

Sugar-coating Female Genital Mutilation in United Nations Documents in English and Arabic: A Diachronic Study of Lexical Variation

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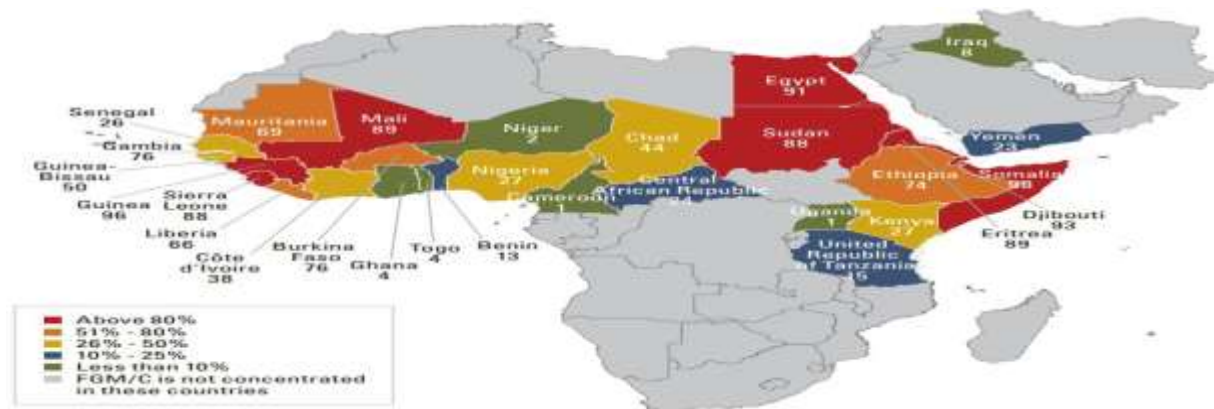
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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the terminology used when addressing “Female genital mutilation” in English and Arabic and, the impact of each term. Large number of young girls in the Middle East, Asia and Africa go through female genital mutilation, which is known as ‘FGM’. According to a United Nations Children's Fund report (UNICEF 2005a), 91% of girls in Egypt and 88% of girls in Sudan experience this procedure annually. Arabic language practitioners’ lexes for FGM include the words (ختان) (khetan) which means “circumcision”, (طهارة) (tahara), which means “purification”, (قطع) (Kat’e) which means “cutting”, (تشويه) (tashweeh) which means “corruption - damaging” and the term (البتر) (batr) which means “mutilation”. This study will focus on the translation of FGM from English to Arabic over twenty years from 1996 until 2016 in the United Nations documents.

“Mama tied a blindfold over my eyes. The next thing I felt my flesh was being cut away. I heard the blade sawing back and forth through my skin. The pain between my legs was so intense I wished I would die.”

Waris Dirie, UNFPA Goodwill Ambassador and spokesperson on FGM



<https://www.undispatch.com/map-of-the-day-the-countries-where-female-genital-mutilation-is-rampant/>

1. INTRODUCTION

Large number of young girls in the Middle East, Asia and Africa go through female genital mutilation, which is known as ‘FGM’. According to a United Nations Children's Fund report (UNICEF 2005a), 91% of girls in Egypt and 88% of girls in Sudan experience this procedure annually. The United Nations (UN) has condemned the practice as violating a series of

well-established human rights principles including the principles of equality and non-discrimination on the basis of sex, the right to life when the procedure results in death, and the right to freedom from torture or cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment or punishment (World Health Organization 2008a).

As a tool for advocacy, and for raising awareness on

the significance of the subject, all UN agencies have agreed to use the term “female genital mutilation” (World Health Organization 2008a). The adoption of the term is meant to illuminate the brutality of the practice. While there is still some debate about the appropriate terminology for the practice, it is difficult to escape the fact that the largest, most coordinated, determined and well-funded organisation ever created for the protection of ‘human rights and international public health’, the UN (and its subsidiaries) advocate for the term ‘mutilation’. Perhaps the best example of this is the UN Interagency Statement on Eliminating FGM, which dedicates an entire chapter and annex to detailing the adoption of the term and its value in awareness raising (World Health Organization 2008a).

The term was first adopted at the third conference of the Inter African Committee on Traditional Practices Affecting the Harm of Women and Children (IAC). Since 1991, the terminology ‘FGM’ has been widely used in UN documents (UNICEF 2005a). The term was also used in the 1997 Joint Statement of the WHO, the UNICEF, and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) (World Health Organization, et al. 1997). It is surprising then to see that these same organisations (and more) have failed to enforce this hard-line language policy in official documents, publications and addresses which are translated or interpreted into other languages, specifically in this research, into Arabic.

Arabic language practitioners’ lexis for FGM include the words (ختان) (khetan) which means “circumcision”, (طهارة) (tahara), which means “purification”, (قطع) (Kat’e) which means “cutting”, (تشويه) (tashweeh) which means “corruption - damaging” and the term (البتر) (batr) which means “mutilation”. The divergent ramifications of language planning discussed in this research paper are focused on the impact of culture, the role of policy makers, the role of language practitioners and how these integrated constituents combine to expedite social change. It is impossible to talk about groups of people without generalising. It therefore follows that it is impossible to talk about the culture of a group without generalising. This research aims to be as accurate and as specific as possible, but inevitably contains such generalisations. It is hoped that with proper critical analysis of existing language planning methodology, successful changes can be made in the culture and language policies surrounding FGM. This study will focus on the translation of FGM from English to Arabic over twenty years in the United Nations. The aim of the

study, namely using effective terminology and awareness raising.

2. OBJECTIVE AND METHODOLOGY

This research project is based on the empirical analysis of FGM- related publications produced by the UN and its agencies and the terminology used to describe FGM in English and Arabic. Since 1997, the UN’s position on the term ‘mutilation’ has been clear and it has consistently encouraged the use of the term as a tool for advocacy. Therefore, this research aims to prove that the organisation and its agencies has not consistently used the term when translated into Arabic. Publications relating to FGM since 1996 were critically reviewed, covering twenty years of literature, comparing and contrasting the use of the term ‘mutilation’ in English and Arabic, drawing on articles available on the UN library website.

Every year the UN and its agencies hold regular meetings and publish between twenty to sixty FGM- related publications in English, which are then translated into Arabic. I used the UN library to collect the documents published annually on FGM.

Research data included all documents published by the United Nations since 1996, the year in which the term “Female Genital Mutilation” or the abbreviation “FGM” appear more than once, as long as the original document is published in English. The articles were collected and compared with the corresponding published Arabic article.

I then counted the number of times Female Genital Mutilation or the abbreviation “FGM” were written in English compared to the number of times mutilation, damaging, cutting, circumcision, or excision, was used when translated into Arabic. The articles were then checked for the English terms circumcision, cutting and excision, although these will not be the main search terms, as a frame of reference or justification for the appearance of such terms in Arabic.

A translation key was created, to help represent the terms used in English and the terms used in Arabic. English terms were allocated an alphabet symbol from A – D: A Mutilation, B – Circumcision, C – Cutting, D – Excision. Arabic terms were numbered from 1 – 6: 1 – Damaging, 2 – Circumcision, 3 – Cutting, 4 – Purification, 5 – Mutilation, 6 – Reduction. This means, for example, if the term in English is Female Genital Mutilation, and in Arabic it is translated to Female Circumcision, it was recorded as A3 each time it appears in this format.

The documents analysed were restricted to those that include the use of the word mutilation more than once in order to identify the different terms used in Arabic within the same document. Furthermore, I only used documents translated from English to Arabic.

3. CASE STUDY

Traditional community customs have made FGM a common practice, which means that girls are frowned upon if they have not been mutilated. This affects their social status and desirability for marriage arrangements, which is still important in such communities. According to Jha & Anand(2017), Burrage(2015) and UNICEF(2005a), practising FGM is justified for the following reasons:

- To reduce women's sexuality in order not to be a burden on men;
- To be affiliated to a community;
- Womanhood initiation during puberty for young girls to become women;
- "Purity" to maintain the honour of the family (the girl's virginity) until marriage and to secure a better dowry (payment made for the bride by the husband's family to the bride's family).

FGM is considered to be an act of honour, safeguarding protection and cleanliness to ensure that women and girls are "appropriate" for future marriages. Women are considered a traded commodity for the family and the future husband, and the amount of dowry and clan affiliation are critical during each arrangement. Girls, women and slaves present a commodity "value" to be transferred among families or between fathers and husbands. Some communities believe that cutting the part of a girl's genitals that resembles a man's part will make the girl cleaner and softer.

FGM is embedded in notions of purity and cleanliness and it has over the centuries been particularly evident in contexts where girls and women are seen as property owned and traded by men. FGM is a marker of chastity and sole ownership by a husband.

(Jha & Anand 2017, p.4) However, [c]ommunities that have employed a process of collective decision-making

have been able to abandon the practice. Indeed, if the practising communities decide themselves to abandon FGM, the practice can be eliminated very rapidly. Several governments have passed laws against the practice, and where these laws have been complemented by culturally-appropriate education and public awareness-raising activities, the practice has declined.

(World Health Organization 2008a, p.1)

As mentioned before, the best example of this is the UN Interagency Statement on Eliminating FGM, which dedicates an entire chapter and annex to detailing the adoption of the term and its value in awareness raising (World Health Organization 2008a).

In Annex 1: Note on Terminology, it states:

The word mutilation establishes a clear linguistic distinction from male circumcision, and emphasizes the gravity and harm of the act. Use of the word 'mutilation' reinforces the fact that the practice is a violation of girls' and women's rights, and thereby helps to promote national and international advocacy for its abandonment.

(World Health Organization 2008a, p.22) It concludes by stating:

For the purpose of this Interagency Statement and in view of its significance as an advocacy tool, all United Nations agencies have agreed to use the single term 'female genital mutilation'.

(World Health Organization 2008a, p.22)

The necessity for a linguistic and semantic distinction between the terms "circumcision" and "mutilation" was promoted from the desire to inspire opposition and to support eradication efforts. Feminist campaigner Fran Hosken first coined the term "female genital mutilation" to replace the term "female circumcision" in her work, The Hosken Report, and later in her many published essays (Hosken 1979).

Hosken's work went on to influence many of the Western writers of the 1980s concerned about the practice of FGM, with Mary Daly going so far as to accuse the WHO of "refusing for many years to concern itself with the problem.", and later stating

that “when [the WHO] was asked in 1958 to study this problem it took the position that such operations were based on “social and cultural backgrounds” and were outside its competence” (Daly 1990, p.102). This type of critical social debate laid the foundation for the post-colonial critique which followed in the 1990s, in which scholars questioned the “anti-FGM discourse” for its supposed “imperialist narratives” and judgemental binary between the “West and the Rest” (Wade 2009).

Wade in a later publication sums up the situation, stating that FGM practices

...amplify the conflict in the conversation between feminism and postcolonialism because, unlike issues that are historical (footbinding), disturbing but rare (widow immolation), chosen by adults (cosmetic surgery), or impermanent (veiling), FGM('s) are ongoing, frequent, performed on children, and can involve extensive and irreversible bodily modification. It is difficult, then, and some would say unwise, to adopt the non-judgemental and non-interventionist approach that eases transcultural collaboration.

(Wade 2012, p.26-49)

Authors like Hosken and her contemporaries argued that the term “female circumcision” was not analogous to male circumcision and therefore should not be used to describe the plight of millions of women and girls. What they also highlighted was the “veil of secrecy” surrounding the topic. At the time, very little literature discussed the types of FGM, nor the extent of the problem. The UN responded, recognising that there were major gaps in understanding and the WHO pledged to focus on increasing knowledge and promoting technically sound policies and approaches to eliminate the problem (Toubia & Izett 1998).

In 1995, the WHO convened a Technical Working Group on Female Genital Mutilation in Geneva, Switzerland, which recognised the need for standardised classification for the types of FGM (Toubia & Izett 1998). The current WHO classification is described below:

Type I: Partial or total removal of the clitoris and/or the prepuce (clitoridectomy).

Type II: Partial or total removal of the

clitoris and the labia minora, with or without excision of the labia majora (excision).

Type III: Narrowing of the vaginal orifice with creation of a covering seal by cutting and appositioning the labia minora and/or the labia majora, with or without excision of the clitoris (infibulation).

Type IV: All other harmful procedures to the female genitalia for non-medical purposes, for example: pricking, piercing, incising, scraping and cauterisation. (World Health Organization 2008a, p.4)

The UN uses and operates in six official languages in its intergovernmental meetings and documents. The UN Secretariat uses two working languages, English and French. Statements made in an official language at a formal meeting are interpreted simultaneously into the other official languages of the body concerned by UN interpreters. If a delegation wishes to speak in a language that is not an official language, it must supply an interpreter to interpret the statement or translate it into one of the official languages. It is then rendered into the other languages by a relay system. Documents are produced in the six official languages and are issued simultaneously when all the language versions are available.

(Cao & Zhao 2008, p.39-54)

For matters relating to FGM, the in-session documents are the result of agreement reached through discussions between delegates. The documents are under the direct control of the DGACM who are responsible for translation and general language management.

4. TERMINOLOGY AND TRANSLATION

Arabic language has various lexes for FGM in general and “mutilation” specifically including the words (ختان) (khetan) which means “circumcision”, (طهارة) (tahara), which means “purification”, (قطع) (Kat'e) which means “cutting”, (تشوية) (tashweeh) which means, “distortion” and the term (البتر) (batr) which means “mutilation”. Each term has its own connotation which varies from medical to religious and cultural connotation as follows: (issues with examples).

(Batr) (البتر) is a noun meaning “mutilation” or “amputation”: largely used by medical professionals and has a strong negative connotation, as shown with the example: {Arm amputation causes a huge disability} which translates to {كبيرة إعاقة البتر في الذراع بسبب إعاقة} (Team 2018).

(Khetan) (ختان) is a noun meaning “circumcision”: used by the educated public with a neutral or pro FGM connotation, as in the example: {The circumcision for men or women is part of fitrah and Islamic Sharia} which translates to {والشريعة الإسلامية} وأن الختان بالنسبة للرجل أو المرأة جزء من الفطرة (Reverso Context 2017a).

(Kat'e) (قطع) is a noun meaning “cutting”: used by medical professionals and rarely used by the public. As per the example: {Surgeons, all we do is cut and sew} which translates to {كل ما نفعله هو القطع والخياطة} (الجراحون, Reverso Context 2017d).

(Tashweeh) (تشويه) is a noun means, “distortion”: has a political connotation which is used largely by the UN and its agencies and rarely used by the public. As per the example: {Truth reflects on the world as it really is, without distortion} which translates to {الحقيقة تعكس العالم كما هو بدون تشويه} (Reverso Context 2017c).

(Tahara) (طهارة), is a noun meaning “purification”: largely used by the public as whole. As per example: {It was a symbol of virginity and purity} which translates to {لقد كان رمزاً للعذرية والطهارة} (Reverso Context 2017b).

(Jadea) (جدع), is a noun that means “stump”. It is neutral and rarely used by the public or international organisations. As per example: {In addition, cutting off, or removing, the genitals is looked upon as insurance of the child’s virginity and faithfulness} which translates to {وإخلاصها بعد {الزواج كما أن جدد هذه أو أزلتها, يعتبر ضماناً لعفة الفتاة} (Glosbe 2018).

Dr Fayyād, a very prominent Muslim doctor in the Arab world, uses “Batr” in Arabic which translates as “mutilation” in English. Dr Fayyād is a well-known Egyptian gynaecologist and scholar who advocates for the eradication of FGM in North Africa through his work as a gynaecologist and through his research. His main focus was advocating that FGM is not based or confirmed by the Quran or Hadith. In his book on FGM he analysed the challenge of FGM terminology in Arabic and English. Dr Fayyād uses the term “Al

Batr al tanasoly lel ontha”, (البتر التناسلي للأُنثى), or “Female Genital Mutilation” as the book’s title and advocates for the term to be considered as the only accurate term in Arabic.

Dr Fayyād (1998) endorses the UN adoption of “mutilation” in Arabic [My own translation from Arabic to English]:

في أثناء انعقاد مؤتمر الأمم المتحدة للمرأة في كوبنهاجن في عام 1980 بادرت المنظمات الغير حكومية الى وضع قضية لختان على جدول الأعمال الدولي. وقد بينت المناقشات الحادة التي دارت بعد ذلك ان قضية الختان حساسة ومعقدة.

وانبرت وفود المرأة في كل مؤتمر للدفاع عن إلغاء الممارسات التقليدية الضارة, وخصوصاً ما أسمينه (طقس البتر التناسلي الهمجى).

(Fayyād 1998, p.42)

[Back translation: During the United Nations Conference on Women in Copenhagen in 1980, initiated by non- governmental organisations to put the circumcision issue on the international agenda, the heated discussions revealed that the circumcision issue is both sensitive and complex.

The delegations of women targeted every conference to defend the abolition of harmful traditional practices, especially what they called (barbaric genital mutilation custom) (Fayyād 1998, p.42)].

تم تبني مصطلح ((البتر التناسلي للأُنثى)) على المستوى الدولي, اعتباراً من عام 1991 ليحل محل مصطلح ((الختان)) القديم.

(Fayyād 1998, p.45)

The term “Female Genital Mutilation” was adopted on an international level, starting from 1991 to replace the old term “circumcision”.(Fayyād 1998).

Analysing the data over 20 years we are able to see the trends in terminology that translators practice regarding Female Genital Mutilation, and the correlation to its prevalence and change in attitudes in Arabic speaking

countries. Included in this analysis is data recorded by UNICEF on Female Genital Mutilation available per country.

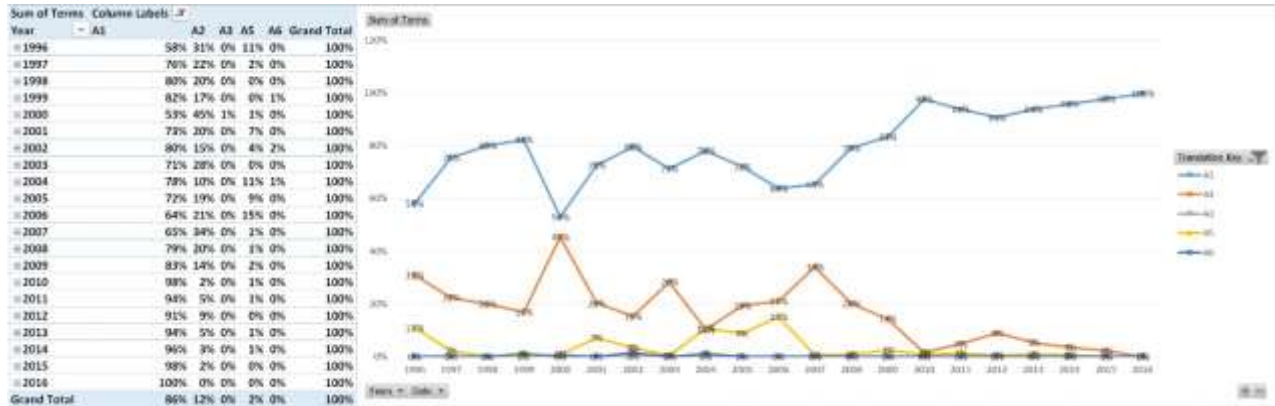


Figure 1: Percentage of “mutilation” and its translation into Arabic per year

As seen in Figure 3, in 1996, the terms tashweeh (تشويه)/distortion appears in 58% of publications when translating the English term mutilation, khetan (ختان)/circumcision is used 31% of the time, and batr (البتر)/mutilation is used 11% of the time. All three terms compete to be the dominant translation term in Arabic. Over the next four years, tashweeh (تشويه)/distortion slowly rises in popularity, while the other two terms decline. Importantly, khetan (ختان)/circumcision usage falls by almost half (31%, down to 17%) and batr (البتر)/mutilation almost entirely disappears. Suddenly, in 2000, khetan (ختان)/circumcision makes a large resurgence, exceeding even the initial recorded level of usage, and challenging the term tashweeh (تشويه)/distortion (53% vs 45%). Khetan (ختان)/circumcision again increases in usage as the Arabic translations of these texts do not use the correct Arabic terminology. Ultimately, it appears that khetan (ختان)/circumcision is on the decrease and tashweeh (تشويه)/distortion has become the dominant term in Arabic when translating FGM from English.

This reflects poorly on the translation quality of the United Nations and its struggle for consistency.

Earlier in this dissertation I highlighted explicit discussion of English FGM terminology in UNICEF and WHO publications in 2005 and 2008.

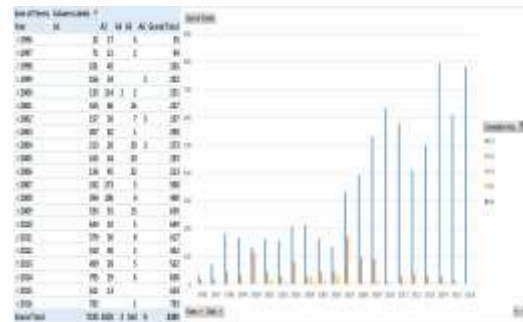


Figure 2: Number of times “mutilation” was translated each year

Figures 5 to 8 below illustrate the prevalence of FGM in four North African countries: Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea and Mauritania between 1995 and 2015. Each chart also contains comparative percentages of women between 15 and 49 years of age who feel that FGM should continue.

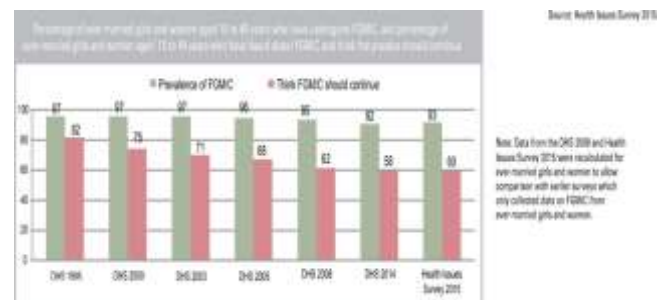
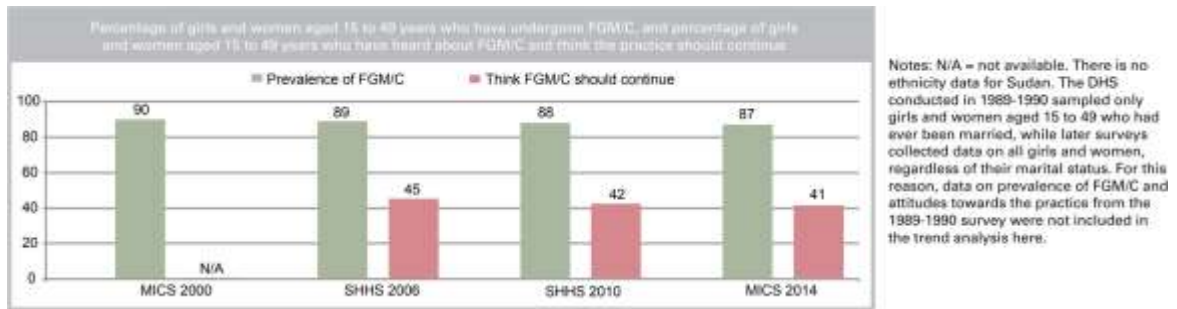


Figure 3: Egypt - Prevalence of FGM and its attitudes



rapidly from 1995 to 2010.

Figure 4: Sudan - Prevalence of FGM and its attitudes (UNICEF 2016e)

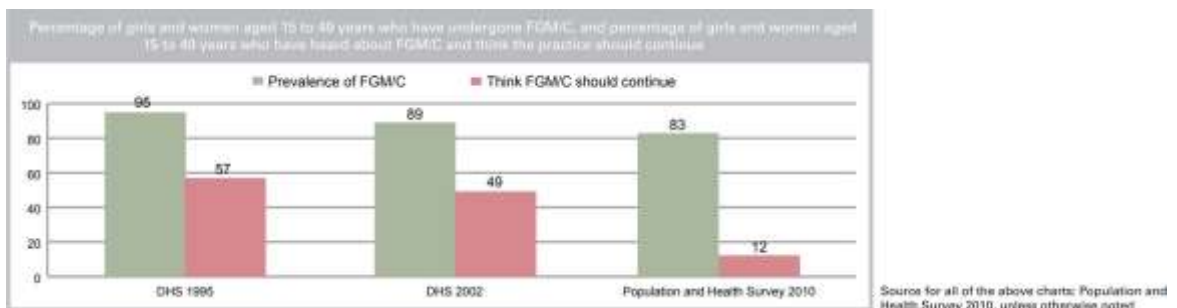


Figure 5: Eritrea - Prevalence of FGM and its attitudes

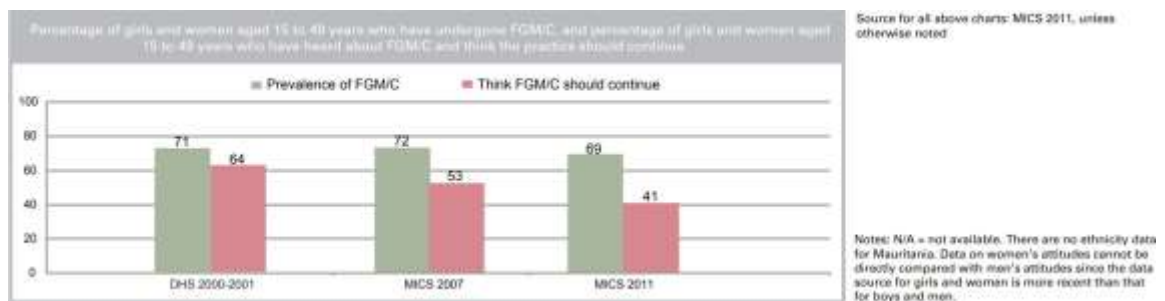


Figure 6: Mauritania - Prevalence of FGM and its attitudes

(UNICEF 2016b)

(UNICEF 2016d)

When we relate this data to the attitudes of Arabic speakers who practice FGM, we can speculate on the impact of the Arabic terminology. While there are a multitude of factors governing attitudes towards FGM, as discussed earlier in this paper, Egypt and Sudan are particularly interesting case studies as predominantly Arabic speaking nations. Sudan practices more severe forms of FGM at higher rates, yet positive attitudes towards the practice are lower than in Egypt whose overall prevalence of FGM is relatively high (93% prevalence in Egypt vs 87% in Sudan). Sudan also has English as a second official language, much like Eritrea whose attitudes supportive of FGM have declined

Arabic speaking countries who are more proficient in English are less likely to be isolated from Western criticisms of FGM and the associated terminology used in English. Whereas those Arabic countries who do not use English as a working language are more likely to be surrounded by the echo chamber terminology of FGM. As the data from the UN shows, and as much of the literature in this paper is at pains to demonstrate, tashweeh (تشويه)/distortion is not severe enough a term to make any lasting impression on attitudes towards FGM. In the last recorded statistics for Egypt, comparing the rates from 2014 to 2015, both prevalence of FGM and attitudes supporting the

practice saw small increases, not decreases. Egypt is one of three countries (Ethiopia and Indonesia being the other two) who together account for half of women affected globally by FGM (UNICEF 2016c).

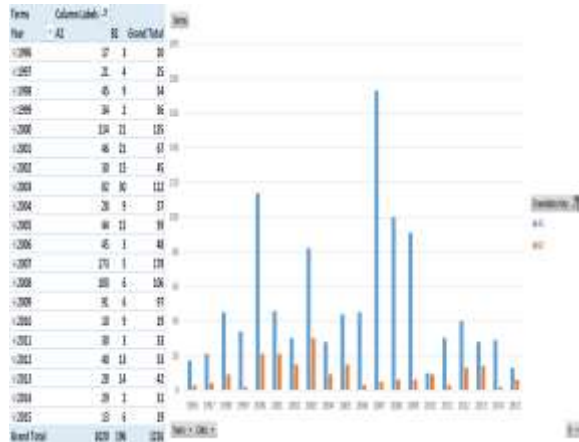


Figure 7: Comparison between the translated terms “mutilation/circumcision” and “circumcision/circumcision” per year

At the point of this comparison, *tashweeh* (تشويه)/distortion is almost exclusively in use in official texts from the UN, yet its impact on Arabic speaking countries is almost negligible, as some of these gains may be also be attributed to the decline in the use of *khetan* (ختان)/circumcision, a very “pro” FGM term. By comparison, whenever the term *circumcision* is mentioned in English, along with the term *mutilation*, the translations showed a heavy bias towards making all the terms into *khetan* (ختان)/circumcision in Arabic. Every year, *mutilation* in English was translated into *khetan* (ختان)/circumcision in Arabic, more times than

circumcision in English was translated correctly into *khetan* (ختان)/circumcision. If the UN is not able to make significant inroads into prevalence of FGM and attitudes supporting the practice in countries most affected by FGM, then further changes have to be made.

5. CONCLUSION

Over the past twenty years the United Nations has implemented several policies in an attempt to eradicate FGM. These policies include education and awareness campaigns, cultural and literature analysis, and criminalisation of the practice. This research is an attempt to build on the existing education and language policy of the UN as well as analysing the effectiveness of current campaigns in Arabic and English. The research focused on FGM as discussed explicitly in English in many research papers and books, including the UN’s strong language policy regarding the appropriate terminology of FGM in its published works. This dissertation highlighted that Arabic-speaking countries have some of the highest rates of FGM in the world, yet the Arabic literature on FGM remains limited. Even published Arabic works by the UN are inadequate when compared to their English counterparts. English to Arabic translators since 1996 have not been consistent with FGM terminology. In order to eradicate FGM, English to Arabic translators should use “Female Genital Mutilation” in English and the Arabic equivalent “*Batr al Aadaa al Tansolya lel ontha*” (بتر الأعضاء التناسلية للأنثى) in all documents.

2 This research aimed to expose some of the poor implementation of the UN’s existing policies of translation from English into Arabic, and will help fill the gap in Arabic language analysis regarding FGM. It is hoped this will improve the quality of the UN’s eradication efforts, especially with regards to the Arabic audience.

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