



SALONE NEWS

Statement by African Women Are Free to Choose (AWA-FC), Washington DC, USA

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It is with great concern that we, members of the newly formed African Women Are Free to Choose movement, regard recent situations in Sierra Leone, immediately stemming from the press release issued on Feb 6th by the U.S. Embassy in Freetown.



We are concerned about recent accusations of the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ) made against an important and valued female institution in Sierra Leone, the Bondo sodality of women. Though we do not condone the use of violence or intimidation we are also deeply affected by the inflammatory impact of language such as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). We declare categorically that this language is offensive, demeaning and an assault against our identities as women, our prerogatives to uphold our cultural definitions of womanhood including determining for ourselves what bodily integrity means to us African women from ethnic groups that practice female and male initiation as parallel and mutually constitutive processes in our societies.

We declare that thus far the representation of female circumcision (FC) - its social and ideological meaning in terms of gender and female sexuality and impact, if any, on reproductive health and psychosexual wellbeing has been over the last thirty years dominated by a small but vocal number of African women that make up the Inter-African Committee (IAC) with the enormous backing, if not outright instigation of powerful western feminist organizations and media personalities. Through aggressive use of the media to portray African women as passive and powerless victims of barbaric, patriarchal African societies, their efforts have succeeded in influencing and tainting the objectivity of such institutions as WHO and UNICEF, among other international organizations that have taken the lead role in promulgating anti-FGM policies and legislation worldwide.

Through political pressure from first world countries on whose aid they continue to depend as well as internal political expediency, several African countries have introduced anti-FGM legislation over against the full knowledge, participation and desires of the majority of affected women. This will not happen in Sierra Leone.

Thus far, the negative medical or health claims about various forms of FC have been disputed as grossly exaggerated by several independent medical researchers and practitioners. The claims that various forms of FC reduce or eliminate sexual desire and feeling in women have also been disproven by affected women themselves, the researchers who relentlessly question them and medical doctors who examine and treat them. We can provide ample references for anyone who is interested in any of this work.

That FC was designed by men to control women's sexuality is a western feminist myth constructed in a disturbing dismissal of African gender models of male and female complementarity and of our own creativity, power and agency as adult women in the social world. The assertion that FC violates the rights of children falters in the face of WHO's promotion of routine neonatal male circumcision (MC) to protect against HIV infection in Southern African. Incidentally, circumcised African women also have some of the lowest rates of HIV infection among women in the world, so why the double standard?

We remind the world that all what is being said today about FC - barbaric, dangerous, reduces sexual pleasure, parochial - has also been said about male circumcision by its detractors, usually and conveniently, by those who are

themselves uncircumcised. Just as racist remarks were made and aggressive legislation to criminalize practitioners (sometimes with the threat of capital punishment) were introduced by host countries or cultural outsiders to abolish MC with the support of some prominent male Jewish insiders, so too such negative actions are taken against practitioners of FC with the zealous support of some cultural insiders. Just as the bulk of Jewish men resisted and openly defied these edicts so too do the bulk of circumcised African women daily and openly resist global eradication policies and continue to define and celebrate their heritage. Just as MC has not ended and is even now seen as desirable with health and aesthetic benefits, so too FC has not ended and is even desired and being repackaged as vaginal cosmetic surgeries or “designer vaginas” by affluent segments of the very population of western women that today condemn us as “barbaric”.

We recognize the legitimacy of claims of the minority of circumcised African women who view their experiences in a negative light. Like the minority of circumcised men who have organized anti-circumcision campaigns, they emphasize their experiences of unnecessary pain and suffering and see their genital surgeries as an attack on their gender identities. We have no problem with these women, just as their male counterparts, organizing to seek change or even referring to their experiences and their own bodies as mutilated. However, these women, like their male counterparts, must take their case to the bulk of others who are circumcised and convince them of their worldview through peaceful, democratic and lawful means. If, where and whenever they fail to convince the majority, the minority must respect the choices and freedom of the bulk of practitioners to positively define their own experiences and bodies. This is a key cornerstone of any modern liberal, democratic and plural society. While we respect and do not support the coercion of the minority to uphold a tradition they find offensive, we certainly will not allow the minority to impose their will and worldview on the majority of women who are circumcised and their prerogatives as parents to make this decision for their children, both male and female. The minority of uncircumcised women in Sierra Leone, as elsewhere in Africa, must have the freedom to remain uncircumcised if they so wish (and many do request circumcision); and, for those already circumcised who wish to abandon the practice, we advocate for and stand with the Government in protecting their rights to not circumcise their own children. This is true, non-coercive abandonment.

As a newly formed association, Free to Choose will not accept attempts to

delegitimize the positive experiences of most circumcised women and any attempts to deny African women, circumcised or not, our rights to self-determination. Further, most of us are not fooled by the substandard research evidence - anecdotal and those purporting to be objective science - to manipulate and coerce circumcised women into submission, that is, to give up a practice that is culturally meaningful to many African women. We question the appeal to a common sisterhood by our western feminist sisters who pretend they do not have a stake in seeing their own uncircumcised bodies as "normal", "healthy", and "whole" and therefore morally superior to our own supposedly "mutilated" African bodies.

Therefore, we call on restraint and respect on all sides. To the Soweis and Sokos of Bondo - you are mighty and need no other justification than that which we your daughters have just given you. No amount of western education and modernization can replace our ancestral rites and rights so we are with you. In that small place in Kenema you are showing the world that ours is not just about training women to be good wives and mothers (another myth constructed by our feminist critics and oft repeated from our own culturally ignorant western educated mouths) but that ours is a militant African feminist indigenous institution equipped with a hierarchy and election process that was set in place long before the very western feminist organizations that ridicule us now came into existence and won the right for their own women to vote in their male constructed and dominated social worlds. While our Bondo women warriors fought and died together with our Poro brothers in revolts against colonial injustices, where were our western feminist sisters who are today so interested in the intactness of our genitalia?

As we honor and carry on that militancy in our communal female spirit, let us seek ways to (re)educate our critics and to correct their misunderstandings and biases about female sexuality in particular and gender in general. We have ample intellectual, scientific and religiously grounded resources to do this. Let us also stand strong and united as our female ancestors have in the past against any attempts to allow the vilification of our own practices while our critics overlook or turn a blind eye to their own. Let us be united as African women to stand against any attempt to deny us our cultural rites and rights as adults equal to any other adult in the world whatever their religion, race, and country of origin. My sisters, mothers and grandmothers in Kenema, continue your peaceful protests, you are an exemplar to other so-called oppressed third world women who are portrayed as so passive and ignorant that they need western women to interpret their experiences

and speak for them on the world scene. We stand with you in your resistance.

To SLAJ, while we support you in condemning any form of violence against journalists or any other civilians in Sierra Leone for that matter, we too are watching you. We will not allow the media in Sierra Leone to be hijacked and used to spread inflammatory language and messages in a country in which the bulk of women are members and strongly support Bondo. You do not need to use the term FGM, unless you state explicitly that the M refers to Modification and not Mutilation. You can use the term excision, which describes the procedure that can be associated with most women in the country. You can contact us and we will be happy to advise on culturally sensitive approaches. We can also provide you with lists of independent (i.e. non-activist) researchers and experts who are prepared to address any issues you have concerning FC as it pertains to health, human rights, cultural meanings and so on. We support the free flow of information so that women can be informed on both sides.

What we will not support and will expose is deliberate provocation by any member of the press of an international crisis to create a perception of Bondo as archaic, barbaric and unlawfully persecuting that very symbol of modernity, the innocent journalist in a truth-seeking mission to correct social injustice. If someone is itching to receive an international journalist of the year award and a free trip to the UN in New York, it will not be at the expense of our culture and our bodies.

To the U.S. Embassy, we recognize that you are following U.S. Policy. As Americans (some of us born, others naturalized) and permanent residents, we are proud of our great nation and commend your office. We are particularly thrilled that you represent the President of the United States, a man born to an African immigrant. Many of us are African immigrants or first generation African-Americans. We are also especially proud that the US President is of Kenyan descent, given the role of Jomo Kenyatta, the first President of Kenya and nationalist hero, who championed the practice of female circumcision among his ethnic group, the Kikuyu, in his stance against colonialism during the struggle for Kenyan independence from British rule. President Obama's father was a Luo, as we are told, an ethnic group that does not practice either male or female circumcision whose members are sometimes persecuted by neighboring groups because of this as well as forcefully circumcised. Thus, this is perhaps an opportune moment for the US to lead the world in pausing for a moment to rethink the female (and male) circumcision

controversy in global health policy: the homogenizing as well as hegemonic (and hypocritical) claims of western feminism over this issue; the cultural meanings FC and MC hold for the majority of practitioners and their right to self-determination; and importantly the internal ethnic politics of economically deprived African countries whose leaders often manipulate the female circumcision question, whether promoting or banning it, for political and economic expediency.

In the spirit of true diplomacy, we advise that the use of the term FGM is a slight to the very women you claim to support and speak for. Women in Sierra Leone do not form a homogenous group - most of us come from ethnic groups that practice female and male initiation, a section of the minority Krio who are descended from freed slaves do not. Most women support the continuation of FC and some are against it. We expect the US Ambassador, to show respect for all women of Sierra Leone and not use derogatory language that diminishes the majority of women over a minority. This would never happen in the United States where the public use of racist language can be viewed as an incitement to violence, and can be punishable by federal law. Prior to the civil rights movement, it was commonplace and uncontroversial for whites to refer to blacks by the n-word (and many blacks to refer to themselves as such, as some do today); the moral inferiority of blacks was not really in question. However, there is no doubt that the use of the n-word then (as it still does today) caused resentment and anger among many blacks. Similarly, the term FGM causes resentment and anger among circumcised women, even though the common perception of the day is that we are mutilated and hence morally inferior to so-called intact women.

In our local languages we too have vulgar terms for uncircumcised women, which is the marked category in our cultures. Even when used by circumcised women to refer to other circumcised women in a derogatory way it is an automatic provocation that spurs violence. In your proclamation against FGM you have given, albeit unwittingly, license to a minority group to use insulting language against the majority of women. If Bondo women were to respond by using their own vulgarities to refer to uncircumcised women there would be all out war among women in Sierra Leone eventually and inevitably - unknowingly or unintentionally triggered by the US Embassy. And, all Sierra Leoneans are tired of senseless war. Thus, we ask that the US Embassy and other western diplomats show due restraint and respect to all Sierra Leonean women, even as you, your NGOs and International Organizations advocate against our cultural practice.

To the Inter-African Committee (IAC) that has declared February 6 Zero-Tolerance to FGM Day, we do not know you, you have not made yourselves known to us, we have not elected you, you do not represent us and your organization has no legitimacy in the eyes of the masses of grassroots women across the sub-Sahara African belt. If the world does not know this, it will soon be made evident. Though you insult (and support the imprisonment of) our traditional female leaders as financially benefiting from the modest sums of money and basic goods they receive from families of initiates, you do not tell us the amounts of your own salaries, consultancy fees and per diems in the burgeoning anti-FGM global industry in which some African sisters (and brothers) are now fighting to outdo one another for international recognition. It is your leaders and your members (how many, 10, 20, 50 women?) who will need to start looking for alternate sources of income other than the horrific lies and images you have packaged and sold a world too ready to believe the worst of Africans. We will continue to celebrate and uphold our initiation practices and we will challenge whatever global international process that has given you official status to decide what happens to our bodies over against our knowledge and what name others should call us over against our will.

Finally, to our main judges, mostly otherwise liberal-minded uncircumcised women: please understand that the global feminist movement to eradicate female circumcision in Africa (and anywhere else) masks what is in fact a global movement to standardize and universalize the white European female body as the cultural, psychic and moral ideal. To the extent that many African and other third world women do not practice female circumcision within their own ethnic groups then these women's bodies conform to the "healthy", "normal", "beautiful" and "desirable" European prototype for all women. We ask that you not ignore the blatant racism which underlies the zealousness of western feminists in abolishing FC but not MC, in marking African women's bodies and sexuality as mutilated, while remaining quiet on other forms of women's bodily and even similar genital surgeries. Their agenda is not really about our bodies, circumcised or not; it is about justifying theirs and thus resolving the uncomfortable dissonance that the existence and support of female excision by subversive African women poses for western feminist imperialism.

We ask that you consider what is happening to the minds of some of our immigrant daughters in western countries as they watch the sensationalist media spectacles of young circumcised African women who, in order to break into the modeling

industry, accept invitations to publicly condemn their bodies as mutilated (as a couple of their infamous, albeit tragic predecessors did previously in bestselling tell-all books) on talk shows, reality TV, as well as magazine spreads where they exhibit their barely clothed bodies for the gaze and wonderment of the western world. We ask how different is the circulation and consumption of these images from that of South African "Hottentot" women paraded around Victorian circles; their photos eliciting feelings of sexual horror in a perturbing voyeurism engaged in by those (both European men and their wives) with the power to gaze as well as to define the "other".

In that Victorian era, when white European women were defined as sexually repressed they projected their fears (in complicity with their husbands) onto African women who were viewed as sexually licentious and immoral. Today, to the extent that the descendants of these women view themselves as sexually liberated (calling attention to their external clitoris as the phallic symbol of theirs and so all women's liberation and autonomy) they project their fears of past repression onto circumcised African women, who given their deliberate excision of the external clitoris, are conveniently marked as sexually repressed and passive. As circumcised women are already defined by white women and in comparison with them as mutilated, no one has bothered to ask what it is that circumcision symbolizes to African women. This would require a great leap of faith that Africans, not the least African women, have constructed, defined and continue to reproduce a meaningful social world, worthy of existence and defense, outside of dominant European socio-cultural and religious contexts and hence, moral control.

Thus, though we see that most of you are sincerely convinced of your concern about the health, sexuality and bodies of African women and girls, we suggest you remove first the plank in your own eyes: What are your own fears and concerns about your own bodies and how do these relate to your individual experiences of male oppression or violence in your lives as well as your societies' historical experiences of patriarchy? What myths have your own cultures evolved about women's sexuality including the relatively recent (re)discovery of the external clitoris as the supposed ultimate site of women's pleasure and orgasm? How do you condone the routine circumcision of your sons, if this is the case in your own cultures, and react emotively to the idea of the circumcision of girls? Do you see no issue with the increasing popularity of Beverly Hills 90210 genital cosmetic surgeries among well to-do western women, including clitoral and labia reductions, vaginal rejuvenation

or tightening and even restoration of the hymen?

And, to our formidable opponents, the radical few western imperial feminists who arrogantly say that multiculturalism is bad for women (and really mean only Euroamerican culture is good for all women), we suggest that in your self-righteous determination to draw the line at FC you reveal more about your hidden racism and xenophobia than you allow the world and yourselves to see. Whatever the case, my sisters, while we will not interfere with your rights to promulgate your steadfast beliefs in the superiority of western gender norms, cultural and aesthetic practices and pretend as if they are the same for women the world over, we will not allow you to deny us what is truly our own: our African cultural rites and our rights to uphold them. Your global power and financial resources, your attempts to divide and conquer us by handpicking, promoting and rewarding those of us who will do your dirty work on the ground in Africa, in the parliamentary and congressional halls of western countries and in secretive, exclusive UN meetings as well as your manipulation of the global media will never match our communal African feminist spirit of resistance, stretching from one end of the Sahara to the other, from the beginning of human history to this day.

We cannot end without acknowledging the sincere efforts of those circumcised and uncircumcised women, insiders and outsiders, activists, scholars, medical researchers and so on who believe in the equality of individuals and cultures and have tempered their individual beliefs with a commitment to evidence-based interventions and research that do not prejudge or stigmatize individuals, entire groups and cultures. We will continue to work with the growing number of such individuals in advocating for rigorous design, implementation, analysis and dissemination of scientific studies that look at the reproductive and sexual health outcomes of both circumcised and uncircumcised women in a wide range of geographic contexts and SES levels. We will continue to respect the rights of NGOs and other entities to try and convince women to abandon these cultural practices as long as their methods are culturally sensitive and respectful.

We will, however, also insist on the rights of African women to continue their traditions if they so choose and will challenge and protest any unjust laws and policies that unfairly discriminate against them. We will step up to organize and sensitize affected girls and women to the full range of their human rights and not just the ones anti-FGM activists choose to share with them. Our new movement

includes both circumcised and uncircumcised African women, those who are for and some who are against the continuation of FC as a personal and family decision. We believe that it is in such open and honest woman to woman dialogue and collaboration that we can come up with policies and interventions that protect the rights of minorities to dissent and the rights of the majority to rule as well as the dignity of the individual to choose what happens to her (or his) own body. This is not a subversive idea or a radical one, it is the principle of pro-choice and respect for privacy applied to African women; it is the same principle that supports a woman's right to abortion, though critics view this as the killing (read: worse than mutilating) of an innocent child; it is the same principle that supports the right of a sixteen year old to opt for genital and bodily piercings, though others may see this as mutilating and repulsive; it is the same principle that invokes sympathy for gender confused individuals and supports their right to radical surgery to change their genitalia and gender.

As for those girls too young to give consent, we must accord to their parents the same rights we accord to the parents of boys in neonatal male circumcision and not discriminate on the basis of gender, religion, ethnicity or country of origin. We will work with willing stakeholders on all sides to determine appropriate ages of consent in varying socio-cultural contexts depending on how majority is determined for decision-making in other important life-crises or stages of development. None of this will be easy and western feminist opposition seems daunting, but from today we, African feminists, educated and illiterate, professionals and rural rice farmers, Christian, Muslim and followers of traditional religion, take the important step to begin speaking up for ourselves in local, national and international contexts in support of our global rights.

The AWA-FC is announcing a press-conference on March 6th 2009, in the Washington DC Metropolitan area, specific time and location to be announced shortly.

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