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Debating ‘female genital mutilation’ and ‘female genital cosmetic surgery’ in the Swiss public sphere (2005-2012)

Abstract

In July 2012 the new art. 124 of the Swiss Criminal Code came into force, prohibiting every type of so-called ‘female genital mutilation’ (‘FGM’), but excluding the regulation of ‘female genital cosmetic surgery’ (‘FGCS’). In other words, ‘FGCS’ is legal and considered legitimate in Switzerland, whereas ‘FGM’ is seen as a ‘social problem’ to resolve. Against this background, my research serves to answer the following questions:

• What are the frames used in political and media debates to depict ‘FGM’ and ‘FGCS’?

• What are the trajectories of these frames (who use them, and how, and what are their effects)?

My thesis seeks to illuminate the causal assumptions which underlie the frames of these two practices of genital modification, in order to determine whether and how normative models of femininity are produced, and what consequences can be observed in terms of power relations between ‘natives’ and immigrants. Following postcolonial theories, I intend to demonstrate that the debate on ‘FGM’ is symptomatic of a broader debate on migrants’ cultural integration and constitutes an example, among others, of the rhetoric of sexual nationalism, that is, the Western claim to be the guarantor of ‘universal’ values such as women’s rights. For this purpose, I will carry out a discourse analysis of the debates on ‘FGM’ and ‘FGCS’ in two areas of the Swiss public sphere. Firstly, I will explore the field of politics through an analysis of parliamentary debates and policy documents. Secondly, my research will involve a media analysis (written press, extracts of TV reports) from the three main linguistic regions of Switzerland. The timeframe studied covers a period of seven years (2005-2012), starting from when the parliamentary initiative against ‘FGM’ was submitted up until the entry into force of the new law.