

# NEGOTIATING FEMALE GENITAL CUTTING AS A DIFFICULT CHARACTERISTIC IN KURDISH NATIONAL IDENTITY

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## Abstract

Based on fieldwork among Kurds in Norway, this article explores how participants described the presence of female genital cutting (FGC) in Kurdistan as a difficult topic to address in public. Perceptions of how FGC should be addressed ranged from acknowledging and directly confronting it to silencing and rejecting it as a Kurdish practice. The participants associated FGC with a “traditional mindset” and perceptions of female sexuality that did not readily fit into new ideologies of women’s liberation. Based on literature on how to manage a “difficult” characteristic in national identity construction, we argue that the participants’ negotiation of “modern” and “traditional” aspects of national identity is one strategy for dealing with FGC. FGC has the potential for spoiled national identity. However, we find reason to suggest that a condemnation of the practice based on women’s liberation may strengthen the aspects of Kurdish national aspirations that are grounded in human rights and gender equality.

## Keywords

Kurdish nationalism • Kurdish feminism • Female genital mutilation/cutting • Norway • National identity

## Introduction

In the spring of 2010, Arian, a 32-year old Iraqi-Kurdish woman living in Norway, was interviewed by a Norwegian newspaper about gender equality and her experience with female genital cutting (FGC) (*Østlands-posten* 2010: 1). The journalist claimed that 80% of Iraqi-Kurdish women have undergone FGC. Arian expressed that she wanted to be open about her experience with being circumcised in order to share knowledge about rights and healthcare with other affected Kurdish-Norwegians. Two weeks after Arian’s interview, two other Kurdish women wrote an opinion piece in the same newspaper. The authors, Amedi

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and Nomat (2010: 1-2), insisted that the extent of FGC was exaggerated. They contended that Arian neglected the central role that women have in Kurdish society and that the excessive focus on FGC “destroys an entire nation’s reputation” (Amedi & Nomat 2010: 1). This newspaper controversy illustrates the key argument of this article: FGC becomes crucially problematic in the construction of Kurdish national identity in which women’s liberation is central. To justify and explore this argument, we draw on fieldwork among Kurdish men and women in Norway to illustrate the difficulties of addressing FGC in public. We make sense of their perceptions through theoretical perspectives on portrayals of difficult characteristics in nation-building projects (Goffman 1959; Macdonald 2015; Rivera 2008).

In this article, we will explore the role of FGC as a symbol of “an extreme form of discrimination against women” in shaping Kurdish national identity (WHO 2019: 1). We assume that nationalism is conceived of as an “imagined community” in which people are thought to share certain common characteristics (Anderson 1983: 1). Not everyone will identify with every aspect of this imagined community, however, individuals identifying with a particular national image are labelled by a socially constructed narrative that powerfully shapes collective consciousness (Anderson 1983). Central to the creation of a national identity are characteristics such as language, history, religion, geography, and gender. However, these unique characteristics also represent potential fault lines, which may incite conflict (Hann 1996: ii). The presence of FGC in Kurdistan is one such potential fault line as women’s liberation seems to be one central aspect to the construction of Kurdishness (Begikhani, Hamelink & Weiss 2018: 10-11).

## FGC among Kurds

The World Health Organisation (WHO 2008a: 1) defines FGC as “all procedures involving the partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons.” Since WHO first addressed FGC in the 1970s and 1980s, global campaigns to end the practice initially focused on negative health consequences (Johansen, Bathija & Khanna 2008: 83). With the rise of the human rights agenda, roughly dated to the 1993 Vienna conference, FGC has increasingly been framed as gender-based violence and a breach of human rights (Johansen, Bathija & Khanna 2008: 83-84; WHO 1997: 10-12). One expression of this was a resolution regarding FGC at the World Health Assembly in 2008, where member states were urged to intervene in order to prevent girls undergoing FGC and to provide care for those who had already undergone the procedure (WHO 2008b: 2-3). Furthermore, in 2009 the UN High Commissioner for Refugees established that the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees can grant a girl or a woman, and their parents, asylum if she has undergone or may be at the risk of undergoing FGC (UN High Commissioner for Refugees 2009: 4).

Kurdistan is a region stretching across the nation states of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria and is not acknowledged as a territorial state by the international community institutionalised through the United Nations bodies. Still, some sub-regions, such as Northern Iraq and

Northern Syria, have acquired greater autonomy since 1991 and 2012, respectively (King 2014: 23-41; Tank 2017: 415). There are no official figures for Kurdish populations in or outside of Kurdistan, and estimates range from 20 to 45.6 million people who recognise the region as their nation (Chaliand 1993: 38-40, 96, 142, 194; The Kurdish Institute in Paris 2017). The first international record of FGC in the Kurdish parts of Iraq was made by a mobile health team in 2004 (Stop FGM Kurdistan 2013). In 2011, the standard population-based instrument developed by UNICEF and USAID, the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey, found that in Iraq FGC is primarily concentrated in the Kurdish areas, with an estimated prevalence of 42.8% in Kurdish areas and 1.2% in the rest of Iraq (MICS 2012: 159). In Iraq, as a whole the prevalence of girls under the age of 15 years who have undergone FGC is 19.9% in urban areas and 23.7% in rural areas (MICS 2012: 161). No such national population-based survey exists for Iran. However, Pashei *et al.* (2012: 2) found a prevalence of 55.7% among women visiting health centres in the city of Ravansar in the Kurdish part of Iran. FGC has also been documented in parts of Iran that are not Kurdish (Ahmady 2015). Research on FGC in the Kurdish regions of Syria and Turkey is limited, and despite anecdotal indications that FGC may be practiced there, no current research supports this suggestion (Acharya 2009: 3; Geraci & Mulders 2016: 30). The international work against FGC and the international reports on FGC in Iraqi Kurdistan may have contributed to the Kurdish Parliament of Iraq passing a Domestic Violence Law, making FGC a criminal offence, on June 21, 2011 (The Parliament of Kurdistan Iraq 2011). On the same day, the Prime Minister of the Kurdistan region of Iraq posted this “good news” on his Twitter account (King 2014: 2). As this tweet was published in English, King (2014: 3) argued that this political act communicated to the outside world that in the “new” Kurdistan practices such as FGC would no longer be tolerated. By condemning FGC in a political and global context, the prime minister thus positioned Kurdistan within hegemonic discourses of gender equality and human rights.

Beyond knowledge on prevalence rates, types of FGC, its health consequences, and some of the cultural underpinnings of the practice, current research on FGC in Kurdistan is scarce (Ahmady 2015; Ahmed *et al.* 2018; Daneshkhah *et al.* 2017; Dehgankhalili *et al.* 2015; Khalesi, Beiranvand & Ebtekar 2017; Saleem *et al.* 2013; WADI 2010). Furthermore, there have been no in-depth studies of FGC among Kurds in diaspora or in Norway specifically (Bråten & Elgvin 2014: 151; Geraci & Mulders 2017; Koukkula *et al.* 2016: 2-6). A report by a Norwegian non-governmental organisation (NGO) stated that Kurdish women have addressed FGC themselves and that the Norwegian authorities have largely ignored Kurds (Abdi 2011: 23-24). The Norwegian government has, however, supported political interventions and research on FGC through several action plans. These efforts have particularly targeted the Somali population, which constitute about half of the population affected by FGC in Norway (Ziyada, Norberg-Schulz & Johansen 2016: 8). However, the number of Kurdish migrants from Iraq and Iran is high in Norway, and Kurds represent one of the four largest groups within the countries where FGC is recorded (Gran 2007: 25-26; Ordemann 2017; Ziyada, Norberg-Schulz & Johansen 2016: 2). This article thus addresses a gap in knowledge on sociocultural aspects of FGC among Kurds.

## Research methodology and data analysis

The research material was gathered in Norway between October 2014 and March 2016 by the first author. An emergent and qualitative research design was used due to the scarcity of knowledge about FGC among Kurds in diaspora. Through qualitative interviews, the study gathered research material from the following two main groups: those self-identifying as Iranian or Iraqi Kurds (28 participants) and those working in organisations targeting FGC and/or Kurds both in Norway and Iraqi Kurdistan (12 participants). All Iranian- and Iraqi-Kurdish participants had migrated from Kurdistan to Norway and had lived in Norway for 6-20 years. Their ages ranged from early 20s to late 50s. Their professions varied widely, and the group included artists, engineers, volunteers, housewives, journalists, unemployed, students, and translators. The 12 research participants who represented different organisations working with FGC and/or Kurds were interviewed to gain knowledge about interventions and policies. Eight of these participants were based and worked in Norway and four worked with FGC in Iraqi Kurdistan and were interviewed via Skype. All were recruited based on their roles in the government, healthcare services, or national, international, or transnational NGOs. Three self-identified as Kurdish, whereas the rest were of non-Kurdish origin. The first author used Norwegian or English in recruitment and at events and interviews, and an interpreter speaking Kurdish Sorani was used when needed.

As there is no record of how many Kurds live in Norway or where in Norway they live, only the various nation states from which they originate, the first author started by contacting Kurdish organisations in and around Oslo, the capital of Norway. This resulted in the first author presenting the research project as a form of recruitment at two events organised by a central political party in Iraqi Kurdistan and a politically independent umbrella organisation seeking cooperation between different Kurdish political parties. The participants at these events were Kurds from Iranian and Iraqi Kurdistan. The first author also attended cultural, social, and women's events, such as the national celebration of Newroz (Kurdish New Year), violence against women workshops, and cultural celebrations. These events were arranged either by organisations associated with Iranian or Iraqi Kurds or a mixture of Norwegian, migrant, and women's organisations. At these events, the first author spoke with individuals and, when appropriate, asked them whether they wanted to be interviewed. Of the 28 Kurdish research participants, 16 were recruited at these events. Ten of these 16 participants self-identified as politically active. The remaining six explicitly stated that they were not politically active, that they had been in the past, or that they were interested in Kurdish politics, but did not consider themselves politically active. As those attending these events were a particular sub-set of Kurds in Norway, in that they had a special interest in political, women's, or social issues, three other recruitment methods were used to gain a broader understanding of FGC. First, those interviewed were asked whether they could put the researcher in touch with someone who may have a different perspective. Second, the first author contacted her acquaintances in healthcare, education, and social services who had developed friendships with Kurdish-Norwegians from Iran or Iraq through their work. Third, together with a Norwegian NGO, the first author arranged

a place for Kurdish women who were either unemployed or students to meet three times. During these meetings, the first author showed a documentary by the British-Iranian anthropologist Ahmady (2005) on FGC in Iraqi Kurdistan to facilitate discussion on FGC, and some of the women were interviewed individually. In the end, these other recruitment methods resulted in 12 of the 28 Kurdish interviewees being recruited outside of events. Even if they made references to Kurdish nationalism and women's liberation, these 12 interviewees did not consider themselves to be politically active. Two group interviews, one with four Kurdish men and one with two Kurdish women, were conducted first to gain an introductory understanding of FGC. The rest of the interviews were conducted with one participant at a time, except for two interviews with two married couples. Twelve of the research participants were interviewed multiple times in order to elaborate ongoing themes. All but two interviews were voice-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. For the two interviews that were not recorded, extensive notes were taken throughout and summaries were written immediately afterwards. Fieldnotes were taken before, during, and after interviews, and in conversation with interpreters who were present in three interviews, and included observations and informal conversations at different political, social, and women's events. Summaries of the fieldnotes were written as soon as possible after the observations were made and have been used in analyses during and after the fieldwork period. Based on these fieldnotes, some themes were excluded, for example, who the circumciser was, while new themes, such as perceptions of Kurdish women, were included.

While a major assumption underpinning the research project is that all knowledge to some extent is negotiated socially, the initial production of data and analysis was inductive in that the data were not put into a pre-existing theoretical or coding framework (Braun & Clarke 2006: 9; Crotty 2009: 53-57). Through the use of a semi-structured interview guide, themes such as where, why, how, and by whom FGC is practiced were brought up, allowing participants to introduce new themes in relation to topics relevant to understanding FGC. In initial interviews and observations, participants expressed both a silence and condemnation surrounding FGC emphasising Kurdish nationalist and feminist ideology. In consecutive interviews and observations, and later analyses, the focus was therefore on how ideas of FGC, women's activism, and being Kurdish appeared within the social worlds that the research participants described. The analysis of the data is based on what Braun and Clarke (2006: 9) defined as a "contextualised thematic analysis." This means that the epistemological position is between a realist position (pure description of the participants' experiences and perceptions of FGC) and a constructionist position (assuming that individuals, political ideas, and sociocultural understandings interact in different ways to make sense of FGC). After the themes were identified and further refined and revised, literature on Kurdish nationalism, Kurdish women, and portrayals of difficult characteristics in national identity were used to further analyse the themes.

## The interconnectedness of Kurdish nationalism and Kurdish women

Kurdish nationalism is transnational in that Kurdish academics, politicians, and feminists living in Western states, particularly the United Kingdom, Germany, France and Sweden, are largely defining Kurdistan as a political ideal rather than merely a geographical territory (Alinia *et al.* 2014: 53; Gran 2007; Khayati & Dahlstedt 2014: 57; Wahlbeck 1999: 153). Recently, the research literature has included the Kurdish feminists' struggle against patriarchal structures and increasingly linked it with the transnational construction of Kurdishness (Begikhani, Hamelink & Weiss 2018: 20; Mojab & Gorman 2007: 65; Mojab & Hassanpour 2003: 60-63). Kurdish national identity is thus shaped by relations between Kurds in diaspora being exposed to urban, modern, and Western ideas and experiences of rural, patriarchal norms, and traditional ideas among Kurds in Kurdistan. These social connections are manifested in an increasingly symbolic distinction between "old" and "new" Kurdistan, as the anthropologist King (2014: 1-3, 43-52) observed during her research in Kurdish parts of Iraq between 1995 and 2010. King (2014: 2) described "new" Kurdistan as one that "projects the image of a rising, peaceful democracy where Kurdishness is celebrated." She (2014: 1-3) argued that "new" Kurdistan is influenced by global connections and ideas of modernity, democracy, and human rights within which a local tradition such as FGC does not readily fit.

Historically, Kurdish women have been portrayed as beautiful and strong mothers, military fighters, artists, or political leaders who enjoy remarkable freedom compared to their Arab, Persian, and Turkish counterparts (Galletti 2001: 210). Because of this portrayal, Bruinessen (2001: 95) argued that Kurdish women have become national symbols representing "the moral superiority of the Kurds over their neighbours." While this global image of Kurdish women does exist, on the contrary so-called honour killings of Kurdish women, such as the infamous killing of Swedish-Kurdish Fadime in 1990 by her father, have linked honour killings with the territorial region of Kurdistan (Hague, Gill & Begikhani 2013; Wikan 2008). More recently, since 2014, Kurdish female fighters have gained increased attention in English mainstream media. They have been positively portrayed on the global stage as fighting against issues such as gender inequality as endorsed by the militant group "the Islamic State" (ISIS) in and around the Kurdish regions of Iraq and Syria (Tank 2017: 406-407). In our analysis of FGC as a difficult characteristic in Kurdish national identity, we find it useful to consider the practice as part of the concept of "honour-based violence" as it is occasionally referenced in the Kurdish literature and commonly understood as "violence against women" (Hague, Gill & Begikhani 2013: 383; WHO 2019).

## Portraying a "difficult" characteristic in national identity construction

Goffman's (1959; 1963) work on stigma and social interactions as dramaturgical performances helps to bridge participants' descriptions of FGC as difficult to address in public with the

broader debate on how a “difficult” characteristic is dealt with in constructing Kurdish national identity. Goffman (1963) insisted that it is outsiders, or the audience, that label attributes of an identity as spoiled. The audience thus define certain characteristics of an identity of a social group as discrediting. Social groups who possess these discrediting characteristics use different strategies of representation to present an image that is in accordance with perceived social conventions (Goffman 1959: 32-40, 114; Goffman 1963: 125). For instance, as “Kurdishness” is often positioned in Western discourses of democracy and gender equality, the national honour of Kurdistan increasingly depends on exposure to a Western audience ascribing recognition and respect. To this audience, FGC as a form of violence against women poses the potential for spoiled national identity.

The sociologist Rivera (2008: 613) claimed that available studies on how states or nationalists deal with a “difficult past” focus on recognition of a difficult event (such as a war) through commemoration. Based on an empirical case study of how the Croatian government dealt with the Yugoslav conflicts, Rivera (2008: 623-625) challenged this view of recognition and argued that states or nationalists may manage a “difficult past” by drawing attention away from the difficult event through covering and cultural reframing. More recently, the anthropologist Macdonald (2015: 7) suggested that there is an ongoing change in how a difficult past is represented in national identity. She (2015: 15-16) argued that the acknowledgement of a difficult characteristic may actually be a positive action that does not lead to a spoiled identity. Although the action may be positive, it does not mean that the problem of the troubling past has been solved, instead she (2015: 19) argued that the disclosure of the difficult characteristic results in more nuanced ways of representing national identity. In the following, we explore how these strategies for managing a difficult characteristic in national identity can be seen in the empirical material, where we found that participants described FGC as condemned (i.e., recognition) and silenced (i.e., covering/cultural reframing) with some willingness to address FGC as a Kurdish challenge (i.e., positive action).

## Results: addressing FGC as a Kurdish practice

Perceptions of how FGC should be addressed ranged from acknowledging and directly confronting it to silencing and rejecting it as a Kurdish practice. In the following, we will first present how research participants described the presence of FGC in Kurdistan as a difficult topic to address in public. Second, we show how the participants could reject FGC by situating the practice within a “traditional mindset”. Third, we explore how perceptions of female sexuality was another means by which FGC became silenced publically. In the last theme, we explore how a “traditional mindset” and perceptions of “traditional” understandings of female sexuality did not readily fit into new ideologies of women’s liberation.

## Addressing FGC in public

Participants were often ambiguous about whether and how FGC constituted a part of Kurdishness. This was also true among the non-Kurdish representatives of different organisations working with FGC. Three of the eight key informants in Norway, who were non-Kurdish, said they had never heard about FGC among Kurds, and therefore, they did not address it, even when dealing with FGC among relevant migrant groups was part of what they did in their work. Those that addressed FGC in their work had learned about the practice either through individuals or groups addressing the practice themselves or through media references to reports on FGC from Iraqi Kurdistan. In response to the growing focus on FGC among Kurds in recent years, Parwa, an Iranian-Kurdish female activist in her 50s held a workshop about FGC with Kurdish participants in Norway. She explained that she had found her own initiative unnecessary, as Kurds already rejected the practice:

We've had a workshop about [FGC]. We got a lot of feedback that it was not necessary, because everyone knows what is right and not right.

Contrary to this view, Hermin, an Iranian-Kurdish woman, emphasised that FGC is not addressed through other channels and that such a workshop will only reach those that are interested in social and political issues and already know about FGC. She insisted that there are other women who do not attend such events but who need this knowledge about FGC.

A seemingly widespread reluctance to address FGC was often explained in terms of the shame of associating FGC with Kurdishness. One example of this is the experience of Iraqi-Kurdish Solgul, a woman in her 30s. She had written and spoken publically about FGC and experienced negative feedback from other Kurds due to her engagement:

Some would not look at my face after I talked about [FGC]. They would say it is shameful that I'm saying we have FGC in Kurdistan.

Bringing up FGC in an effort to deal with the practice as a challenge for Kurds to tackle, brought with it shame related to exposing this information to the outside world. FGC seemed to be viewed as antithetical to the international Kurdish image as a proud, modern, and united people. Many of the non-Kurdish participants, such as Linda, a Norwegian governmental worker, shared this view. Linda had worked with FGC both in Iraqi Kurdistan and in Norway and expressed it this way:

[Kurds] do not want [FGC] to be disclosed. This is obvious among the Kurds. Probably among other suppressed peoples too... They maintain a united front against the outside world, and say that it is our "dirt and filth" and that you will not see us that way. We want to be seen as a proud people who are fighting for freedom, and outsiders are not supposed to show our dirty laundry.

Although it was difficult to address FGC in public, many participants expressed a desire to do so, so that Kurds could put an end to it. When the first author held a presentation on FGC

at an event with Iraqi Kurds, an Iraqi-Kurdish man named Mazar expressed his opinion that confronting FGC in such a public context was both uncomfortable and positive:

It is very good that you bring up [FGC], it is. But one has to think twice about how it is brought up because it is a very intimate topic and some may feel particularly affected by it. [...] I do not think we Kurds bring it up at all. Then someone else comes and does it, and that is incredibly good. In the end, it benefits us.

Mazar highlighted the difficult issue of how to address FGC among Kurds in a good way – both for outsiders and for Kurds. One way the participants addressed FGC was by positioning it within what they considered a “traditional mindset”. This was a way to dismiss FGC while also demonstrating that the “traditional mindset” was a current challenge to being Kurdish.

### **“Traditional mindset”**

The research participants who self-identified as Kurdish understood their own identity mainly in the context of living in Norway, many as Norwegian citizens. They highlighted the transnational aspect of being Kurdish through continuous comparisons of their own and others’ lives as Kurds in Norway with how they imagined the lives of Kurds in Kurdistan. Most research participants emphasised the heterogeneity of “Kurdishness” and protested against traditional perceptions of individual autonomy and gender ideals. They nevertheless expressed a strong notion of what Kurdishness meant to them and to others. FGC was often described as a custom among “other” Kurds, who had a “traditional mindset,” and was commonly understood as similar to practices such as forced marriages and honour killings. The persistence of these traditions was often explained through patriarchy, suppression of women, and conservative Islamist groups and was contrasted with being modern. Zara, who was in her late 20s, was born in Kurdish-Iran and had lived in Norway for over 10 years. She described what she considered to be a “traditional mindset”:

It’s not only a Kurdish man’s mindset. It’s a male dominated society’s mindset, which I think is applicable at least in the Middle East and large parts of... Actually in the entire world. [...] It surprises me, but I heard it yesterday. A colleague said: “A Kurd is very traditional,” and I think that’s right. It is a people who are no good at adapting to the development that we see in the rest of the world. The male dominant mindset is very present among Kurdish men and Kurdish boys in the present day. I have a little brother who did not accept that my mom was going to remarry. He has grown up and been raised in Norway. He is a modern kid out in public, but that mindset is still there.

As Zara implies, the “traditional mindset” was commonly described as unacceptable, yet she emphasised that this mindset was a part of current Kurdish identity. Participants often talked about religion, particularly Islam, as central to the “traditional mindset”. Four of the research participants who self-identified as non-religious or moderately religious reasoned

that FGC came about when Kurdistan was exposed to Islam. They were not clear about when they believed that this had occurred, with descriptions ranging from some decades to some centuries ago. However, they argued that because FGC was introduced by Islam, it was not a Kurdish tradition because Islam was not part of Kurdishness. However, one of the participants, Behman, from Kurdish Iraq, who considered himself a Muslim, disagreed with this view, arguing that FGC is not part of Islam. While participants often associated the “traditional mindset” with Islam, they made a qualitative distinction between conservative and modern Muslims. According to their conceptualisation, modern Muslims rejected this “traditional mindset” and consequently they were “acceptable” Kurds. Hanan, a woman in her 20s who was born in Iraqi Kurdistan and married to a man from Iranian Kurdistan, provided an example of this. She explained why her in-laws, in contrast to her “old-fashioned mother,” who still supported FGC, are against the practice: “...because they are those modern Muslims.” Furthermore, FGC was often positioned as a symbol of being conservative and traditional in a negative sense, as Iraqi-Kurdish Yasemin explained:

Yasemin: “After so many years [circumcised women] feel they have made a big mistake. And others start to think about what kind of family you belong to [...]”

Interviewer: “So when you hear about a woman who is circumcised, people think...”

Yasemin: “Very negative.”

Interviewer: “And that she comes from a family that is not so good?”

Yasemin: “Yes, a conservative one.”

As the participants expressed that the “traditional mindset” constituted one negative part of Kurdish identity, by positioning FGC within a “traditional mindset”, it was thus possible to both reject and silence FGC. Furthermore, the close link to female sexuality appeared as another contributing factor to a public silencing of FGC.

## Female sexuality

Practices such as honour killings, forced marriages, and violence against women were often described as challenges that were being dealt with and discussed as a part of Kurdishness and women’s liberation. In contrast, FGC was not mentioned by the participating Kurds at any of the political, social, and women’s events attended, unless the first author raised the topic. This may partly be because at some of the events not only Iranian and Iraqi Kurds were present but also Kurds from other parts of Kurdistan and non-Kurdish migrants. However, FGC was not discussed at the events where only Iranian and Iraqi Kurds – and mainly women – were present either. Many participants added that they found it challenging to deal with FGC due to its link to an intimate part of the female body. Linda,

the Norwegian governmental worker who had worked with FGC among Kurds in Norway and Iraqi Kurdistan, put it this way:

We worked with a small volunteer group on FGC. The problem was that it was so much... so much stigma that no one wanted a public debate around it. [...] It was much more difficult to talk about than honour killings, forced marriages, and such things. They are accepted as social issues that [Kurds] are very concerned with. And it's intimate, right? It is very close to sexuality, and one does not speak about that publicly.

Thus, this close link to female sexuality appeared as a central barrier in directly addressing FGC in public contexts. Iraqi-Kurdish Nesrin illustrated this barrier when she reflected upon her experiences with engaging in political debates about FGC and why the law against FGC in Kurdish Iraq would be hard to implement:

As long as 20 per cent, 30 per cent, or 40 per cent of those who are in the parliament are unable to speak about their own bodies, what do we expect?

Taboos surrounding female sexuality and its close link to FGC thus made it difficult to address the practice in public contexts. At the same time, most research participants emphasised that one of the main reasons they condemned FGC was because it had negative sexual consequences and that modern women should be able to enjoy their sexuality (Lunde *et al.* Under review). This emphasis on the negative sexual consequences of FGC made it possible to position FGC within understandings of women's rights.

### **Women's liberation**

While not all research participants identified as politically active, all Kurdish research participants, both male and female, identified women's rights and liberation as central to condemning FGC. A strong desire for freedom was central to perceptions of Kurdishness, as expressed by Amira: "to be a Kurd is to obtain freedom." Freedom was generally described as a future goal, but exactly what it entailed was unclear. What was clear, however, was the perception of women's liberation as a central part of what *should* constitute Kurdishness. Afran, a man from Iraqi Kurdistan, referred to the slogan "woman, life, freedom," originally from a speech by Turkish-Kurdish activist and politician Abdullah Öcalan and often used by Kurdish women's activists, to illustrate that for Kurds, freedom and women's liberation are intimately interconnected (Schäfers & Neven 2017). The Kurdish men and women often referred to the region of Rojava in Kurdish Syria and to radical Kurdish feminists to illustrate women's strong position in Kurdish society. In this way, women's liberation was identified as a main force for change. Zilan, an Iraqi-Kurdish woman in her 30s, explained how Kurdish women in Iraqi Kurdistan broke with social norms of FGC, honour killings, and the family:

It is exactly what goes against everything we believe about Kurds. You know, in relation to FGC, honour killings, and blah blah blah. There are women that I have met over and over again since the age of 13-14 years old who say: "I could not stand my family anymore, I ran away to the mountains and the Peshmerga." I reply: "Are you kidding me?! How can you do that? What would your family say?" "They just had to take it... I just wanted to be free [...]. Now I'm going to fight alongside men and live on bread and water." It's incredibly noble in a way. [...] They are fighting against all odds. And they are the foremost, most modern feminists, really. Based in the context in which they live. [...] So, to express oneself is very extreme in Kurdistan compared to here.

Despite a strong sense of the struggle for women's liberation, many emphasised that there were challenges with this discourse of liberated Kurdish women. Further elaborating on what constituted the "traditional mindset", Zara discussed how the image of the Kurdish women's movement has gained attention in the Western media, placing women at the forefront of the armed struggle. She, however, felt that this portrayal of Kurdish women did not reflect reality:

It appeals to the rest of society that there should be women who lead the struggle. [...] I think it is symbolic because I believe many generations are needed for this mindset to disappear. [...] Because the mindset is the least modern I would say. [...] I simply think it is too superficial. Because we are talking about values, core values, found in each single cell of these people.

Other Kurdish men and women were similarly concerned that this "traditional mindset" was a present-day challenge. Some described the growing Islamization of Kurdish culture in Arab states and the challenge this presented for women's liberation. For instance, three Iranian-Kurdish women, one Iraqi-Kurdish woman, and one Iraqi-Kurdish man described how women used to dress in miniskirts at universities; now more women wore the hijab, and both men and women wore clothing covering their shoulders and knees. Most participants believed that patriarchy and the suppression of Kurdish women were unacceptable and should be challenged, but it remained unclear in which way they considered FGC to be part of the Kurdish women's movement. Elaborating on the position FGC had within the Kurdish women's movement, Roza, a representative of a Kurdish women's organisation, explained that they do not address FGC as a singular issue, but rather as part of the larger discussion surrounding the women's struggle. She claimed that through the destruction of patriarchy based on women's liberation, FGC will be stopped.

## Discussion

In an analysis of representations of Swiss national identity in public debates on FGC, the sociologist Bader (2018) found that the framing of FGC as an unacceptable practice situated

the Swiss national identity as superior to non-Western migrants. In our study, we have seen how some representatives of one such migrant group – Kurds in Norway – negotiate FGC in a somewhat similar context. Kurdish identity is to a large extent constructed between Kurds in “Western” states and Kurds in Kurdistan. International media reports, research articles, and activist attention towards FGC in Kurdish areas in recent years make FGC a practice that Kurds need to acknowledge somehow. In Norway, they need to negotiate their identity towards an audience that labels FGC as a breach of human rights and violence against women, or by using Goffman’s (1959; 1963) theories on spoiled identities; Kurds as a social group need to make use of different strategies to deal with what outsiders label as a discrediting characteristic. We argue that FGC plays a role in the growing construction of a “new” Kurdish national identity where understandings of modernity are negotiated with understandings of tradition. While the position of FGC in Kurdish national identity construction is far from clear-cut, the empirical material suggests that negotiating “modern” and “traditional” aspects of national identity is one strategy for dealing with FGC as a “difficult” characteristic of Kurdishness.

We have seen, on the one hand, that FGC is recognised as a Kurdish practice in situations where condemning FGC was an acceptable way of discussing it. Participants sometimes addressed FGC at seminars, in public debates, and key informants were informed about FGC by reports or by Kurdish women taking up the issue themselves. On the other hand, we have seen a covering of FGC in the way that there is shame associated with acknowledging FGC in public contexts as a Kurdish challenge. FGC was commonly ascribed to a “traditional mindset” in a negative sense. While the “traditional mindset” is still perceived as part of being Kurdish, FGC was not seen as fully relevant to the Kurdish participants because they largely rejected this “traditional mindset”. In addition, its close link to female sexuality makes FGC a particularly difficult issue to address in political contexts compared to other acts defined as honour-based violence or violence against women. This recognition and covering of FGC in public contexts echoes the literature on management of a “difficult” characteristic in national identity; it is problematic to address FGC as it can be “reputation-damaging,” resulting in a spoiled national identity (Rivera 2008: 615; Goffman 1963). However, we contend that the research participants’ descriptions of women’s liberation as a way to condemn FGC may be a positive action that can strengthen certain aspects of Kurdish national aspirations (Macdonald 2015: 16).

To support our claim that condemning FGC publically may be positive for the construction of Kurdish national identity, we argue the importance of the interconnectedness between understandings of women’s liberation, or as Zilan put it, the “most modern feminists,” and Kurdish nationalism. Kurdish women are often positioned at the “margins of feminist knowledge” and contribute to a broader debate on nationalist feminism (Mojab 2001: 16). In this broader debate on nationalist feminism, there is disagreement regarding: (1) whether the state reinforces patriarchal structures and, consequently, whether gender should be seen as separate from the state, or (2) whether feminism inevitably and dialectically exists in a context of postcolonial nationalism (Yuval-Davis 1997). Even though the research

participants of this study originated from Iraqi and Iranian Kurdistan, they often referred to the Kurdish-Turkish politician, ideologist, and activist Abdullah Öcalan in describing their condemnation of FGC. Despite being imprisoned and sentenced to death in Turkey for his political and armed protests, Öcalan has been particularly influential in shaping the position of women in Kurdish nationalism. He is the founder of the Turkish-based political party PKK, and he introduced the concept of democratic confederalism, which can be seen as an attempt to meet the critique of nationalist feminism (Düzgün 2016: 284). Simply put, Öcalan (2013: 49-54) positioned women's liberation as the first step in facilitating a needed revolution, viewing the state and the family as an interrelated social phenomenon that needs to be addressed holistically. Kurdish women are thus not only solely positioned within an academic debate but also as active social agents. In Norway, Westrheim (2014: 128, 141) argued that Kurdish women strengthen their political and female awareness by joining Norwegian and Kurdish political and women's associations. This, she contends, allows Kurdish women to partake in the reconstruction of Kurdish nationalism (Westrheim 2014: 137). However, different women's organisations and major political parties have had difficulty in uniting around common issues. At times, women become symbols of the nation rather than actual political agents, which may be another reason why it is problematic to address FGC in the Kurdish nation-building project (Begikhani, Hamelink & Weiss 2018: 12). Furthermore, just as Kurdish women's movements have gained influence in the construction of Kurdish nationalism in Iraqi Kurdistan, so have conservative Islamist groups. Some Islamist groups have promoted crimes against women, such as honour killings, as part of Kurdish culture (Al-Ali & Pratt 2011: 344). If FGC is addressed as a feminist issue, this seems to strengthen those parts of Kurdish national aspirations that are grounded in gender equality and human rights, which oppose such conservative and patriarchal forces. Notably, it was during the Arabian Spring, in June 2011, that the Kurdish parliament of Iraq made FGC a criminal offence. While the liberation of women may not be the sole aim for every party in the Kurdish nation-building project, women's liberation is a central discourse in Kurdish nationalism. We suggest that condemning FGC based on women's rights situates the Kurdish identity better in relation to Western nation states.

## Concluding remarks

We have explored how FGC becomes problematic to address in public due to the construction of Kurdish national identity being closely linked with ideologies of women's liberation. The research participants showed how FGC was acknowledged, rejected, and silenced in public contexts. Positioning FGC within a "traditional mindset" made it possible to silence and reject FGC as part of what modern Kurdish identity should constitute. Perceptions of female sexuality were another contributing factor to the difficulty in addressing FGC in public contexts. However, condemning FGC based on negative sexual consequences, ideologies of women's rights and women's liberation may be a possible way in which FGC can be addressed publically. This article contributes to the literature on the management of

a difficult characteristic in nation-building projects by presenting the negotiation of modern and traditional aspects of FGC as one management strategy. As FGC is a symbol of violence against women, the practice poses the potential for spoiled Kurdish national identity in the Norwegian context. However, we find reason to suggest that a condemnation of the practice grounded in women's liberation may strengthen the aspects of Kurdish national aspirations that are grounded in human rights and gender equality. Although the study is limited to a singular qualitative study of how some Kurds in Norway talk about FGC, it can be a starting point for future research on different ways the concept of "violence against women" and the modern/traditional dualism plays out in nation-building projects. In addition, this study raises questions about the role of female sexuality in global norms of democracy, nationalism, human rights, and women's health.

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