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GENITAL INTEGRITY AND GENITAL EQUITY

Genital integrity advocates struggle to safeguard all children from genital cutting. Gender equity activists promote true equality of men and women. Commonalities and differences between the two movements are very illuminating. Three words relevant to genital integrity are: exceptional, muddle, and discomfort.

Keywords: genital integrity, gender equity, circumcision, men's rights

Genital integrity and gender equity are two movements that are related both sociologically and etymologically—through a common Latin root *gen-*, meaning to beget or produce. Genital integrity advocates struggle to safeguard all children—male as well as female—from medically unjustified genital cutting, also known as circumcision. Gender equity activists work to promote the true equality of men and women. The two issues are seldom addressed in conjunction with each other, illuminating though the commonalities and differences between them can be. Gender equity is a much more familiar struggle, though often from an exclusively feminist, pro-female perspective.

Why Do People Care about Male Genital Integrity?

Three words describing the issue of circumcision are: Exceptional. Muddle. Discomfort. It is an exceptional issue in many ways, partaking as it does of culture, social convention, religion, psychological denial, sexuality, and medicine. Circumcision persists because of all sorts of theoretical and practical muddles; it is a cultural procedure masquerading as a medical procedure. Physicians make the excuse they make for no other procedure—that they perform it because the parents ask for it, and often parents defend the practice by saying their physician recommended it. And consideration of the issue can cause various types of emotional discomfort, including denial, guilt, and apprehension. I will have more to say about each of these words below.

Often the issue of circumcision is dismissed because people feel resource overload. Excuses we may hear include that a son's penis should look like his father's, and

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that female genital mutilation (FGM) is an incomparably more important issue so why waste your time on male genital integrity? Such reasons, rational though they are, may suggest a speaker's discomfort with the issue.

The foreskin has three important principal functions—immunological, protective, and erogenous. Circumcision interferes with or destroys all three of these roles. An estimated 100 deaths occur annually in the United States as a result of this medically unjustified procedure (Bollinger, 2006).

Farrell (1993) has written what may be the most powerful, succinct summary of the intimate association for males of genital integrity and gender equity: “America's reflexive continuation of circumcision-without-research reflects the continuation of our tradition to desensitize boys to feelings of pain, to prepare them not to question the disposability of their bodies any more than they would question the disposability of their foreskins” (p. 223)

Medicalization

Started in the mid-nineteenth century, in what we might term a deliberate muddle, medicalized circumcision was introduced into Western medicine, ostensibly to stop masturbation and thereby epilepsy, psoriasis, and an exceptional collection comprising nearly all other known diseases.

Justifications have continued since—venereal diseases, sexually transmitted infections, cervical cancer, penile cancer, and the latest one is HIV. HIV infection has been in worldwide decline for a decade or more. The horrible epidemic is controlling itself in public health terms. Circumcision may work in some parts of Africa, or it may not. Even if it does, there is no reason to import to US with wildly different infection modalities and public health conditions. In Africa, public health clinics are one of the most common places people get infected.

Female genital mutilation also has been shown to allegedly help prevent HIV, but no followup has been made to that finding because it is more politically convenient to cut males. Recent evidence (Wawer et al., 2009). shows that male circumcision does not help keep women safer from HIV and may in fact increase the danger to them.

Parallels Between Genital Integrity and Gender Equity

Like genital integrity, gender equity is fundamentally a civil rights movement.

Both topics seem strange at first blush but are supported by basic principles with which most of us agree in this post-Nuremburg Trials world.

Both concerns can be rendered easily understandable to the uninitiated through straightforward parallels with more familiar topics. Male genital integrity can be analogized with female genital integrity, and the need for equity for men can be analogized with the need for equity for women. Discomfort can thereby be allayed and the muddle clarified, at least momentarily.

Distinctions Between Genital Integrity and Gender Equity

The tendency to muddle issues helps maintain circumcision. Factors include lies about an absence of effect on males, explicit and implicit references to male circumcision's alleged religious (primarily Jewish) sacramental role, untruths about medical benefits, misrepresentations about babies' inability to feel pain, and so on.

However, signs are appearing on the horizon that such balancing acts are becoming more difficult to sustain. In recent years, a number of influential medical organizations in such places as Australia and New Zealand, British Columbia, and Saskatchewan have forcefully rejected these claims. A South African law outlaws the practice barring certain exceptions that threaten to swallow the rule, and Sweden has legally regulated it. Tasmania has issued a position paper questioning the practice's legality.

The men's movement has obtained changes in the law in California and elsewhere. Domestic violence shelters can no longer openly discriminate against men. The New Hampshire Men's Commission is one familiar outgrowth of the men's rights movement, as are changing tables in men's bathrooms, the result of an NCFM lawsuit many years ago.

Legal Parallels Between Gender Integrity and Gender Equity

Equal protection under the Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments to the US Constitution is violated by both circumcision and discrimination on the basis of sex! Gender equity has never been explicitly rejected for males, nor has it ever been affirmed with respect to genital integrity. This represents another paradox.

One unhappy commonality between legal cases involving genital integrity and gender equity is that courts often search for any conceivable basis, such as a narrow decision regarding lack of legal standing, that may allow them to avoid addressing the potentially earthshaking (and possibly politically and/or personally treacherous) merits of such cases.

Thus, at least three times, courts have avoided squarely addressing the legality of male circumcision by diverting the discussion into such peripheral, procedural issues as standing. The judicial view of standing is politically and culturally shaped. Thus, we have had a federal law against FGM since 1996 with only one recent use of it. In 2007, the Violence against Women Act (VAWA) was renewed with some welcome reductions in harm thanks to activists. In a relatively recent case in which the author was involved, involving systematic discrimination against Spanish-speaking mothers from whom "consents" for circumcision were fraudulently extracted, a federal district court went to extraordinary, monumentally improper lengths to prevent fair consideration of a wrongfully circumcised boy's complaint.

Similarly, a potentially groundbreaking pair of related gender equity cases, one brought in Minnesota state court, the other in federal court, came to an unsuccessful end after the second case was denied certiorari by the United States Supreme Court. The cases were filed by a number of state taxpayers as a constitutional challenge to the

state's power to spend money in a manner that—in approximate parallel with circumcision itself—clearly discriminates against men by explicitly barring them from any opportunity to seek assistance as victims of domestic violence. Both cases failed based on standing, without the merits ever being addressed by the courts. A similar lawsuit filed by plaintiffs who are both taxpayers and are also directly aggrieved, is currently under way against the State of California.

More recently, the most famous circumcision-related case ever ironically also involved custody matters. Oregon's *Boldt v. Boldt* was a truly exceptional custody case that delved into inactivism when the father, who had recently converted to Judaism and had primary custody of an originally nine-year-old boy, showed his determination to circumcise the youth. The case ended in the boy's wishes being honored, but perhaps only due to the inexcusable five-year delay in resolving the case and the conflation of custody and circumcision issues. This case eloquently demonstrates the law's inability to effectively address male circumcision without descending into a muddle.

Informed Consent

As my co-authors and I discussed in an article published in 2000, (Svoboda et al., 2000) each of these two words conceals a muddle. True information never happens. And the "consent" is actually the *assent* of another. Assent by proxy is not permissible for other cosmetic procedures on children, only for circumcision.

Why do I say true information never happens? The legal standard for informed consent is that all information must be given that a reasonable patient would want to know. All material risks and dangers must be disclosed. At minimum this should include the following information: Circumcision is amputation of genital tissue. The functions of the foreskin should be discussed. The harm caused by its loss. Up-to-date medical pros and cons. Possible alternative, non-surgical solutions to whatever penile problem may be motivating the circumcision (in appropriate cases). Possible bias or profit motives must be disclosed. Perhaps a video of the procedure should be shown.

Gender Equity and Gender Integrity Activism

New Hampshire has opened the world's first men's affairs commission run under government auspices, though for the present it does not receive a dime of government money.

Yet, both the genital integrity and gender equity campaigns, while seemingly reflecting the most obviously meritorious of principles, are nevertheless paradoxically ostracized from widespread acceptance by a variety of factors. These barriers to acceptance include the reigning paradigm under which men's and women's discrimination are viewed differentially, a lack of exposure due to historically meager press coverage (though as we shall see, currently media attention to both genital integrity activism and gender equity is growing), and court reluctance to endorse issues not yet socially approved. Also, both movements quite simply may cause some level of dis-

comfort to individuals, institutions, and, indeed, society itself. Genital integrity partakes of sex, religion, psychological denial, medical procedures, parental denial, and a variety of other uncomfortable issues. Men's rights, for many even in the form of gender equity, is almost as unappealing, striving to affirm the need for equal treatment of a sex that is seen as historically dominant and currently privileged in many or most aspects of human life.

A "hold back the floodgates" mentality may also be at play. If males are "in" as rightful claimants, the thinking may go, then nobody is "out" any more. The impulse to define one's efforts in terms of insiders and outsiders is natural; it may be harder to visualize an enemy when everyone is potentially a victim.

The same forces that separate the genital integrity and gender equity movements from broader success also separate the two movements from supporting each other. For many if not most of the reasons discussed above, activists for genital integrity often view other claims by men with a certain suspicion. Probably playing into this perspective are fears of message dilution, simple logistical inability to take on more than one struggle, submission to the reigning paradigm in which men's difficulties are not as easily acknowledged, and so on.

Similarly, many gender equity activists are uninterested in getting involved in such a seemingly outlandish and strange issue as male circumcision. Here, as well, we may find fear of message dilution, logistical limitations, and a submission to an equally pervasive dominant perspective in which circumcision is not harmful (or, at least, not very harmful), has medical benefits, and in any event is a religious sacrament so must not be challenged. One other factor in the rejection of genital integrity as a proper concern is conscious or unconscious homophobia, whose powerful role among heterosexual American males should not be underestimated.

One further parallel is that discrimination against males and violation of male genital integrity are both rendered more acceptable by focusing on supposed gender differences that justify differential treatment that hurts males while sparing females. The same arguments used to buttress alteration of male genitals in one part of the world support female genital cutting in another part: Hygiene, safety, esthetics, custom. The muddle propagates itself to far-away lands, where it is transformed into a practice on females as well as males (everywhere FGM occurs, male circumcision also occurs). As recently as the 1970's, female genital mutilation was being performed and recommended in reputable medical journals by physicians within the United States! Male genital mutilation is performed on 15% of world's males, while female genital mutilation is performed on 2% of world's females. Why then do we hear so much more re FGM? Europeans don't see the "big" difference. Africans don't see the difference. Ironically, genital alterations are now being done cosmetically for upper-class white women, making all these distinctions even harder to coherently justify.

Growing Pressure for Gender Equity and Genital Integrity

Recent media appearances suggest that both movements may be on the verge of some major breakthroughs. In recent years, well-respected and well-known media out-

lets such as MSNBC's Donahue Show, CNN, NBC, Fox6 News, We Channel's *Secret Lives of Women*, *Newsweek*, *Time*, *Atlantic Monthly*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *California State Bar Journal*, the *Harvard Law Bulletin*, and the *Los Angeles Daily Journal* have placed stories on the men's movement. Similarly, well-written pieces on the genital integrity movement that help to clear up the muddle have appeared in, among other places, Showtime's Penn & Teller Bullshit!, *Penthouse*, *Men's Health*, *Esquire*, the Today Show, MSNBC.com, the *Wall Street Journal*, Yahoo.com, Fox.com, Salon.com, the *National Journal*, the *Washington Post*, the *Harvard Law Bulletin*, and the *San Jose Mercury-News*.

A book I co-authored appeared from Oxford University Press titled *Does Feminism Discriminate Against Men?: A Debate*. As its title suggests, *Does Feminism Discriminate* discusses gender equity, and also delves into intactivism. An important book was recently published addressing differential perspectives on female and male genital cutting. *Fearful Symmetries—Essays and Testimonies around Female—Essays and Testimonies around Excision and Circumcision*, edited by Chantal Zabus and published by Rodopi, may be the first volume to treat the two practices with parity. It includes a long article that I co-authored addressing symmetry and asymmetry in views of the two practices, a first-person circumcision story, and an article analyzing numerous personal accounts of the psychological and physical impacts of male circumcision. In both areas, things are proceeding beyond the curiosity level and starting to get substantive. We now appear to be just one level rather than two levels below general public awareness on each issue.

Recent Progress

In recent years, some important steps have been taken to progress toward fuller cooperation between the genital integrity and gender equity movements. In July 2008, I was in the audience at the historic London conference entitled, "Genital Cutting in a Globalized Age" that brought together activists and scholars on various previously separate genital cutting issues—intersexuals, circumcision, FGM, genital cosmetic surgery, and other related areas. Anti-FGM activist Efua Dorkenoo frankly told us that she wholeheartedly supported the genital integrity movement, and that the anti-FGM movement had simply made a strategic decision not to openly support intactivism as doing so would make protection of females harder. Two months later, on the eve of the Tenth International Symposium on Circumcision and Human Rights in Keele, England, two prominent UK organizations that hitherto have labored on opposite gender sides of the genital integrity battlefield, FORWARD and NOHARM-UK, launched a new joint campaign promoting the right of all men and women to say no to unnecessary genital surgery. This is a landmark development. At the press conference announcing this collaboration, FORWARD echoed Dorkenoo in noting that in the 1980's, the anti-FGM movement made a strategic decision not to support intactivism. In a groundbreaking acknowledgement, FORWARD affirmed that male genital integrity is equal in importance to female genital integrity.

Where Do We Go from Here?

Barriers to change are several: Circumcision is profitable. We have a cultural/social predisposition to do it. There is an appalling lack of knowledge among doctors regarding the functions of the foreskin. Doctors claim to feel pressured by boys' parents to perform the surgery, though this curiously muddled argument is again exceptional, unique to circumcision.

Both issues, regrettably, are relatively neglected at this particular historical moment. The very discomfort and resistance such discussions can raise may be representative of the difficulties and barriers faced by genital integrity activism in gaining support for its cause of protecting the genital integrity of males as well as females.

Genital integrity is an exceptional issue, characterized by numerous muddles, and creating *discomfort*. We can present our concerns with sincerity, integrity, and most importantly patience. Further cooperation can be encouraged between intactivists and opponents of female genital mutilation to elaborate on the progress that has already occurred in this regard. Conferences can be held to follow up on, for example, the success of the excellent 2008 London conference. University courses can be taught about genital integrity, not to mention gender equity, in gender studies programs. Gender equity advocates can be encouraged to incorporate genital integrity in their missions. Progress made in gaining a media foothold can be expanded upon. Online resources can be utilized more fully. Streaming media could provide an inexpensive, rapid way to transmit pertinent information to far-flung supporters. In the end, gender equity and genital integrity can join forces and cooperate toward a vision of a better future.

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