

Salasika

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Universalism v. Relativism: The human rights debate around internalization of global norm of Anti-FGM in Gorontalo, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Research shows how people and government of Southeast Asia tend to promote the relativism of norms, and with that challenge the mainstream narrative that promote the universalism of norms. This partially explains the multiple failures of the regionalization of many global norms in the region. Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), a term that defines any procedure that harms female genital organs, is a traditional practice that is condemned by many international institutions. Anti-FGM has become one of the most important global norms on health issues, officially adopted as a terminology by WHO in 1991 and become resolution in 2008. Under these circumstances, it is widely known that the practice of female children circumcision is still very commonly found in Gorontalo region in Indonesia. In Gorontalo, this practice involved not only health and rational consideration, but most importantly also is involved tradition and beliefs that have been passed down from generation to generation. It is hence contained a particular cultural meaning, which somehow has become the people's shared characteristics which further defines the identity of the women of Gorontalo. This strong tradition is, naturally, goes against global believe which consider this custom as a violation on children's and human rights. This local dynamics thus lead us to the contestation between the idea of "universalism" of norms which holds the legitimation of human rights introduced by Liberal thinking, and the idea of "relativism" which acknowledges the particularity of local tradition, as well as religion, and the rights of the people to practice what they believe as culturally appropriate. This article hence will answer the question, "in what way relativism overcome universalism in the process of internalization of global norms on anti-FGM in Gorontalo, Indonesia?"

KEYWORDS: *Female Genital Mutilation, Global Norms, Gorontalo, Relativism, Universalism*

INTRODUCTION

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is a traditional practice that is condemned internationally. The World Health Organization (WHO), as a representative of the United Nations (UN), defines FGM as any procedure that hurts and tears female genital organs without medical reasons and is recognized as a violation of human rights (IPPF, 2018). Globally, this practice has been condemned and agreed upon as a traditional practice that must be discontinued.

Indonesia is the third country with the highest number of practices of female genital mutilation, after Gambia and Mauritania (IDN TIMES, 2019). In Indonesia, FGM is better known as female circumcision. Gorontalo, one of the regions in Indonesia, is the region with the highest rate of implementation of female circumcision; around 83.7% of Gorontalo women undergo female circumcision (KemenPPPA, 2021). This number is also confirmed by a study conducted by the Center for Population and Policy Studies (PSKK) at Gadjah Mada University (UGM) and the National Commission on Violence Against Women (Komnas Perempuan) which included interviews and surveys involving 4,250 households (consisting of 2,782 fathers and 4,250 mothers) who circumcised their daughters, as well as 86 female circumcision practice service providers in Gorontalo (KBR, 2022).

The effort to stop the practice of FGM in Indonesia was not unnoticeable. Many records show how various women's movement, national organizations and local women's organizations working on

women's issues, such as the Women's March, KUPI, Puan Amal Hayati Foundation, Salam Puan, Wire G, and Gusdurian Gorontalo demand for the prohibition of the female circumcision (Narasi, 2023; Antara, 2023; KBR, 2022). Their main argument is that the practice violates the rights of children and women, especially that it does not have any impact in the betterment of the girl's life in terms of their health. However, their activism goes with no success; the practice continues.

In assessing this situation, the authors refer to the debate around universalism and relativism of norms. This debate shows a new way of thinking about cultural differences which challenges the assumption of the universal nature of Western/Liberal cultural dominance. The universality of principles such as materialism, individualism, rationality, and functionalism is challenged by relativist perspectives who argue that there is such no 'objective position' from which one can assess the 'relative worth' of different cultural and social systems (Beeson, 2014:115). Furthermore, relativism also argues that because of the different elements which construct their histories, each societies will own unique traditions which further influence their beliefs and behaviors. These shared characteristics will be passed down from generation to generation. It is hence argued that there is no such values embedded in every culture "that can equally represent the character of all cultures at all times" (Sundrijo, 2020:43-44), this is including the Western/Liberal cultures that are widely promoted as having universal nature in its values.

METHODS

This research applies qualitative research methods. It particularly employs an inductive approach in seeing the role of theory in research processes (Bryman, 2012, p. 380). Instead of applying and utilizing a theory to explain events, this inductive approach enables researchers to interpret and analyze data and information found during the research process and then generate and build a new theory based on the output of the analysis (p. 387). For data gathering, we use interviews mainly to obtain primary data from the key resource persons. We interviewed the Head of the Council of Traditional Rulers, traditional leaders, academicians, and activists in Gorontalo who understand and dealing with the issue of female circumcision. We also gather secondary data from academic and non-academic literature, including news from various trustworthy media outlets. Additionally, we also collect data dan information from official government documents and publications from international organizations, including policy documents, official publications, and other pertinent publications about the anti-FGM standard.

Applying inductive approach, we were able to draw connections between the data and information gathered to explain how the anti-FGM norms is failed to be applied in Gorontalo. By doing this, we prove the endurance of the relativistic nature of the norms as opposed to its universalistic nature.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

FGM in Gorontalo

In Gorontalo, Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) or female circumcision is better known as *Mongubingo*. *Mongubingo*, in the understanding of Gorontalo tradition, is a practice that kick off the full life cycle of Gorontalo woman, hence it is usually performed on girls on the age of one to three years old (Zihad Islami & Putri, 2020). The practice is intended to clean the baby girl's genital from haram¹ glands. Apart from that, this practice is also seen as a symbol of opening the veil of truth in the sacred covenant bond between *Allah* and the *Prophet Abraham* (Sinaga, 2005).

Gorontalo is a place of many traditions which contain various good values that have been internalized so much to become community habits. The customary system is constructed based on the understanding that humans are fundamentally good in their behavioral qualities or manners. To be accepted in the community, people are expected to own some ethical values that will lead to a strong commitment to properly practice their customs and traditions. This way, the Gorontalo people will develop a strong sense of belonging to their customs, strong enough for them to continue preserving the tradition from one generation to the next.

The people of Gorontalo also believe that *Mongubingo* is a way to shape 'girls' character, life patterns, and behavior (Zihad Islami & Putri, 2020). They belief that by going

¹ forbidden or proscribed by Islamic law

through the practice of *Mongubingo*, the Gorontalo girls will be able to avoid behavior that is considered as inappropriate according to the culture – mainly related to how they manage their relations with man. This belief is somehow supported by some research which shows how female circumcision will reduce women's sexual desire (Sultani et.al, 2021). In the tradition of Gorontalo, the reduction of desire is not only interpreted in terms of physiological and/or physical, but also in terms of ethical – it is believed that in the future, women who have been circumcised will be able to protect themselves from involving in an inappropriate sexual intercourse, hence they can always maintain the honor of not only themselves, but also their family and their community at large

Universalism and Relativism

In the studies of International Relations (IR), universalism has a predominant meaning. The term is rooted in a Latin word, *universalis*, which contains the presumption that a single principle or law of order underlies the diversity of reality (Thomass, 2020, p.26). It is an outlook that put spotlight more to the general as opposed to the particular. This idea asserts that some principles, values, or ideals, including standards and guidelines, are universal for all people, and apply to every individual and civilization, regardless of the context in which they live and where they come from. Some considered universal standards, which address human needs, rights, or biological and psychological processes, are based on the notion that all people

are equal. Similar understanding is also applied to some considered universal norms, including people's rights, such as marriage, property ownership, and equal legal protection.

Universalism is applied in social settings through norms and behaviors that uphold prevailing universal principles (Kohfeldt and Grabe, 2014). It is argued that for society to function well, these principles (laws) must be accepted by its members and absorbed by them. The application of principle of universalism is usually evident in individualistic civilizations.

According to Robert Cox (2002, p. 53), universal is true across all space and time. His concept, known as particularistic universalism, explains how Western Liberal thought applies to every member of humanity universally. This leads to the conclusion that Western/Liberal concepts, values, rights, and obligations are, in theory, applicable to every human being. Because they promote Western/Liberal values and largely ignore cultural diversity, defenders of universalism are generally seen as being ethnocentric (Benhabib, 1994; Donnelly, 2003).

In contrast to universalism, relativism is a perspective that acknowledges the existence of local culture, norms, and values. Relativism argues that human values vary greatly depending on one's cultural background and are not universal. According to Baghranian (2001), relativism posits that there are no such universal norms, and that standards of truth, rationality, and ethical right and wrong vary significantly between culture.

Relativism acknowledges the significance diversities of the people's histories, experiences, and backgrounds, as well as variety in lifestyles and cultural viewpoints (Cherry, 2023). It also acknowledges local community's different perspective on what is considered as 'human' rights as opposed to 'communal' rights.

The Universalist Idea on FGM: Human rights and gender equality

According to Fakhri (2004), there are eight types of violence experienced by women, those are— (1) rape of women; (2) physical assault on a woman; (3) torture that targets the reproductive organs; (4) prostitution; (5) pornography; (6) sterilization (family planning to control population growth); (7) secret acts of violence, for example, holding or contacting women's body parts without consent; and (8) sexual harassment such as throwing jokes at women, embarrassing women with inappropriate questions about their sexuality, etc.

From this perspective, female genital mutilation can be considered as violence type number 3, particularly caused by traditional culture. Violence is carried out based on the cultural demand to fulfil the long-time tradition practised in the society. It is argued that such acts might cause physical, psychological, and sexual suffering for women as it takes away their freedom and rights (Erwanti, 2016). Cases of culturally based violence occur in many parts of the world where the practice of cultural traditions are still strong.

Human rights violations against women is not an uncommon issue faced by the international

community. Particularly related to FGM, the debate began to gain international recognition in the 1960s, when activists and medical workers in Africa raised international awareness through various forums held by the UN and WHO on the negative implication of the practice of FGM on the health of women (Costello, 2015). However, this activism gained not enough attention hence no policies was produced. In the next two decades, the issue of FGM was frequently discussed in various international forums, but still with no significant follow up action. Finally, during the 4th Women's Congress in Beijing in 1995 FGM was acknowledged as one of the threats of violence against women, as well as threats to reproductive and sexual health (PAHO, 2010).

Universalist highlights the fact that FGM is hurtful, only one during the 'surgery process', but sometimes the pain continues until some times after the procedure is undergone. Some strongly argues that the procedure is damaging for women as it affects them physically and psychologically. Physically, FGM involves agonising period when the victim experiences health issues such as swelling of the tissue around the vagina which will block the fluid excretion process, wounding around the vagina due to infected urine, severe bleeding, etc. (Supriatami et.al, 2022). Furthermore, the long-term misconduct practice of FGM can also cause urinary tract infections (UTI), which, if it passes through the reproductive tract, would trigger the grow of bacteria and reduce the level of white blood cells in the vaginal tract (Buggio et.al, 2019). It would further cause

disruption of the pathway of menstrual cycle, accumulation of residue in the vagina, blockage of the fallopian tubes, and in the worst case may even cause infertility, and kidney damage (Sarayloo et.al, 2019).

One of the critiques brought by the women's activists is that the processes involved in *Mongubingo* are a form of marginalization to women. One of our respondents strongly argue that *Mongubingo* is a form of discrimination against women not only because of the circumcision practice which put the women in danger, but most importantly also because of the big idea behind the practice which attempt to 'purify' women as if women were born 'dirty'.

All and all, from the logic rational perspective based on health and rights consideration, Universalist agree that practices of FGM, such as the tradition of *Mongubingo* among the people of Gorontalo, are considered as an act of violence against women, hence a violation of human (women's) rights.

The Relativist Idea on FGM: Belief, tradition, and the right to practice local customs

Relativist believes that there is no absolute truth. All ethics, values, moral, and hence culture are unique in themselves, they have no way to judge each other. According to Zechenter (1997), all judgements are considered as ethnocentric. Based on this, relativists view FGM more as cultural practice, which each community has all the right to adhere as they believe that it is undeniably appropriate.

The practice of female circumcision can be found in almost all regions of Indonesia, including in Aceh, Gorontalo, South Kalimantan, Banten and Bali. The practice is generally perceived as part of the tradition which has been conducted by their ancestor and continues up to their parents. The value attached to the practice is mainly linked to religious teachings (dogma) toand cultural elements (histories and customs) that have been long found in the community.

Mongubingo, the circumcision ceremony performed to baby girls, is one of the many customs that Gorontalo community has maintained from ancient times to the present. It entails two main steps, i.e., *lihu lo limu* (the intention, which is to purify the the baby girl to be circumcised), and *mo polihu lo limu* (the conduct, which is the purifying processes) (Sinaga, 2005). The conduct of *mo polihu lo limu* is located in special places where the baby girl is bathed with lemon water in her mother's lap. This ritual is the particularly unique, and only found in *Mongubingo* practiced in Gorontalo. The bathing was first conducted by the mother carried, followed by the traditional authority, and finally the *hulango* (village midwife) who then do the circumcised..

During our interview, Reyners Bila – a traditional leader in Gorontalo, said that *Mongubingo* is a tradition passed down from generation to generation and must be preserved and continued to carry out the ancestor's oath (Bila, personal communication, February 2020). If the practice is violated, there will be consequences that must be borne by the community. Related

to this, our other respondent, Sofyan KAU an academic, strongly argued stated that while NGO activists campaigning anti-FGM using the narrative of universal human rights, the people of Gorontalo also have the right to implement their customs and beliefs (Kau, personal communication, February 27, 2024). Even more critical, the Head of the Council of Traditional Rulers, Alims S. Niode, argued that the global narrative of anti-FGM brought in by the activists is a form of a persistent practice of Western colonialism towards the people of the East (in this case, Gorontalo) which proudly own different culture, practice different traditions, and hold different beliefs. Removing this and replacing it with the universal norms and values would potentially eliminate the identity of the people of Gorontalo.

Global narrative 'anti-FGM' carried by activist movements is failing to understand the culture of the people of Gorontalo (Alim, personal communication, February 27, 2024). According to Alim, if *Mongubingo* is considered as a violation of human rights because it is carried out without the child's consent or makes the child cry, then other activities, such as providing immunizations for children which cause children to cry, should also be considered as a form of human rights violation. Still according to him, the activist understands the tradition "only on the surface" and this movement, which he sees as part of 'colonial system' would finally erode the local system (Alim, 2024). According to Alim:

“What do you want to talk regarding customary law? About what? About

statecraft? Civil matters? We have it all. And that is what liberated Gorontalo in [19]42, before Indonesia became independent, on January 23, that customary law. That's their pride. Is this going to be removed? [...] We were destroyed here [in] 1889. Since the incident was called *restricht bestuur*² by the colonial government, the Assistant Resident was brought in. Colonial systems have replaced all local systems.”³

Relativist agrees of the importance of implementing and preserving customs from generation to generation (Zihad and Putri, 2020, p.195). From the more practical perspective, to support the continuation of the practice of the *Mongubingo*, the people of Gorontalo, as also in many other societies, believes that, female circumcision is part of a form of initiation into female maturity (Laila and Jubba, 2021, p.145). The purification processes is considered as a form of improving the health of women and the children they will later give birth to; it is believed that where women who undergo female circumcision will be more fertile and give birth more easily (Laila and Jubba, 2021, p.146). It is also believed that female circumcision is a form of beauty. The genital organs are considered as 'dirty' and not in a good shape, so some part of it must be cut or thrown away. This will make women a symbol of beauty (p.146). In addition, female circumcision is thought to increase fertility, hence ensuring the birth of

² Dutch language

³ Translated from Bahasa Indonesia

future generation (p.146). In addition to this, people of Gorontalo also practice female circumcision as part of the practice of Islamic law.

Does Universalism really matter?

The global, and considered as universal, narratives on the norms of anti-FGM have become a form of colonialization of ideas in implementing *Mongubingo* tradition in Gorontalo, Indonesia. First, the argument that *Mongubingo* is old-fashioned (against the idea of Western modernity) and as a form of violation of women's right shave threatened the long-believed tradition of female circumcision in the area. This argument can be challenged in a way that, the people of Gorontalo practice *Mongubingo* without coercion based on their personal beliefs of the religious values, cultural values, and even health consideration. From this perspective, the spread of the global anti-FGM narrative and movement then has the potential to destroy the identity of the people of Gorontalo. Practices that are condemned as a form of a women marginalization, are in fact believed as a way to protect the of dignity of the women of Gorontalo. Hence, the universalist vs. relativist debate on this issue will lead to this fundamental question: for the sake of applying the universally believed norms of human rights, is it appropriate to prevent an individual to practice what they traditionally believe as true?

CONCLUSION

In this article, we argue that the debate between universalism and relativism of norms has been influencing the way we see the appropriateness of the practice of female genital mutilation. In one hand, universalism criticized the practice based on the underlying values of human basic rights, hence trigger the global narrative and movement of anti-FGM. On the other hand, relativism sees nothing wrong with the practice so long as it is voluntarily accepted within the specific context of specific communities. Discussing *Mongubingo* – the practice of baby girl circumcision in Gorontalo, within the universalism and relativism debate, we would like to conclude that it is indeed an issue of human rights violation. It is a woman's human right violation. However, whether it is a violation of the rights of women, or a violation of the rights of the community in Gorontalo to preserve their culture and tradition and keep practicing of what they believe is true – it will be largely dependent upon the perspective we use when analysing the situation, universalism or relativism. Both will provide two different – might be contradictory, but equally pertinent – explanations.

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SJ is inspired by the need to put into visibility the Indonesian and South East Asian women to ensure a dissemination of knowledge to a wider general audience.

SJ selects at least several outstanding articles by scholars in the early stages of a career in academic research for each issue, thereby providing support for new voices and emerging scholarship.

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There are other journals which address those topics, but SJ approaches the broad areas of gender, sexuality and feminism in an integrated fashion. It further addresses the issue of international collaboration and inclusion as existing gaps in the area of academic publishing by (a) crossing language boundaries and creating a space for publishing and (b) providing an opportunity for innovative emerging scholars to engage in the academic dialogue with established researchers.

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