Without excision and with the youth: Towards an informed African citizenship

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Information and communications technologies (ICTs) are changing the daily lives of African men and women, whether rich or poor, young or old, urban or rural, employed or unemployed. Their effects are felt in all sectors, by schools, companies, households, associations, ministries and parliaments, in private lives and in all countries.

The practice of female genital excision/ mutilation (FGM) is not immune from this trend.

Giving up this practice is unavoidable, but in what direction is this ICT-driven change leading?

How can this change be directed so that it contributes towards a fair, egalitarian and supportive world that will benefit future generations and African cultures as well as towns and villages?

Enlightened by the results of the ICT-FGM research project *(see page 8),* this brochure recommends an innovative approach of social intervention policies and strategies.

These recommendations are intended for political and institutional managers responsible for directing intervention policies and initiatives on issues related to gender, youth, citizenship, African integration, ICTs and development, excision and innovation.

Pinpointing and understanding change

Africa's information society is developing rapidly. How will it influence African **traditions**, especially those which, like excision (female genital mutilation) seem the most painful, the most marginal and also the most persistent? Why and how can information and communication technologies contribute towards sustainable change for the better? As a matter of fact, ICTs allow us to **reconsider our certainties**. Talking about excision in public, in communities, is still difficult because it touches the private, the sensitive ones. Does this issue not concern all citizens – men, women, the young and the old? Why then is this practice still solely a women's issue? Are men not also directly and personally involved?

Giving life to the possible

With ICTs, **hypertext** was born. This was only one of the **major technological advances** that redefined the relationships between people, and their ability to manage the common good. ICTs allow for a break with unequal relationships and **call injustices into question**. They **challenge the objectives, methods and means** of sustainable personal and collective human development. They give those who have been penalised by the digital divide **the opportunity to seize on a possibility** in which they can take a direct and active role. The **factors traditionally** evoked to explain the marginalisation and victimisation of Africa – illiteracy, oral tradition, the multiplicity of African languages, the scarcity, inadequacy and cost of infrastructure, equipment, network coverage and connectivity – are all becoming obsolete. The **real obstacles** are seen in sclerotic visions and methods, which stifle creativity and innovation. In particular, the tendency to not consider ICTs as tools and techniques for Africa obliterates any **strategic plan for change**, and prioritises the consumption of content produced abroad, rather than **endogenous content production**.

Making knowledge visible

ICTs are more than modern media. Their ability to facilitate **horizontal, interactive and democratic communication** represents a major qualitative step forward. In the African information society, the **intangible elements of knowledge** thus assume an importance that cannot be compared with the tools and techniques (information technology, internet, and telecommunications) which enable dissemination and sharing.

Questioning norms

Within this new context, **knowledge production methods such as decision-making tools** must evolve based on **scientific, research and technical innovations** and should initiate a **cross-disciplinary dynamic**. Approaches focused on compartmentalisation of disciplinary fields and the autarchy of roles are not suitable for the knowledge society, which invites **solidarity, openness, participation, inclusion and creativity.**

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Giving up excision

Après l'excision la tristesse

A **community** practice that is carried out in the name of tradition in Sahelian African communities on the **external female genitalia**, excision seeks to ensure the suitability of girls for marriage. It thus preserves the **sociocultural order of the sexes**, and is also a **violent, dangerous and discriminatory act** against women. It affects the most intimate part of their bodies, and its risks can be felt far beyond a woman's body, among their children, spouses, relations and communities. Excision is a **mirror of gender relations** – and thus politics – in societies. The **majority of adults, and nearly all young people, both girls and boys**, advocate its abandonment. They put forward personal well-being (of men, women, the young and old) against the norms decreed by other men and women. Young people are **ready to enter into the modern wo**rld, using information channels to **change African cultures, without condemning them**.

Between health and sanction, what alternative is there?

Nestled in the space between tradition, judgement and antagonism, the debate on excision continues to be a sensitive issue. Excision has been denounced as a violent, discriminatory, sexist and rights-denying practice, not least because of its disastrous **health** consequences. Civil society, including feminists, institutions and public services have sought to convince married women and decision-makers to give up on this practice. The tendency is towards **integration of African legislation** on excision "at the top" with the emphasis on law enforcement. This approach places excised women and girls in the position of **victims**. However, another approach, centred on **human rights education** and through community negotiations, is proving its relevance, and is introducing an innovative strategy **where all parties are the winners**.

> **"Beyond working to end excision, which is the issue at hand, it is a matter of building a tradition in the sense of what is worthy of being inherited."**
> *Aminata Diaw / Department of Philosophy / Université Cheikh Anta DIOP de Dakar*

Internet: avoiding pitfalls.
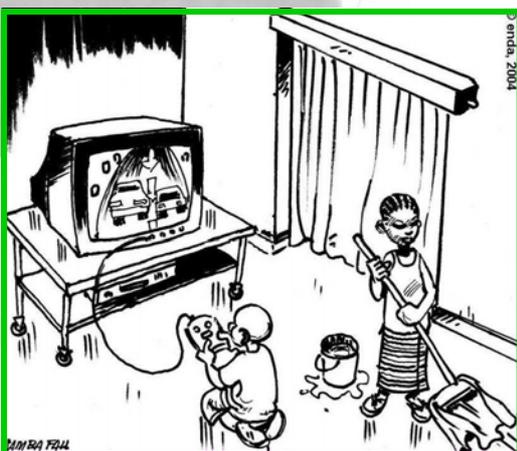
What will excision become if – or rather when – the internet becomes involved? Does the dissemination of stigmatising, voyeuristic, or even pornographic photographs, videos and comments represent the best way of informing or increasing the awareness of the public at large? How could traditional communities **preserve and promote their cultural identities** without resorting to mutilating the female genitalia ? Continuing to make excision a "women's affair" encloses them in a **social role of reproduction** (of lineage). This separatism consolidates them in the **private sphere** and distances them from the **public sphere**, a **place where their human, physiological, social and political rights** are exercised, including the right to physical integrity, protection against violence, health, pleasure, and freedom. It also distances them from **their citizen entitlements**, such as respecting the independent rights of others, taking part in the public affairs of the community, and deciding on the common good.

Giving way to the youth and ICTs

Girls, boys: two genders
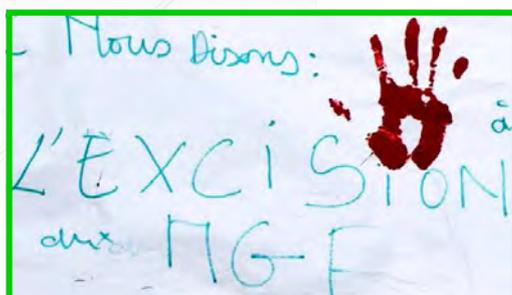
Perspective on excision

Creating feminine ICT forums

Instilled with an **education based on respect for elders**, the youth are becoming aware of taking on responsibility in keeping with the adult world. However, recent technological advances have placed the youth – especially boys – in a position to **produce their own knowledge. Far from the control** of older generations, they are enthusiastically grabbing hold of the culture of communication, interchanges with others and the virtual world. Can the older generation place their trust in them, **making them partners as full citizens**, to share in management of the community?

Responding to this question involves taking gender into consideration. Gender defines **identity, masculine or feminine**, developed by the social environment. Far from being a natural data, it represents the result of powerful socialisation and educational systems. Boys are educated, through play and empowerment, to face risk, produce and dominate. Girls, through risk avoidance and management, are reduced to an invisible, "second grade" status, reproduction, with reference to **a supposedly neutral norm**, which is masculine at the core. The biological differences between the sexes (male and female) bring about complementarity, not inequality. Gender relations themselves involve notions of justice and solidarity at the heart of citizenship and democracy issues, including politics, economics and social and cultural issues. They link **relationships of power with the exercise of equality and freedom**. The generalised lack of attention given to date to gender relations by both sexes as well as by institutions obscures and perpetuates political inequalities between men and women.

In the information society era, considering excision as **a public and intergenerational "gender issue"** is liberating. This approach increases the **visibility** of both **the private life** and the **masculine gender**, buried beneath supposed neutrality. Through ICTs, **initiatives to abandon FGM are hinted at** in the level of creativity of the youth. Boys entertain themselves more willingly with these new "toys" and plunge headfirst into fun, as opposed to girls who, owing to their education, reject technical matters as not being their concern.

Even if they wish to discuss such issues in public, as citizens, girls are **driven to silence**, even by ICTs. Their education and socialisation inhibit them to the point that they are **forbidden to publicly reveal their experiences, their intimate lives, sex and excision experiences**. **Specific ICT forums** therefore need to be developed to allow them to be creative, humorous, serious and spontaneous.

Citizenship and the African knowledge society

The information society is setting itself up in exclusion, and the **revitalisation of visions** will allow for **the innovation and creation of new solidarities.** Among the educated youth, the gender digital divide is measured less in terms of access than **control, content, and gender capacities and roles**. Situating politics within relationships between the public/state/economy and the private/domestic/intimate authorises analysis of the gender of citizenship, meaning the differentiated exercise of rights and obligations within the community.

Invisible private life

The youth, girls and boys, want to finish with excision, and all are in agreement that it is **dangerous and painful**. However, girls do not want to or cannot talk about it publicly, and delegate others – boys, institutions, adults – to take public responsibility for the issue. Perpetuating their social role as **objects** rather than **subjects**, they are double victims of violence, which they do not know how to overcome and for which they blame themselves, and of social relegation to the status of second-rate citizens. Boys, well established in the **public sphere by the privilege of their gender**, "naturally" consider themselves as being concerned by the risks affecting their sisters, daughters and mothers. They experience it as unfair, believing themselves to be "more active" than the girls, who they deem impassive. Without questioning their gender role, they reproduce the ancient system, like **an obligation, an immutable rule. The lack of women's public discourse** reactivates the virile certitude of the young men that they are within their social rights, assuring their status of "eternal dominance." For both genders, there is **confusion** between rights and laws, and between those with the rights, who decide and dominate… and why. So, is there any relevance in the **only citizenship model** offered to women in a male-dominated society? Will it enable their **liberation**? **Parity** is certainly a **necessary** condition, but is **insufficient** in ensuring communication, collaboration and complementarity between the genders.

JE SUIS NEE AVEC ET JE VEUX MOURRIR AVEC. POURQUOI ME L'ENLEVER

We believe that African culture can evolve over time, and we know that excision is an ancient tradition which aims at giving women second-rate status in society. Men are not sufficiently aware of what excision actually is."
Young partners of the ICT-FGM project

Producing knowledge for change

The knowledge society **forces change**. It blurs the borders between social and economic innovation, between knowledge and use, market and non-market. ICTs thus enable the youth to **take part in governance, the expression of their private and collective, natural and regulated rights and obligations**, within these increasingly **interactive** spaces. What is important is less the flow of information and the supporting networks than the knowledge, expertise, creativity and innovation that develop around it. This is the track to be forged if women are to be able to give expression to their intimate lives.

Investing in change

Reexamining citizenship

The political principles and processes decided "at the top" are hardly participatory, and confirm entitlements over rights, the pre-eminence of the law and society over rights and the individual. They translate the nature of the vision and the importance given to citizenship and the social bond. Their **limits** can be seen in the events related to the adoption and implementation of legislation on excision, in the countries where this exists. Breaking with such logic by adopting a **collaborative, non-hierarchical approach** leads to **convergent advances** in sustainable human development, such as the abandonment of excision and early and/or forced marriages, the promotion of health, education, women's and children's rights, justice and direct community democracy.

Citizenship – the modalities according to which towns and villages are **defined and managed** – is at once a **framework** (a set of rights and entitlements), an **identity** (a feeling of belonging to a community) and a **practice** exercised by electoral representation and participation. It translates the ability of the social individual to have an impact **on the public arena by issuing a critical judgement** on society's choices, and by reclaiming the **right to exercise his/her rights**. However, **citizen stakes are gendered**. For men, they involve **participating** in management of the community's public sphere. For women, the priority is to **acknowledge themselves and be acknowledged as people**, with their own existence, above and beyond the social roles assigned to them as mothers, daughters, sisters, wives and grandmothers. This qualitative leap happens through their

political re-appropriation of their rights, including the right to **speak, make decisions, and the right to get** cultural, social and economic **ownership**. The citizen inclusion of women involves legitimisation of the private/public relationship dynamic, of the existence and significance of the body of the other person. This approach imposes acceptance of the idea of a **gendered vision of citizenship**.

Rejuvenating communications strategies

Communications strategies on excision have not evolved. The Information, Education, Communication (IEC) strategy has allowed for popularisation of a message: *excision is a dangerous practice which should be abandoned*. One-way, vertical, hardly open to creativity and imbued with methodological prejudice, its efficacy continues to be equivocal. ICTs have been grasped as communication tools for use between experts rather than forming a part of an action strategy. The main change brought about by the digital revolution, **social interactivity and hypertextual relationships**, should be grasped as a **cultural and political innovation**.

Budgeting for and investing in results

Institutions for cooperation, such as **society's decision-makers and stakeholders**, have everything to gain by directing their intervention strategies towards participatory, cross-disciplinary and innovative dialogue, supporting the highlighting of gender inequalities and stereotypes and the integration of young adults. This approach involves a commitment in terms of funding, human resources and training, and education policies.

"Excision: the youth are changing Africa through ICTs"

It is no longer possible, in Africa or elsewhere, to keep thinking of the excision issue as it was 25 years ago. But how should it be re-examined? Africa's information society is already developing rapidly, information and communication technologies are no longer a novelty, daily life has been turned upside down, and a number of beliefs and practices have changed, primarily among the youth. In this internet era, the abandonment of female genital mutilation in Africa is primarily an issue related to young people, gender and citizenship. This approach imposes a cross-disciplinary vision of the social fact. This is the main resutlt of this the ENDA TIC-FGM project, funded by **Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC),** www.idrc.ca

Full Project Report, *in French, 2009, 126 pages:*

http://www.enda-sigie.org/bases/sigie/ressources/edocs-mot_sans-excision-av-les_jeunes.pdf

Special Thanks