

**Just Like Couscous:
Gender, Agency and the Politics of Female Circumcision in Cairo**

Av Maria Frederika Malmström

Akademisk avhandling för filosofie doktorsexamen i socialantropologi,
Institutionen för globala studier, Göteborgs universitet, som med tillstånd av
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**UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG
SCHOOL OF GLOBAL STUDIES**

Abstract

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This dissertation explores how female gender identity is continually created and re-created in Egypt through a number of daily practices, of which female circumcision is central. In order to do so, the study inquires into the lived experiences and social meanings of female circumcision and femininity as narrated by women from lower class neighbourhoods in Cairo. The study seeks to understand how the experiences of femininity and female circumcision are shaped and challenged by the social and political changes that impinge on these women's lives. Female circumcision has become a global political minefield with 'Western' interventions affecting Egyptian politics and social development, not least in the area of democracy and human rights. The global human rights discourse brings about change by portraying female circumcision as mutilation. These discourses and other political and social changes both in Egypt and elsewhere, such as modernization, the aftermath of 9/11 and regional instability have together begun to dis-embed female circumcision from its socio-cultural context. This thesis focuses upon the way in which these women understand and respond to these complex changes and it looks particularly at how different actors, in their construction of female identity, contest, resist, subvert or embrace female circumcision. The study explores how the subject is made through the interplay of global hegemonic structures of power and the most intimate sphere, which has been exposed in the international arena. The need to understand agency as the capacity to act according to the exigencies of the specific socio-cultural forms the main premise of this dissertation; the Egyptian context comprises the complex interaction between the local and a variety of wider global forces.

Key words: anthropology, identity, gender, agency, embodiment, senses, body, sexuality, female circumcision, politics, social change, performativity, practice, political Islam, Egypt, Middle East, North Africa.