualized in women's lives.

Participants' accounts suggest that there is a need to be vigilant of the ways colonial constructions of affected women blind us to women's efforts to exercise their agency to protect themselves and their daughters by means of seeking asylum. Women's struggles to make their case on the grounds of FGC, forced marriage, and/or domestic abuse illustrate the failure to recognize the ways gender-based violence is rooted in, and sanctioned by, wider systematic discrimination of women. Participants' experiences of the Home Office's hostility embody the ongoing conflict that characterizes women's struggles to seek protection from FGC and other forms of gender-based violence; increasing international migration and a growing fortress mentality in the UK have contributed to public pressures to condemn FGC, but also to the state-level reluctance to consider the practice as grounds for asylum. Although the increasing pressures to end culturally normative forms of violence in Scotland have led to more aggressive measures to prosecute perpetrators of FGC, such demands should not bypass affected women's needs to make sense of their experiences of violence.

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