Towards an understanding of the current debates on the Dawoodi Bohra tradition of Female Genital Cutting: A synthesis of key issues

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Lunchtime Talk
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Context:
Who are the Dawoodi Bohra?

- Small Shia Muslim Ismaili group 1 million
- Mumbai and diaspora
- Modernist (women’s education and embracing technology)
- Highly traditional (distinct dress, disciplined social organisation sense of duty to religious authority high)
- Economic success and development work in less advantaged sectors of community
Context:
Why did they come to the TIHR?

- Independent view on Sahiyo report (not PR)
- To challenge that FGC is not FGM
- To protect community from reputational damage and prosecution
The contract:
What did the Dawoodi Bohra want? How did we respond?

What did they ask for?
  – Critique of Sahiyo Report

What did we offer?
  – A review of whole situation in order to open a conversation.

Why was it important for us to do this project?
  – Because it was difficult
What we did:
Initial review of the Sahiyo research

- The design was not fully described and lacked rationale
- There was no independent review and the sampling strategy resulted in findings that present problems for generalisation
- There remain unresolved ethical issues in the design and methods of research
- The survey analysis was neither transparent nor robust
- The literature review was incoherent, unstructured and not systematic
- The report is biased towards the wider anti-FGM aim of Sahiyo.
What we did: Synthesis of key issues and relevant other research

1. Is the Sahiyo report a valid representation of the views and experiences of Dawoodi Bohra women?
2. Is the Dawoodi Bohra FGC practice a ‘human rights violation’ as claimed in the Sahiyo report?
3. How do Dawoodi Bohra women understand FGC within their culture and religion?
4. What drives the debate represented by Sahiyo on the one hand (human rights) and orthodox Dawoodi Bohra (religious freedom) on the other?
5. How can the findings of this synthesis shift the conversation into a more open space?
Key Findings:

1. The Sahiyo report is not a valid representation of the views and experiences of Dawoodi Bohra women.

2. ‘Human rights violation’ as claimed in the Sahiyo report? No evidence of more serious claims but evidence to support hypothesis of short term physical harm, psychological harm and social impacts if not had.
Gender roles

- Meeting the DB ‘at home’
  - being invited in
  - being supervised throughout

- Perceptions on both sides
  - women and men positive about women’s lives
  - education, jobs, professionals, communal cooking

- Patriarchy and/or matriarchy?
  - allegiance to a single spiritual leader,
    the Da’I-al- Mutlaq, with complete authority
Modernism and orthodoxy: a paradox for the community?

- The Dawoodi Bohra promote being progressive while maintaining their traditions.
- They claim that these are reconciled yet ‘modernity can support tradition but here tradition will trump modernity’ (Blank, 2001).
- Is there a clash of values? Perhaps not ‘provided the word modernity is used in a narrow sense of adoption of information, communication technologies and secular education’. (Ghadially, 2002)
- Thus FGC has been argued as ‘compatible’.
In the women’s gallery
On being women

- The Dawoodi Bohra Women’s Association for Religious Freedom (DBWARF): established 2017
  - active in the pro-FGC movement in India
  - see selves as the authentic voice of orthodox community
  - argue that making ‘khafz’ illegal counter to religious freedom

- Perceived strengths
  - tight-knit community
  - autonomy is many areas of life including rituals (FGC)
  - women’s self-determination so arguably not patriarchal but matriarchal thus modern

- Vulnerabilities
  - compliance with their situation?
Multiple perspectives:

- Can FGC only be understood as a human rights violation or as a cultural practice?
- Do anti-FGC arguments homogenise different practices, overlooking power dynamics and women’s subjective experience?
- Are women typically cast as victims thus creating a loss of agency for themselves?
- Where do consent and autonomy enter the discussion?
- Can there be a space where women’s experience is honoured?
Challenging a community:

- Privacy (and a-political position)
- Exposure to discrimination because of press
  - use and misuse of data
  - visibility of women’s rida/risk of fuelling Islamophobia
- Being exposed and using exposure
- Silence no longer a protection
  - Prime Minister Modi meets the Dawoodi Bohra 14.9.18
  - Twitter video promoting FGC 20.9.18
  - Supreme Court case in India referred to the Constitution Bench 25.9.18
No response. How can the findings of this synthesis shift the conversation into a more open space?

The Court Case continues weighing between these polarized views.

- Human rights
- Religious freedom
- Human rights
- Bodily integrity