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Honors Thesis

THE CRIMINALIZATION OF FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION IN OHIO:
A SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ANALYSIS

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Submitted to Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment
of graduation requirements for University Honors

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ABSTRACT

THE CRIMINALIZATION OF FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION IN OHIO: A SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ANALYSIS

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Bachelor of Science

This research examines the public attitudes towards the criminalization of female genital mutilation (“FGM”) in Ohio in 2018 with the passage of S.B. 214. Content from *The Columbus Dispatch*, testimony in favor of the bill, and an oral history with a current Ohio Senator who was a House Representative in 2018 were used as data in this research. Data are examined using group threat theory to better understand the attitudes of the Columbus public towards trends in immigration and FGM. Results find that anti-Islam and anti-African sentiments (and specifically anti-Somali sentiments) were widely found in these data, as well as the portrayal of mother heroes fighting against FGM. Linguistic choices in these texts portray FGM and individuals/groups associated with FGM as “primitive” and “violent.” This research helps us understand why this law was created when it was and with as much support as it had from Ohio legislators, as well as gauges Ohioians’ opinions towards FGM and immigration before and leading up to the passage of S.B. 214.

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Thanks and love to my parents for teaching me the importance of education and that my mind is great and wide.

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Introduction

In 2018, state legislators in Ohio unanimously passed a bill that involved race, gender, immigration, healthcare, and religion. The bill had two primary sponsors and 72 cosponsors: 49 members of the House Representatives and 23 Senators¹ (Anon 2019c). This level of bipartisan support for a bill addressing highly debated topics was (and remains) uncommon in Ohio, which is a swing state that swung more conservative under the Trump administration (Antonio 2023). In a time of such political polarization, this bill stands out as an outlier in which all political parties came together to unanimously pass a bill. Why did this bill pass when it did, and what made this bill something every Ohio state lawmaker wanted to support?

The bill, S.B. 214, criminalized something that has been federally criminalized since 1996 (Macready 1996): female genital mutilation (“FGM”). S.B. 214 of the 132nd General Assembly criminalized performing FGM on a minor or knowingly transporting a minor to be circumcised. Under S.B. 214, these actions became a fifth-degree felony punishable with prison time between 6 and 12 months and a fine under the Ohio code with possible additional fines imposed by the court of up to \$25,000 (Terhar and Lehner 2017). This bill was introduced following a case in Michigan that brought state-level regulation of FGM to political and public attention (Terhar and Lehner 2018).

FGM is a particularly interesting issue in that it intersects both conservative and progressive values. Conservative parties involved in S.B. 214 prioritized protecting young women and girls from FGM, and the progressive side involved in the bill emphasized women’s rights and control over a procedure on their bodies (Antonio 2023). In 2018, Ohio was a polarized swing state trending more conservatively, and this issue

¹ For reference, there are 99 House Representatives (Anon 2023a) and 33 Senators (Anon 2023b).

and bill provided a special intersection of these conservative and progressive values. This produced a bill that both major parties agreed on, though they rarely agree on much else when it comes to issues of race, gender, immigration, healthcare, and religion. This allowed a space of intersecting values where the bill was highly supported by both conservative and progressive parties.

FGM² is a highly controversial practice that came to public attention leading up to and following the passage of S.B. 214. In the decades before the bill's introduction, Ohio's immigration from African countries where FGM is commonly practiced increased (City of Columbus, n.d.). As of 2018, there were 1,661,333 African Americans living in Ohio, and 74,000 of them were foreign-born (New African Immigrants Commission of Ohio 2018). Ohio now has the second-largest Somali population in the United States (Noor 2011; Siegel 2018b), which has not gone unnoticed by the public.

In this paper, I analyze public rhetoric in Ohio around FGM to disentangle and better understand the reasons why S.B. 214 was created when it was and passed with so much support. My analysis of newspaper content and other public writings about FGM in Ohio suggests that, in reaction to this increasing Somali population, the greater Ohio population treated Somali and other African immigrants as a threat. This group threat response manifests in multiple ways, including the open expression of highly anti-African and anti-Islamic sentiments and public policy. These data also show a glorification of Somali women who presented Western values by rejecting FGM as well as protectionist attitudes towards women and girls. Linguistic choices made by authors and speakers also characterized Africa and people from Africa as primitive and barbaric, as well as

² FGM has many names such as female circumcision or genital mutilation. This text will mainly refer to the practice as FGM because that is the term used in S.B. 214 from the 132nd Ohio General Assembly.

associating FGM with other highly violent and brutal behaviors such as sexual assault. All of these findings demonstrate the public's opinion of the increasing Somali population in Columbus— they are a threat that needs to be controlled.

FGM, Immigration, and Ohio

FGM is a traditional practice involving the partial or total removal of external female genitalia or other injury to female genital organs for non-medical reasons. There are no known health benefits of FGM, and it can lead to long-term health risks and complications to women's physical, mental, and sexual health (Anon n.d.a). It is estimated that more than 200 million girls and women alive today have experienced FGM. Every year, approximately three million girls are at risk of experiencing FGM, and most are circumcised before the age of 15 (Anon n.d.a). FGM is practiced all around the world and is almost universally practiced in Somalia, Guinea, and Djibouti, where more than 90% of girls and women experience FGM (Anon 2019a). FGM is practiced in other countries across Africa and the Middle East and in pockets of Europe, Australia, and North America where migrants from the countries where FGM is common have immigrated over the last few decades (Anon 2019a).

One of these pockets of immigration is the state capital of Ohio, Columbus. Columbus has a long history as a destination for immigrants, as is seen in its historic ethnic enclaves such as German Village, Italian Village, and Hungarian Village (City of Columbus n.d.). The state of Ohio has a growing immigrant community (American Immigration Council 2020). Columbus is home to 155,000 immigrant residents, or about 7.2% of the city's population, born in nations such as Bhutan, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, India, and others (City of Columbus, n.d.). The Columbus

metropolitan area has a total population of 2,151,017 people (Duffin 2022), and roughly 8% of the total population is foreign-born (City of Columbus n.d.). Between 2014 and 2019, the immigrant population in the Columbus metropolitan area grew by 22.2% (New American Economy 2021). In the same period between 2014 and 2019, the region's population grew by 6.4%, with immigrants accounting for 29.5% of the population growth between 2014 and 2019 (Anon 2021). 16,000 refugees also resettled in the Columbus area from 1983-2015, and secondary resettlement has grown among refugees from countries such as Somalia, Bhutan, and Nepal (City of Columbus n.d.).

FGM has been federally criminalized in the United States since 1996 (Macready 1996), though the federal statute was essentially dormant until 2017. Federal prosecutors brought charges in *United States v. Nagarwala* in 2017 under the federal statute against physicians, medical support personnel, and mothers who allegedly brought their daughters to the physicians for FGM procedures. Though the charges were later dismissed (Foster 2019), FGM legislation was brought to national media and legislative attention, including Columbus where the immigrant population from countries commonly practicing FGM, was growing. Only two years after *United States v. Nagarwala*, Ohio passed a law criminalizing FGM (Anon 2019b) with unanimous support in the Senate and House of Representatives (The Ohio Legislature 2022).

Group Threat Theory

Group threat theory is the idea that as the size of an outgroup in society grows, the corresponding ingroup or mainstream perceives a threat to its interests and reacts with negative attitudes towards the outgroup (Schlueter and Scheepers 2010). Negative attitudes or prejudice occur in an ingroup when members perceive threat from an

outgroup (Fussell 2014), and this prejudice tends to increase when living in a more diverse metropolitan area (Fossett and Kiecolt 1989). In these contexts, as the minority group population increases, there is increasing discriminatory behavior towards them from the dominant group (Chiricos, Pickett, and Lehmann 2020).

Group threat theory posits that white majorities feel threatened when the black minority either increases in size or mobilization and that white majorities in these contexts respond with racial discrimination (Chiricos et al. 2020). Additionally, the perceived immigrant threat is seen in trends in media, political, and cultural products and outlets (Chiricos et al. 2020). Research indicates that group threat is activated through both the *proximity* of the in and out groups and the *population density* of the threatened groups (Andrews and Seguin 2015). Group threat can be a major factor associated with policy change, specifically when demographic changes challenge the economic, political, and cultural standing of established groups. In these cases, ingroups mobilize and support new policies to maintain or restore their group status (Andrews and Seguin 2015). In an oral history collected with Senator Nicki J. Antonio, who was a House representative when S.B. 214 was passed, explained that the passage of S.B. 214 was in part, “a little bit of backlash against cultural practices of new immigrants that probably helped get folks to sign on to pass this” (Antonio 2023). In other words, the ingroup felt threat from the new immigrant outgroup.

Given the Columbus metropolitan area’s recent increase in its immigrant population and subsequent increases in its racial and cultural diversity, it is relevant to measure and evaluate trends in public attitudes toward immigrant groups. Group threat theory posits that rising immigrant populations present as threats to US-born whites in the

area (King and Wheelock 2007). Given this, US-born whites, or the ingroup, may perceive threat with the increased presence of African immigrants in Columbus. Reactions to these threats may manifest in public policy (King and Wheelock 2007), such as with the criminalization of FGM in Ohio, which merits the need for analysis of public opinion surrounding the criminalization of FGM.

Methods

To better understand the political and social climate surrounding the criminalization of FGM in the state of Ohio, I conducted a content analysis of media coverage, testimony in favor of the bill³ provided by political and community organizations, and other records relevant to the passage of the bill. I also collected and analyzed an oral history from Ohio Senator Nicki J. Antonio who was involved in the 132nd General Assembly as a House Representative when the bill was presented and passed in 2018. The bill was passed by the Senate and House and sent to the governor for approval on December 28, 2018, and became effective as law on April 5, 2019 (Anon 2019c).

I collected newspaper articles from years before, during, and after the passage of the bill, searching for all articles mentioning FGM between January 1990 to November 2022. Data were collected online from the *Columbus Dispatch* as well as from public political records relevant to the bill's development and passing, such as testimony given in support of the bill. I focused my analysis on articles published in the *Columbus Dispatch* because it is the primary newspaper consumed and distributed in Columbus, which is in Franklin County, where 55% of the African-born immigrants in Ohio live (New African Immigrants Commission of Ohio 2018). To search for newspaper articles

³ No official testimony was offered in opposition to the bill.

relevant to my research, I used the Worthington Libraries databases. I searched the newspaper database within the date range of interest for “FGM”, “female circumcision”, and “female genital mutilation” to find relevant articles to code and analyze. I downloaded and organized all relevant articles in a cloud drive available to me through my university.

I then reviewed these data and recorded themes, items, and observations of note to further examine for implicit and explicit messaging in these data. From these searches, I collected 36 total articles. 11 of these articles were written by community members, and the majority of authors did not come from Islamic or African communities. Four articles were written by authors from outside news sources such as *AP News*, 18 articles were written by *Columbus Dispatch* writers, one was written by a Stanford historian, and two were anonymously written. Article types similarly ranged, with 11 news articles, six opinion columns, 11 letters written by community members, seven book or play reviews, and one editorial article.

Testimony from political meetings was gathered using a population sample of all testimony given in favor of the bill that was available online. This included eight testimonies. The bill as enacted was also collected online for analysis, as well as any relevant documents mentioned in the testimonies. This included the document titled, “A Guide to Somali Culture,” which I downloaded online from *Scribd* using a personal account.

Once collected, I then read through and open-coded all of the articles and testimonies. I then developed a codebook based on themes and trends I identified in this first reading of these data. Following the development of this codebook, I then re-read

each document and coded them according to the codes and themes I had identified. I continued to refine my analysis throughout the coding phases and then organized the findings into the themes presented below.

The oral history was collected via video call, recorded on an audio recorder, and transcribed via Otter.ai software. I contacted 22 cosponsors of S.B. 214 who were still a part of either the Ohio Senate or House and thus still had contact information listed online. I either emailed or filled out forms on the Senate or House website to get in contact with these individuals and received automatic replies and no further communications from all other representatives except Senator Antonio, whose staff reached out to me via email and scheduled an online call with me. I created a brief interview guide with questions for discussion based on the trends in the articles and testimonies that I had previously collected and coded. This oral history intended to gather more information about why the bill happened when it did, know what the goals of the bill were, understand the bill's impact to date, and learn more about the conversation that was happening around the bill from the perspective of lawmakers. Once collected and transcribed, the oral history was coded using the same codebook that was used on testimonies and articles.

Findings

Across 36 articles from the *Dispatch* and eight testimonies in favor of S.B. 214 in the 132nd General Assembly, authors and speakers commonly expressed anti-Islamic and anti-African sentiments. Anti-Islamic attitudes included negative sentiments towards Muslims immigrating into the area, negative attitudes about Islam in general, and associating FGM with Islam. Anti-African sentiments included generally negative

attitudes towards African people, negative attitudes towards specifically Somali people, and an association of FGM with African people. A hero mother story was present in the dataset as well, praising mothers who fight back against FGM and uphold Western values, often against their mothers. These hero mothers also included women who are not literal mothers but resist FGM in their communities by protecting the younger generation from FGM. Authors' and speakers' perceptions of women and girls also presented them as persons needing protection and as passive actors in experiencing FGM. Linguistic choices across articles portrayed FGM as barbaric, violent, and primitive, often in relation to Africa. Testimony given in favor of the bill also presented that S.B. 214 was in part motivated by a Michigan FGM case and subsequent bill passing that criminalized FGM in the state. An oral history collected with Senator Antonio led to findings that conservative and progressive ideals and biases intersected perfectly to allow S.B. 214 to pass so seamlessly when it did. Senator Antonio's remarks also led to the findings that the identities of the bill's sponsors played a significant role in its large support. Senator Antonio also explained that it is unusual and significant that the bill had so many cosponsors, as these legislators wanted their names to be associated with the bill and its support.

Anti-Islam

Across these collected data, authors and speakers commonly expressed anti-Islamic attitudes. This included associating FGM with Islam, negative sentiments regarding Muslims immigrating into the area, and negative attitudes regarding Islam in general. These negative attitudes became more common in tandem with the rise of Muslim immigration to the area, corroborating the idea that the public's response to this

immigration was with group threat. In the words of Senator Antonio, Ohioans were reacting with an “overarching attitude of a lack of tolerance and insensitivity to people coming into our country” (Antonio 2023).

Authors often expressed negative attitudes toward the immigration of Muslim people into non-majority Muslim places, again corroborating the presence of group threat. People seemed to fear the changes that would come along with an increasing Muslim population in their area and a general intolerance for non-Western culture (Locke 2017a), as well as fear some of the norms that come with this immigrant population (Carlson-Riehm 2018). For example, one author stated, “It is amazing that Westerners are willing to surrender their freedoms of movement, speech, and conscience, rather than demand that Islam reform before accepting millions of Muslims into their midst” (Locke 2017a).

Authors expressed a general fear and distrust of Muslims and the changes involved with their arrival (Hanson 2017; Carlson-Riehm 2018). One such article described the privilege of a straight man living in France where many Muslims were immigrating, “he will not face the type of degradation French homosexuals, Jews, and [women] will endure as Muslims pour into France” (Locke 2017a). The use of “pour” in this excerpt emphasizes the fear of large-scale Muslim immigration, as resident populations seem to feel that their societies are being taken over, expressing feelings of threat and fear experienced by the ingroup.

Fear of the Islamization of the ingroup’s societies and violence authors associated with Islam also appeared often in these texts, as authors expressed fear of “more mosques, madrassas, burquas, female genital mutilation, child brides, random terror, and

the continuation of Islam's 14-century war on non-Muslims in the heart of a once-free nation" (Locke 2017a) coming to their own homes. One such article using France as a case study for what could happen in Ohio with the immigration of Muslims claims that a Paris with more Islam will "soon be a nightmare in the daylight" (Locke 2017b), suggesting that Ohio could become a similar nightmare given its increasing Islamic population via immigration. Authors generally associated Islam with violence (Flowers 2017; Locke 2017b), going so far as to say that FGM "religiously inspired brutal misogyny" and "has no place in our society" (Gil 2018). This linguistic choice of calling FGM "religiously inspired" demonstrates how the ingroup is associating FGM with Islam, and saying that it has no place in Ohio demonstrates the expression of group threat, as the ingroup pushes back against minority practices.

Similarly demonstrating group threat, authors expressed the attitude that immigration came with a loss of control of one's home society and culture. One article discussed the effects of globalization and commented, "the United States seems to want to go back to the world that existed before the 1980s, when local communities had more control of their own destinies and traditions" (Hanson 2017). This "control" signals a desire to revert to the demographic composition of the city before large-scale immigration from African countries, as these "local communities" want to decide which "traditions" are allowed in their midst, which likely does not include FGM. Testimony given in favor of S.B. 214 likely discussed how some immigrant norms and "traditions violate U.S. laws and our social norms" (Carlson-Reihm 2018), such as FGM. These comments express displeasure and prejudice against the immigrant outgroup.

The authors' texts also presented the belief that the Muslim people immigrating to Columbus are fundamentally different than the majority group in Columbus. The article discussing globalization points out that sharing goods does not remove the fundamental differences between Western and Eastern peoples and cultures, "let us not fool ourselves into thinking that globalization has fundamentally altered the nature and culture of those it hooks" (Hanson 2017). The same article deeply emphasized the cultural and historical divides between Islamic and non-Islamic societies, doubting that the "Radical Islamic world [is] therefore becoming more like the United States? Or are they adopting Western ideas and weapons while accentuating their far deeper cultural and historical differences?" (Hanson 2017). These essentialist ideas assert that Muslims from outside the United States are fundamentally different from Ohioans:

Does [globalization] really bring people together into a shared world order, or does it simply offer a high tech and often explosive veneer to non-Western cultures that are antithetical to the very West that they so borrow from and copy? An Islamic State terrorist does not hate the United States any less because he now wears hoodies and sneakers and can text his girlfriend. More likely, Western fashion and high-tech toys only empower radical Islamic hatred of Western values (Hanson 2017).

When faced with tolerance and love from Muslim people, some authors of newspaper articles expressed surprise: "In an almost surreal moment, I listened as a devout Muslim woman in a hijab and a full length dress explained to me, a Catholic woman... how wonderful my own faith is" (Flowers 2017). This surprise at tolerance and acceptance from Muslims coexisted with common sentiment across data that Muslim

immigrants' culture inherently clashes with Ohio culture and life (Carlson-Reihm 2018; Gil 2018).

In these data, there was a common expectation that immigrants should change their way of life to be more American, which includes not practicing FGM. One author asserted that “for the most part, the norms of our country become their norms, but sometimes there is a clash of values when another culture’s traditions violate U.S. laws and our social norms. Female Genital Mutilation is one such tradition” (Carlson-Riehm 2018). This idea that this immigrant population’s values clash with US norms was similarly present in Senator Antonio’s remarks,

In the context of this bill, it was almost like, well, these folks are already here. So that's not the issue. Right, now that they're here. What we're telling you is that this is in direct conflict with American values. And this is something culturally that came in but, however, we believe it is not in the best interest of certainly these young girls and women (Antonio 2023).

Senator Antonio similarly commented on the generally anti-immigrant narrative present at the time the legislation was proposed and how it overlapped with a renewed cultural emphasis on Americanness and Western values and norms:

Sometimes there's a shift in narrative. And new information comes in and gets added to, we hope and evolve to narrative and certain areas. So in 2018, there was a lot of new immigrants coming in. In 2018, there was a different administration in the White House than there is now. There was very much for my conservative colleagues across the aisle very much, not just ‘America first,’ but America, sort of ‘America everything,’ and that we have the best answers about everything. And

so I think it was in that climate, that if you're coming to this country, to be a new immigrant, to our country, and, you know, don't forget, there was a lot of negative narrative around just immigrants coming to our country (Antonio 2023).

Senator Antonio described the reasoning behind S.B. 214's success on the conservative side of legislative teams, "the folks that were politically conservative, made the decision to support these kinds of pieces of legislation. Seeing it I think, more than anything, as standing up for the American way of life" (Antonio 2023). This preservation of "the American way of life" seems to exclude the presence of Islamic immigrants and their cultures. Immigrants coming to Columbus seem to be expected by the mainstream to conform to the dominant culture and abandon their own cultures, especially the aspects of their cultures deemed most undesirable or problematic by the dominant culture (Carlson-Reihm 2018; Gil 2018). This implies that Western values and norms are better than those of Eastern immigrants. One author examining the differences between various societies despite globalization commented that "many Western elites implicitly believe that their own ideas... are superior to the alternatives elsewhere" (Hanson 2017). The belief that Western ideas are superior allows space for the need to override or change the so-called inferior culture. When discussing globalization and America's influence in developing countries, one author remarked that "isolation lets the good traditions survive but also the bad" (Schwier 2005), celebrating the desired aspects of cultural differences while pointing out the parts that are "not acceptable" (Carlson-Riehm 2018), such as FGM.

While anti-Islamic sentiment prevailed in these data, some authors expressed apologetic attitudes toward Muslim people for the harsh US immigration policy and

Islamophobic attitudes. Nickolas Kristof of the *New York Times*, whose opinion piece was re-printed in the *Columbus Dispatch*, offered the following apology: “I hereby apologize to Muslims. The mindlessness and heartlessness of the travel ban should humiliate us, not you...Islamophobia swirls through the order” (Kristof 2017). It is important to note that a nationally prominent author wrote this piece for an international audience, rather than an Ohio-based author local to the community. There were other instances of tolerance towards Muslims (Ahmad 1998; Magdy and Fam 2021), but it was certainly a minority attitude in these data by far.

Linguistic choices made by authors and speakers such as using phrases like “Radical Islamic World”, “explosive”, “Radical Islamic hatred”, “Islamic State terrorist” (Hanson 2017), “terrorism”, and “jihadist attack” (Flowers 2017) all evoke images of violence and radical terrorists associated with radical forms of Islam, generalizing these images to the whole religion. These texts reject that highly Islamic countries can be like Western nations, associating Islamic nations with violence and hate while elevating Western societies. As another author claimed, “What really is needed is a new worldwide culture -- one where women everywhere have equal rights and freedom from reprehensible, outdated practices” (Case 2003). This cultural override suggests abandoning the traditions and cultures of those that practice Islam, referencing their “reprehensible, outdated practices” implying that a “worldwide culture” should replace these, which is an expression of group threat as the ingroup attempts to override the outgroup’s culture. The use of “equal rights and freedom” evokes American culture, implying that American culture should be the override.

Authors also generally associated Islam and FGM in these data, whether this is by religious law or cultural tradition. This is exemplified in the story of one man's travels in Mali, who recounted that "a tribal leader in rural Mali says Islam mandates the practice... [he] points out that the practice is not mentioned in the Quran, and the man relents, citing tradition as justification" (Schwier 2005). Other articles pin FGM and other violence more deeply on Islam, "I am not stupid enough to believe religion is irrelevant to those incidents of blood and revenge" (Flowers 2017) and show FGM to be enforced by Islamic leaders, "The elders proclaim that purification should continue because it is a Muslim tradition" (Chordas 2005); "purification" here refers to FGM.

Other articles displayed an understanding of more nuance to FGM's practice and origins, demonstrating a deeper knowledge of how culture and religion can interact, "the practice... predates Islam and crosses religious lines" (Magdy and Fam 2021). One author, when discussing FGM, noted that it "is not uniquely practiced by Muslims in Africa" (Flowers 2017). Some articles reject that FGM is a religious practice at all and point out that the oppression of women is cultural, asserting that "the Koran makes no specific mention of women's religious role" (Anon 1999). These articles are clear that FGM "is purely a local custom and has nothing to do with Islamic tradition or practice" (Ahmad 1998). Additionally, some articles show respect for Islam by using respectful language such as "Holy Koran" or "Holy Prophet Mohammed" and less violent language for FGM such as "female circumcision" when discussing FGM in relation to Islamic societies. It is important to note that articles expressing sentiments that are not Islamophobic generally come from the earliest years of these data sampled, before the significant rise in Muslim immigration to the area, further supporting the idea that this increase in

immigration prompted a group threat response from the Ohio ingroup, directly prompting and shaping the subsequent discourse around Islam and FGM to be full of fear and prejudice towards Muslims. These articles from the earliest dates sampled also were written before the Twin Towers attack in New York City in 2001, which may also have influenced the rhetoric about Islam and Muslim people in Ohio during my sampled years.

Anti-African

Authors also commonly expressed Anti-African sentiments in their texts, including negative attitudes specifically towards the Somali immigrants and population in Columbus. Authors highly associate FGM with Africa and African people in their articles. Across articles, authors demonstrated generally Anti-African sentiments, going so far as to say that “Africa contains some of the most godforsaken places on Earth”, calling it “The Dark Continent” (Schwier 2005). The title “Dark Continent” evokes both images of people living difficult lives and dark-skinned people, associating this dark skin with the “harsh realities in war-torn Africa: wrenching poverty, tyranny, famine and disease, for starters” (Grossberg 2014). These details and linguistic choices characterize Africa as primitive and undesirable. This sentiment is similarly present in the messaging from the president at the time, as Donald Trump referred to African nations as “shithole countries” in an Oval Office conversation, questioning why he should let in more immigrants from places like Africa or Haiti (Fram 2021). This negative messaging of African countries and the African immigrants that come from them mirrors the messages present in this dataset regarding Africa and African people.

Linguistic choices in these texts commonly used language evoking a sense of primitivism around FGM and those involved with it. Phrases like “ritual cutting” (Burkett

2018), “brutal customs” (Grossberg 2014), “cultural or ritual necessity” (Tobin 2018), “torture” (Flowers 2017), “barbaric” or “dangerous practice” (Chordas 2005; Terhar and Lehner 2018), “tribal loyalties” (Flowers 2017), “Ghana’s rites of womanhood” (Harden 2000), “Rites of Passage” (Harden 2000), and “hideous torture... in keeping with ancient custom” (Anon 2004) all evoke a sense of a primitive, tribal culture surrounding FGM. Other stories evoke an image of a primitive procedure and society as FGM is described to be “usually performed without anesthetic by a traditional practitioner with crude instruments” (Ohio Department of Public Safety; Flowers 2017).

Other stories, such as one about a reporter whose home in “her native West Africa” was being searched by police, evoke violence and African imagery, “men huddled in the predawn, chattering furtively into their walkie-talkies. She knew they were ready to pounce” (Harden 2003). These African men are equated to animals hunting in the night like a pack of lions. Another article criticizes Muslims for not being vocal enough about the violence of extremists while similarly evoking animal imagery when discussing moderate Muslims, condemning them for their lack of a “roar” (Flowers 2017) in response to radical’s violent attacks. This predator imagery was also present when calling Ethiopia a “lion’s den of female genital mutilation” (Williams 2004), as the women performing the FGM would be those lions. Animal imagery continued in describing FGM with language often used to refer to animal attacks, “women and girls who have been maimed by the procedure” (Severyn 2018), and was characterized typically as African, “the brutal ritual of female circumcision in Africa” (Johnson 2000); “genital mutilation, a practice not uncommon among tribal groups, including some in Ghana” (Harden 2000). A few times authors and speakers mentioned other locations

where FGM happens, such as Asia and the Middle East (The AHA Foundation 2018), but the vast majority of articles associated FGM with Africa (The AHA Foundation 2018; Burkett 2018).

Articles also deeply connect FGM with Africa by providing readers with information such as that “virtually all Ethiopian women” are circumcised since “the practice is common in parts of Africa” (Anon 2004), or calling FGM a “‘purification,’ practiced in dozens of African countries” (Chordas 2005) or noting that “virtually all Somali-born women, and likely many of their daughters, have undergone some form of FGM” (Sevryn 2018). This information was commonly shared in both newspaper data and testimony given in favor of the bill. One article chronicles the topics of films at an international film festival, and the only African feature was “a Senegalese drama about female circumcision” (Gabrenya 2005). This constant association shows up in a wide range of stories, including a story of young African American girls traveling to Ghana to “have a better worldview” (Harden 2000), and the reporter writing this story asked one of the travelers about FGM, suggesting that girls traveling to Ghana are associated FGM (Harden 2000). Stories of immigration also often connected their stories with FGM, “an east side woman who fears her daughter could be forced to undergo circumcision if they are deported to their Ethiopian homeland” (Willaims 2004). Other articles hint at FGM being “a practice in some ethnic communities” (Siegel 2018a), suggesting that those who practice it are “ethnic” and separate from the ingroup of the Columbus population. African tradition and culture are also blamed for the continuation of FGM. This blame is expressed by individuals interviewed by authors such as Nimco Alli, a woman of Somali heritage who is a co-founder of an organization working to end FGM in Africa (Anon

2019d), who was quoted in an article saying, “this thing will die very slowly... It’s an issue related to our traditions and the Sudanese culture” (Magdy and Fam 2021).

Though many authors mention African countries in their articles, Somalia is by far the most prevalent country mentioned across all articles, testimony, and oral history. Somalia is first mentioned in an article in 2017, the same year S.B. 214 was introduced and long after the Somali population of Columbus was firmly established. Beginning in 2017, texts begin heavily associating Somalia and Somali immigrants with FGM by specifically mentioning Somali people, culture, or immigration in tandem with mentioning FGM. One such article details a Somali woman’s visit to a doctor’s office in Columbus, “like many other Somali immigrants in Columbus, this patient had undergone a female genital mutilation/circumcision” (Chalif 2018). Another author specifically links FGM to Columbus’s Somali population, “with the nation’s second-largest Somali population, the Columbus metro area ranks seventh among the nation’s metro areas in the number of girls at risk” (Siegel 2018c). These data also portray Somali families as deeply Muslim, as 99% of the thousands of Somali people living in Columbus are Muslim (Ohio Department of Public Safety). In these articles, authors explicitly connect adherence to Islam with a deep adherence to the tradition of FGM. Articles portray families to be so deeply committed to circumcising their daughters that when they struggle to find “FGM ‘practitioners’” they “resort to ‘vacation cutting,’ sending their daughters back to Somalia to visit family, where the girls undergo FGM” (Severyn 2018; Carlson-Riehm 2018). Even in positive connotations, authors still associate FGM with Somalia, such as with Somali women fighting back against FGM in displaced person camps (Kristoff 2017), as doctors (Kristoff 2017), or in their education (Sevryn 2018). When discussing the

intentions and goals of the bill during our conversation, Senator Antonio spoke of how the AHA Foundation, which is an organization “that is committed to preserving, protecting, and promoting Western freedoms and ideals” (Anon 2022), came and spoke to legislators. She remarked,

It was amazing that they told us that, you know, we actually have the second largest Somali population in [the country] in the Columbus metro area, which I think some of us realized- we knew we had a large Somali population that's come- new immigrants that have come probably in the past ten or 15 years. I don't know that any of us realized how large of a concentrated population it was. And that female genital mutilation, as we call it, was a part of cultural practice for many folks. And you know, that there were a lot of girls at risk. And I think that knowing that, first of all, that we had the numbers was a wake-up call (Antonio 2023).

In the newspaper articles published during the 2017-2018 legislative session, authors typically paired this heavy association of FGM with Somali immigrants with generally negative feelings towards Somali immigrants being present in Ohio. One author responded to an article calling for cultural competency with a letter questioning who bears the burden of learning each other's cultures,

If I were to emigrate to Somalia would anyone there care about accommodating my culture? My culture doesn't practice the barbarous and misogynist female genital mutilation procedure. Should our doctors become competent at that so that female Somali immigrants will not feel alienated? (Parr 2018).

Other articles highlighted intolerance of Somali culture with legal backlash, “many Somali cultural norms are not accepted by American society and some are illegal. One example is the practice of female circumcision” (Ohio Department of Public Safety). Stories about medical care also presented generally negative attitudes toward the Somali community. These stories characterized Somali women as generally vulnerable and passive such as one article detailing a Somali woman’s visit to the doctor for health problems related to her FGM, “lack of education, low usage of health services, little preventative treatment for sexually transmitted infections and like the many real and debilitating barriers to improving care make the female Somali population extremely vulnerable” (Chalif 2018). One testimony given in favor of the bill discussed how the speaker had requested information from the Ohio Department of Medicaid to check “the total number of cases and dollar reimbursement to Ohio Medicaid providers, hospitals, and other health-care entities associated with FGM repair” (Sevryn 2018), suggesting that FGM—and thus the Somali population—is a financial burden on Ohio taxpayers.

Stemming from anti-Somali sentiments, “in an effort to achieve ‘cooperation, understanding, mutual respect, and harmony’” with Columbus’s Somali immigrants, the Ohio Department of Public Safety published “A Guide to Somali Culture” for first responders and law enforcement” (Sevryn 2018). This guide explores Somali life, traditions, and culture both in Somalia and in Ohio. The guide uses stereotypically African patterns and fonts and while most pages are beige or blue, the section about FGM has pink pages with the female symbol set behind the text (Ohio Department of Public Safety), signaling that FGM is a women’s issue. Additionally, the text presents Somalia (and therefore Somali people) as primitive, including details about tribes and the use of

camels as dowry, “the dowry, traditionally, is paid in the form of camels, with the quantity varying by tribe” (Ohio Department of Public Safety). Another detail in the text suggesting that the Somali population is primitive is that the Somali language wasn’t written until about 100 years ago, and relied solely on oral tradition until then (Ohio Department of Public Safety). This paints a picture for readers of a society so far behind modern Western cultures that it was incapable of creating written text until recently. The text also notes that “it is very important to notice that more than 15 years after tens of thousands of Somalis came to live in urban centers like Columbus, Ohio, they still practice tribal customs and traditions” (Ohio Department of Public Safety). The inclusion of this detail both primitivizes Somali people by connecting that to “tribal customs and traditions” and also flags that this information is “important” for the reader to “notice”, emphasizing that Somali people are persistently different from the rest of us. The text similarly flags other information for the reader to emphasize that Somalians are different from the general Ohio population. One such detail is introduced in the text with the phrase, “one tradition may raise concern for outsiders”, suggesting that we, the reader (who were intended to be first responders and law enforcement), are outsiders, and then explains a tradition where grooms whip their brides to coerce the bride to be an obedient wife in their marriage (Ohio Department of Public Safety). The inclusion of this story communicates the idea that Somali women are abused and oppressed, which works in tandem with the high association of FGM with Somali people to create an image of a highly abusive and sexist community.

Authors and speakers commonly expressed anti-African sentiments, both towards African individuals in Ohio and African in general. These negative responses to African

and specifically Somalian people are a manifestation of the group threat felt by the Ohio mainstream, as an increasing African and Somali population is seen as a threat to the way of life and norms of the Ohioans who are a part of the dominant culture. And a desire to override and control this culture is present in these data. One author responded to an article about child brides and discussed other traditions she deemed human rights violations such as bride burnings and FGM. In her comments, she remarked, “what really is needed is a new worldwide culture- one where women everywhere have equal rights and freedom from reprehensible, outdated practices” (Case 2003). These attitudes are the beginnings of controlling the influence and power of the African population through actions such as public policy like S.B. 214, as the Ohio ingroup sees a need to override and control the culture of the immigrant community.

The Hero Mother Story

Throughout these collected data, a common story authors told in their articles was one of the mothers protecting their daughters from FGM. Authors showed this mother figure as a force defying the norms of her own community, “rejecting the painful purity practice means going against her family, culture and even the immigration service” (Williams 2004). These women, real and fictional, are portrayed as taking actions such as welcoming girls from their community into their homes and protecting them from FGM at the hands of their communities (Chordas 2005) or becoming refugees and leaving their communities to protect their daughters from FGM (Williams 2004). Interestingly, authors rarely mentioned fathers in these stories, except for imagined future fathers-in-law possibly enforcing FGM on uncircumcised brides. Only one author wrote a story mentioning a father (who was mentioned in only one sentence) implying that he worked

in tandem with his wife to protect their daughters from FGM (Williams 2004). But the rest of this article focused on the role of the mother, never again mentioning father figures in the prevention of FGM.

Authors presented mothers as forces fighting against FGM and protecting their daughters within their communities in Africa (Kristoff 2017), in addition to the US. One author discussed a feminist film about a woman “exposing [FGM] for the misogynistic fraud it is”; “in a west African farming village, Colle, the wife of a village leader, has sheltered her daughter from the purification and gives asylum to four girls who fear undergoing the knife... She places string across her doorstep; a vengeful spirit will attack anyone who crosses the line” (Chordas 2005). Authors present this act within Colle’s own homeland of Ethiopia as both primitive and heroic, as she protects her own daughter and four others to whom she has become a mother figure and protected with nothing more than a string and a threat of vengeful spirits. The text shows this woman as a force giving “asylum” that “shelter” to these girls fleeing FGM in their communities, evoking a sense that these girls are refugees in their own community and she is a safehouse from FGM.

Additionally, these texts portray a mother’s fear of her daughter’s circumcision as a reason required to be considered a refugee in the US immigration system (Anon 2004), such as in an article discussing a woman receiving refugee status due to the possibility of her daughter being circumcised if they returned to their country of origin, “the court recognizes the threat of female genital mutilation posed by Berhan’s future husband or relatives” (Williams 2004). One article told the story of a mother going through immigration hearings to try and stay in the United States because of her fear that her daughter would be circumcised if they returned to the Ivory Coast, “Salmita couldn’t bear

the thought that this could happen to her daughter, and if she were forced to return to the Ivory Coast, it would” (Flowers 2017). This compassion towards these families working with the US immigration system to avoid FGM is notable due to tight immigration policies and negative attitudes towards African immigration found in the articles. These mothers and their daughters seem to be the exception to the anti-African and anti-Islamic immigration sentiments in the articles, precisely because they are rejecting the norms of their homeland’s culture and becoming “almost American” (Williams 2004).

The language in the articles discussing mothers protecting their daughters from FGM in their country of origin evokes a particular fear of generational trauma from FGM (Flowers 2017; Williams 2004). Another mother named Abay felt the urgency for this as she faced deportation to her country of origin, “Abay and Berhan arrived in the United States in 1993 on a visitor’s visa and applied for asylum four years later when Barhan was 9, the same age Abay was when she was circumcised” (Williams 2004). This language evokes a fear that comes with time as the girls age old enough to be circumcised, likening them to their mothers who were circumcised at the same age. The mothers are shown to be protecting their daughters from FGM to protect them from the pain and suffering they went through, as the articles discuss their “fear of taking her daughter into the lion’s den of female genital mutilation in Ethiopia and being forced to witness the pain and suffering of her daughter” (Williams 2004). This language evokes the bravery of the mother denying the fate she experienced as a young girl for her daughter, though she faces external pressure and threat to have her daughters circumcised.

Authors often show these mothers as limited forces defying their parent's generation, the grandparents of their children, such as with Abay, who immigrated to the United States and refused to have her daughters circumcised before and after immigrating, "Abay's mother criticized her because she did not have her daughters circumcised" (Williams 2004). The mothers are fighting both legal systems of immigration to get to safety from "the lions den of female genital mutilation" (Williams 2004) and their own maternal figures, who are implied to be the African lions in that den. These mothers' power to prevent FGM is limited, such as one mother whose children were past the typical age when FGM happens, "when she left them in the care of their maternal grandmother. [She] does not know whether they have been circumcised because it's a taboo subject" (Williams 2004). Distance from their children back in Africa combined with the force of the grandmothers who care for them weaken the mothers' ability to protect their daughters from FGM. Across the dataset, authors present this helplessness of the mothers fighting FGM. Mothers struggle against current pressures to participate in the practice of FGM for their daughters, and fear grandmothers' and others' influences outside of their control in both the present and the future. One such mother, Abay, fears that despite her success to date in preventing her daughter's circumcision, future pressures and individuals will circumcise her daughters, "Abay and her husband prevented Berhan and their other three daughters from undergoing the procedure. But Abay fears future husbands and in-laws of the young women could impose it" (Williams 2004). Another article told an emotional story of a mother who,

Did not want [her daughter] to suffer the same barbarism she has been subjected to as a 5-year-old. She remembered being taken by her grandmother to a room,

along with seven or eight other girls, being held by neighbors, having her legs pushed open and watching as her mother's mother used a dull knife to cut into her genitals. Salimata could not bear the thought that this could happen to her daughter, and if she were forced to return to the Ivory Coast, it would (Flowers 2017).

These mothers push back against the social norms of their communities by not allowing their daughters to be circumcised, though their spheres of influence are presented as limited due to the influence of other people in their communities. The stories of these mothers are emotional and are meant to evoke compassion in the reader, aligning the audience with the pushback against FGM.

Most authors presenting these kinds of stories portray grandmothers as enforcers of FGM, though there was one exception where a girl was abused by her mother, and "her mother's cruelty was counterbalanced by her grandmother's love and encouragement" (Harden 2000). However, it is important to note that this was a story that did not involve FGM, but a generally abusive mother. But generally, authors showed mothers as strong within a limited sphere of control that is quickly overpowered by their own mothers and community and further weakened by distance from their children back in Africa. They are heroes within their limited, small spheres of influence: "A woman valiantly stands against the purification, exposing it for the misogynistic fraud it is" (Chordas 2005).

Beyond mothers, authors offered a more complicated picture of women's role in continuing or fighting against FGM. Some non-mother figures, such as women in the African communities external to families being discussed, were portrayed as figures

reinforcing the practice of FGM, such as one woman who was trying to get into political office; “a self-described moderate, she supports the controversial practice of female circumcision as falling within the Prophet Mohammed’s teachings” (Anon 1999). Authors portray these women as forces in the community that heroic mothers fight against. Similarly, other non-mother figures present in the articles are also presented as hero figures fighting FGM, such as “Edna Adan, a heroic Somali woman who has battled for decades for women's health and led the fight against female genital mutilation” or “Somali gynecologist, Dr. Hawa Abdi, who ran a displaced persons camp in Somalia” and challenged extremists even when held at gunpoint, refusing to stop her work (Kristof 2017). Another one of these figures was “a Somali woman, who personally underwent FGM as a youth, [who] wrote her 2012 University of Toledo sociology master’s thesis on reasons for FGM persistence in the Columbus, Ohio Somali Community” (Sevryn 2018). Another one of these women was a character named Ousmane Sembene in an African “feminist fable” in which she “valiantly stands against the purification, exposing it for the misogynistic fraud it is” (Chordas 2005). Nimco Alli, co-founder of an organization working to end FGM in Africa was another non-mother figure shown fighting FGM as she was quoted in Magdy and Fam’s (2021) article. She is a British woman of Somali heritage working to end FGM on a systemic level on the African continent (Anon 2019d), though the article quoting her simply presents her as a proud co-founder of an organization working to end FGM (Magdy and Fam 2021). Though all of these women are not literal mothers protecting their children, authors similarly portray them as mother-figure heroes. Their presence and experience as women in these communities give them authority and leverage to fulfill this role as hero mothers, regardless of whether

they have children or not. These women's spheres of influence appear larger than the actual mothers, as they influence many people rather than just their children (Kristof 2017; Sevryn 2018; Chordas 2005). Authors regularly paired these non-mother mother heroes with rhetoric such as "heroic," "led the fight," and "battled" (Kristof 2017), evoking an image of a warrior fighting FGM in the community. This contrasts with the mothers who lack power and influence over their children when faced with community and familial influence. The bravery and influence of these non-mother figures are long-lasting and stable, as they have "battled for decades" (Kristof 2017). One woman portrayed in the articles led a program taking young girls to their family's country of origin in a coming-of-age trip, "These girls have been with me for years... Have I ever let them be harmed? Do you think I am going to let them be hurt?" (Harden 2000). Authors present these women's power to protect the girls from FGM as reliable and longstanding, contrasting the actual mother's limited sphere of influence. No male-figure heroes were present in these texts, signaling that FGM is an issue that mainly involves women and girls and the primary responsibility.

Perception of Women and Girls

Authors' perception of women and girls in these texts manifested through the themes that women and girls need to be protected and that they are passive actors in FGM (except for hero mothers resisting FGM or grandmother figures enforcing it). Typical articles portray women and girls as people who "undergo" FGM (Flowers 2017; Sevryn 2018; Williams 2004; Siegel 2018c), who "have been maimed by the procedure" (Sevryn 2018), or who are "subjected to" (Flowers 2017) FGM. This passive language depicts women and girls as passive actors in FGM, portraying the idea that these men are

exerting “control over women” (Magdy and Fam 2021) in a highly patriarchal community (Ohio Department of Public Safety n.d.). Other stories depicted women as uninformed and uninvolved in their health and bodies since men make decisions regarding all medical needs and procedures (Ohio Department of Public Safety n.d.), “the patient felt ashamed and confused about her current condition... it had never occurred to her that her physical symptoms could have been a result of the procedure [FGM]” (Chalif 2018). These linguistic choices create an image of passive, unempowered women and girls who are the subjects of FGM rather than involved actors in FGM. This passive portrayal creates a space and the need for other parties to step in and get involved to regulate FGM, such as with S.B. 214.

In addition to being passive, women and girls are shown as “vulnerable” (Harden 2000) and in need of protection (Haworth 2003). In testimony in favor of S.B. 214, the bill’s sponsors proclaimed that “we should protect the girls” (Terhar and Lehner 2018). Other testimonies in favor of the bill suggest that “this legislation will provide protections for girls in the state” (Severyn 2018). Texts portray women and girls as “abused” (Quamme 2001) and damaged (Severyn 2018) once they are circumcised, “forever impacting their ability to ... fulfill their full potential as adult women” (Carlson-Riehm 2018). Authors also objectified women and girls, referring to them as “Afrikan Jewels” in need of “polish” “before their pilgrimage to Africa” (Harden 2000). Senator Antonio also expressed the sentiment that women need to be protected when asked about legislators’ general feelings toward the Somali population,

I think that in some cases, the sense for some of the legislators of protectionism. So you also have ingrained into some conservative cultures, practices of

legislators, you know, and they will talk about their sense of wanting to protect the girls and women in their lives. And I think there was this connection with that. That I heard probably from my colleagues” (Antonio 2023).

Portraying women and girls as vulnerable, passive people who need others to step in and protect them creates a space for group threat theory to manifest in legislation, such as with S.B. 214. If the public perceives that these African and Muslim women and girls need to be protected from their culture’s threat of FGM, which is characterized as violent (Dastagir 2021), then the Ohio mainstream is urged to do so, manifesting in public policy.

This characterization of FGM as brutal and violent was accomplished through linguistic choices. These phrases created a sense that FGM is barbaric and cruel, using terms such as “barbarism” (Flowers 2017), “horror” (Flowers 2017; Castello 2017; Dastagir 2017), “terrorism” (Flowers 2017), “barbarous,” and “brutal misogynist” (Gil 2018; Parr 2018) to describe FGM. Authors characterize FGM as “one of the most barbaric practices known to man” (Flowers 2017). Texts and testimonies also pair FGM with other highly violent actions such as “sexual assault across the globe” (Castello 2017), “rape” (Grossberg 2014), “female infanticide,” “violence” (Dastagir 2021; Terhar and Lehner 2018), domestic violence (Antonio 2023), and the oppression of women (Eichenberger 2003). Authors also often pair this violence with African connotation or context, “amid Africa’s wrenching poverty, famine, tyranny, female genital mutilation, baby rapes and pervasive disease” (Grossberg 2011). This characterization of FGM paired with the characterization of women and girls as passive actors in need of protection from FGM helps create a need for the Ohio legislature to step in and take action to protect these women and girls from this perceived brutalism and violence. This

was prevalent in testimony given in favor of the bill, “it is incredibly important to enact Senate Bill 214 and ensure that female infants and girls living in Ohio are protected from practices that will harm them” (Carlson-Riehm 2018). Though the public perceives this need to protect these girls, this protection could have manifested in different ways, one way is by criminalizing performing FGM on a minor or knowingly transporting them to the procedure, which is exactly what happened.

Michigan Case

In addition to trends in immigration, a factor present in these data influencing the creation and passing of S.B. 214 was a case in Michigan. In 2017, a Michigan doctor was the first person arrested and charged under the federal anti-FGM statute on six counts of female genital mutilation (Terhar and Lehner 2018; Siegel 2018c). Authors and authorities quoted from the dataset estimate that the doctor may have performed the procedure on nearly 100 girls (Carlson-Riehm 2018). Testimonies in favor of the bill explained that,

It is known that at least two of the victims were from Minnesota. At the time, Minnesota had a state law in place to ban the practice, but Michigan did not. After the doctor was arrested, the Michigan legislature quickly passed a law to ban FGM in their state. It is now critical that we follow in Michigan’s footsteps, because recently, a federal district court judge dismissed the FGM charges against the doctor, citing the Commerce Clause in ruling that anti-FGM laws should be handled by the states” (Terhar and Lehner 2018).

Authors expressed the idea that Ohio needs to get ahead and pass this law since 27 other states “won’t tolerate this in their borders,” and Ohio should do the same (Terhar

and Lehner 2017; Siegel 2018c). This talk of borders also evokes exclusion and border walls discussion, which was highly prevalent at the time under the Trump administration, echoing a common idea from the dataset that “vigilant enforcement of immigration laws is essential” (Anon 2004) to protect our society. Senator Antonio’s remarks also reflected the idea that FGM should be kept out of Ohio, “this is, again, not something that should be happening in Ohio, for sure. In the United States in general, but in Ohio, for sure” (Antonio 2023).

Prioritization of Women’s Health and Rights

Authors and those giving testimony in political meetings also presented a focus and concern on women’s rights and health, including Senator Antonio’s remarks that progressive legislators supported this bill due to its relevance to women’s bodily autonomy (Antonio 2023). The authors presented a focus on women’s rights as related to FGM by making linguistic choices such as using “misogynistic” to describe FGM (Parr 2018; Chordas 2005), evoking discussions of feminism and gender theory. Authors referring to FGM as being “interwoven with a patriarchal mentality that connects a man’s sexual pleasure to a woman’s pain and exerts control over women” (Magdy and Fam 2021) additionally evokes a feminist lens to banning FGM. Other linguistic choices made by authors and those giving testimonies in political meetings included referring to a “woman’s well being” (Siegel 2018a) in relation to banning FGM or having the priority of “improving women’s health” (Burkett 2018) or discussing “gender-based violence and a violation of fundamental human rights” (Seigel 2018d). These phrases communicate to the audience that the speaker is invested in the health, rights, and well-being of women and girls when discussing banning FGM. The same is also portrayed when authors focus

on FGM being a violation of women's rights. One such article responded to another article about women's suffrage, discussing the current need for protest and disparities in women's rights, representation, and empowerment, "we are women who want to see rights for girls and women in all nations increase drastically, helping to end horrors such as female genital mutilation" (Castello 2017). Citing data from "the 2015 State Department Report for Human Rights Practices" to show that FGM is a "serious problem in some parts of the country" (Flowers 2017) also frames the argument in favor of banning FGM as a prioritization of women's rights. Authors also used data from The World Health Organization to similarly frame FGM as "an 'extreme form of discrimination' against women" (Magdy and Fam 2021). Many authors and those giving testimony also focused on the health of the women and girls who are circumcised (Williams 2004; Burkett 2018; Carlson-Riehm 2018; Severyn 2018). Many authors also recognized the gendered nature of FGM while associating it with gendered violence (Siegel 2018b), "most violence in the world is directed toward women. That can be anything from female genital mutilation, which is horrific, to female infanticide" (Dastagir 2021). It is important to recognize that though a manifestation of group threat theory is highly prevalent in these data, a prioritization of women's rights and health was also present. And as Senator Antonio noted in our discussion (2023), the intersection of this group threat and these values of women's rights and health created a unique space for S.B. 214 to have as much support as it did among legislators.

Oral History with Senator Antonio

Senator Antonio shed some light as to why this bill passed without opposition, explaining that both conservative and progressive ideals and biases intersected in this

issue. She described that at the time, conservative parties under the Trump administration transmitted and received very negative messaging towards and regarding immigrants, similar to how we saw African and Muslim immigrants were poorly regarded in articles and testimony in our dataset. Senator Antonio explained that the passage of S.B. 214 was in part, “frankly, probably a little bit of backlash against cultural practices of new immigrants that probably helped get folks to sign on to pass this, if you understand what I’m saying” (Antonio 2023). This manifestation of group threat demonstrates how the backlash against the presence of a new immigrant community can result in legislation meant to control the subpopulation, which in this case is the African and Muslim populations of Ohio. Senator Antonio also explained that on the progressive side of the House and Senate, other values such as concerns “about women and girls’ health, their own bodily autonomy, their own sense of just the right to be able to say no to something that’s personal, private and going to affect them in one way or the other, physically the rest of their lives” (Antonio 2023).

And sort of these two different converging ideas came together, which is why it was supported on both sides of the aisle. And even within the spectrum of legislators who are extreme, you know, on the continuum, extremely conservative, to extremely progressive, and everyone could sign on to something like this (Antonio 2023).

This intersection allowed for the bill to be so highly supported by legislators and pass without opposition. The large number of legislators willing to cosponsor the bill from the House and Senate was highly significant, as legislators wanted their names associated with the bill,

There are some bills that are benign in content or, or perfunctory, you know, we need to update this, the part of the code for this, that and the other, you get a unanimous- maybe people put their name on it, maybe they don't. The fact that so many legislators not only voted for the bill, but then put their names on- you, literally do in a second action after your vote to say I also want to be a cosponsor in Ohio. And so the fact that this many legislators wanted to be cosponsors, also says that they wanted to be able to be on record to say that they had not only voted for this bill, but co-sponsored it. Put their name to it (Antonio 2023).

Senator Antonio was one of these legislators who signed their name to the bill to be associated with its support (Anon 2019c), and being involved in the 132nd General Assembly gives her insight into S.B. 214's history, support, and passing. In our meeting, she explained that the identities of the primary sponsors of the bill, Lou Terhar and Peggy Lehner, were also highly significant factors in the bill's message and support,

Senators Terhar and Lennar, who were the lead sponsors in the Senate, were conservative. Senator Lehner was a strong voice and Republican voice for our children and families. And so she was seen as an expert. When Senator Lehner brought a bill forward, people listened. Especially when it was anything to do with family, anything to do with children. And so she was able to talk about this in the context of this is happening, sometimes this practice happening happens to young children (Antonio 2023).

As a result of my conversation with Senator Antonio, I came to see that the manifestation of group threat and values of protecting women's rights and health created a unique space for S.B. 214 to pass with so much support. The sponsors of the bill also

influenced this support, as these legislators were highly respected and one was seen as a protector of children, which deeply aligns with the portrayal of women and girls in these texts as in need of protection.

Conclusion

S.B. 214 did not pass in an insular chamber. An increase in immigration of individuals from African countries with predominantly Muslim populations and public opinion surrounding their presence was shifting along with and leading up to the creation and passage of the bill. Negative public attitudes towards FGM, Africans (and specifically Somalians), and Muslims manifested in public opinion and media as a reaction to the growing immigrant population and increased demographic diversity in Columbus. These negative attitudes towards Muslims and Africans—paired with the perception of women and girls as passive actors in need of protection—created a space in which S.B. 214 could be born. Subsequently, the unique intersections of progressive and conservative values the bill offered, as well as the identity of the bill’s sponsor as a champion for children, enabled state lawmakers to pass the bill swiftly and without opposition.

In harmony with group threat theory, the mainstream population of Ohio reacted to the growing immigrant community with an increasing sense of threat. As the outgroup African immigrant population grew in Ohio, the ingroup population reacted with fear and prejudice towards the outgroup and their traditions, such as FGM. The ingroup used FGM as a legitimate excuse to express their negative feelings and prejudice towards the immigrant African community of Ohio. These negative feelings and prejudices extend beyond FGM, but manifest in the public discourse surrounding Islam and African

immigrants. FGM is used as evidence in support of their prejudice, which manifests in public policy like S.B. 214. Due to their ingroup fear, the Ohio mainstream felt a need to control and override the culture of the highly African, typically Somali, and Muslim immigrant population.

My recommendation for current lawmakers and Ohioans is to measure the impact of this law. S.B. 214 was characterized as a bill that would protect women and girls if passed into law, and much of the discussion in support of this bill centered on women's rights, health, and safety. And yet, four years later, we have no idea what the impact of this law is. In matters involving vulnerable populations such as minors, refugees, and immigrants, the state should place increased attention and resources on tracking and understanding the impacts of laws like this one to prevent and minimize harm. It is possible that passing this bill into law has driven FGM cases further underground. It is possible that this law doesn't decrease the likelihood that a female minor is circumcised, but it could increase negative health outcomes associated with FGM since people will be less likely to seek medical assistance during or after performing FGM out of fear of legal penalty. These possible negative outcomes could further harm women's and girls' health and well-being, making it paramount that Ohio tracks the trends resulting from the creation of this law. Impact evaluations could be conducted either by the Ohio government or a private consulting third party to better understand the impacts of this law, enabling Ohio to actually protect these minors from harm and potential death, prioritizing the wellbeing of Ohioans, including the children in the immigrant and refugee population.

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