


2016

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## Recommended Citation

Kennedy, Amanda & Lauren M. Sardi. 2016. "The Male Anti-Circumcision Movement: Ideology, Privilege, and Equity in Social Media." *Societies Without Borders* 11 (1).

Available at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/swb/vol11/iss1/12>

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## The Male Anti-Circumcision Movement: Ideology, Privilege, and Equity in Social Media

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### ABSTRACT

Social media has become a primary way in which various social movements may attempt to gain traction within larger frames of cultural discourse (Obar, Zube, and Lampe 2012). However, not all movements that profess human rights and equality goals are truly egalitarian in their orientation. Many men's movements are ostensibly about gender equality but fall short of their claims because they fail to come to terms with issues of privilege (Messner 1997, 1998). While the male anti-circumcision movement (sometimes referred to as the Intactivist movement) is less radically anti-feminist and has utilized social media to develop and maintain connections with other human rights movements, it has broadly continued to resist feminist critique and has limited its own achievement of human rights goals. We argue that, by using social media as a way to gain a wider audience and following, many tactics of the Intactivist movement have also alienated many potential supporters because of its fractured message and misalignment with actual equality, which has inhibited its overall growth as a social movement. We draw on Messner's (1997) model of men's movements to reflect on the limitations of the Intactivist movement. Through a discussion of examples of such tactics and a case study analysis, we suggest recognizing privilege as a way to align the movement's interests in human rights and gender equality.

Keywords: Male Circumcision, Social Media, Intactivism, Privilege

Neonatal male circumcision is the most common surgical procedure in the United States that is performed on a person who is incapable of providing informed consent (Pfundner, Wier, and Stocks 2013). Performed primarily for a variety of sociocultural reasons, neonatal male circumcision is also one of the most hotly debated surgical procedures in the United States (Gollaher 2000; Henerey 2004). The practice reached its peak in the late 1970s; at the same time, a movement of parents, medical practitioners, ethicists, and circumcised men was growing (Gollaher 2000). This movement, commonly called either the Genital Integrity Movement or the Intactivist Movement, would challenge not only the medical justifications of a practice historically rooted in religion and culture, but also the morality of such a procedure performed on an infant as well. Over time, they would begin to frame themselves as a human rights movement, invested in the bodily integrity of all children.

The movement is located primarily online, using social media and networking to disseminate their ideas (Ross 2009). While many images posted online of intactivists show them protesting outside of government buildings and medical conferences as well as along busy roads and highways, much of their work is also conducted through social media such as Facebook and Twitter, in the comments sections of medical news articles, and in online parenting forums.

Social media has become a primary way in which various social movements may attempt to gain traction within larger frames of cultural discourse (Obar, Zube, and Lampe 2012; Sardi 2011). Indeed, more human rights movements are organizing online and using various social media platforms as a primary method of communication (see, for example, the Black Lives Matter and the HeForShe movements). Intactivists have also

utilized the rise of the Internet and social media for a number of reasons (Ross 2009). First, Intactivists are not centrally located in one geographic area of the United States, and many self-identified Intactivists live in areas across the globe. Second, with the rise of the Internet, numerous parenting forums as spaces to influence parental decision making surrounding medicalized topics have also emerged (see Hardey 1999, 2001; Hartzband and Groopman 2010). Third, the anonymity of the Internet and of social media has allowed men to openly discuss issues about their penises; such engagement in social media, in particular, can lead to an understanding of how one's penis has been "marked" through circumcision (Kennedy 2015).

Prominent Intactivists and Intactivist groups have developed savvy social media activism. They have YouTube channels where they share documentation of protest events and videos of circumcisions that would cause even the most hardened among us to consider the anti-circumcision point of view. They encourage "Pintactivism," where activists share Intactivist materials through the social media site. As well, men who are committed to foreskin restoration share their experiences with one another and create photo journals of their progress (Kennedy 2015). They've even used social media for research, creating the "Global Survey of Circumcision Harms" (2011-2012) which had more than 1000 respondents. And like almost all activists today they tweet, hashtag, and create Facebook groups.

In what follows, we examine internet Intactivism. We argue that, although the movement is framed in terms of human rights in a Western context, much of its social media presence is deeply influenced by radical elements within and alongside the movement, specifically by Men's Rights rhetoric. Ultimately, if the movement is

genuinely invested in promoting gender equality and having a deeper, more nuanced understanding of human rights—as it has long claimed—we posit that it must distance itself in obvious and meaningful ways from various vocal anti-feminist groups who have co-opted the message of equality and replaced it with racist, sexist, and anti-Semitic rhetoric. Thus, we seek to describe the ways in which Intactivist tactics inhibit the progress of their own social movement and suggest ways to promote messages of gender equality that are genuinely inclusive of all people.

### **Medical and Social History of Circumcision in the U.S.**

Before we explore Intactivist arguments further, it is important to contextualize the practice they are fighting. In the United States, circumcision is primarily performed for non-religious reasons, and parents report that their decision to circumcise is often based on the circumcision status of the father; the perception that circumcision is related to good hygiene and lowered HIV/AIDS or cancer risk; and the notion that infants will not remember the pain associated with the procedure (see Sardi and Livingston 2015; Tiemstra 1999; Wang et al. 2010). This reliance on sociocultural reasoning clearly differs from other contexts, wherein circumcision is performed for religiocultural reasons. Nevertheless, its entry into routine medical practice was marked by a number of extra-scientific factors.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, U.S. medicine ‘discovered’ male circumcision. What had been a predominantly religious practice moved into the scientific realm through concerted effort. Scientific thought at the time was rooted in “nerve force” theories that suggested that irritation in one area of the body could influence all manner of problems in

other parts of the body. A tight foreskin, according to this theory, could produce a number of problems—doctors attributed paralysis, seizure disorders, asthma, and lunacy, among other things, to an overly tight foreskin (see, for example, Sayre (1876), who claims to have cured partial paralysis, uncontrolled orgasm, exhaustion, constipation, and rectal prolapse through circumcision of young boys).

More than these medical problems though, people were concerned with masturbation. If a tight foreskin could agitate the body, couldn't it also agitate the mind, driving boys (and grown men) to touch themselves? Doctors became involved in the anti-masturbation movement, with circumcision as a key tool in the fight against the perceived social ills associated with such behavior. Physician, public health official, and circumcision champion Peter Charles Remondino claimed that the foreskin was both superfluous and dangerous; if left alone, the prepuce could cause many problems for its wearer:

...unfitting him for marriage or the cares of business; making him miserable and an object of continual scolding and punishment in childhood...beginning to affect him with [many] conditions calculated to weaken him physically, mentally, and morally; to land him, perchance, in jail or even in a lunatic asylum (quoted in Gollaher 1994: 14; see also Miller 2002).

Circumcision could thus be used as a tool to prepare men for marriage, work, education, and a successful life. As this way of thinking became more popular, circumcision came to be viewed as a precautionary and sanitary, rather than a purely curative, measure.

There was also a question of cleanliness; it was not just a tight foreskin that was to blame, but also the presence of smegma—the mix of sloughed cells and excretions that collect under the foreskin—that was apparently dangerous. As medical thinking shifted from nerve force to germ theory, smegma was seen as a culprit—of UTI, cancer, and eventually HIV/AIDS. But questions of hygiene parallel with questions of morality and value. Circumcision had already been shown to ready men for proper masculine performance in school, work, and (heterosexual) marriage. But the socioeconomic context of the U.S. anti-masturbation movement was one of change for “native” Americans (those white people who now claimed the land against newly arriving immigrants). Increasing migration and a changing economy raised new concerns. The movement against masturbation and for circumcision was, as Fox and Thompson explain, particularly concerned with:

the health of a white middle-class population increasingly regarded as enfeebled and challenged by more ‘robust’ immigrant communities. As a racist discourse of pollution and contagion emerged, in response to growing immigration to the United States from Southern and Eastern Europe, circumcision was adopted by the white middle classes as a prophylactic (2009:204).

Fox and Thompson also explain how circumcision worked to differentiate the sexes; it removed the only penetrable orifice of the penis, the foreskin, making the penis solely a tool for penetration, never a thing to be penetrated (2009).

Thus, the implementation of routine neonatal male circumcision is deeply—and somewhat ironically—tied to racism, nativism, classism, heterosexism, and male dominance. A practice which has roots in Judaism and Islam was taken up by doctors in the United States to enhance the performance of white, “native”-born, mostly Christian, middle class men in the economy and public sphere by keeping them “clean” and distinct from “dirty” European migrants, and by redirecting masturbatory energy into economic productivity. No longer part of a nativist anti-masturbation movement, this is nevertheless circumcision’s history in the United States.

### **Intactivist Arguments and (Problematic) Politics**

Despite the existence of the Intactivist Movement, circumcision has persisted in the United States. Over the past three decades, numerous scholars (Gollaher 1994; Miller 2002; Sardi and Livingston 2015) have noted that male circumcision has gone relatively unquestioned by both parents and mainstream doctors alike. These same scholars have problematized the procedure, in that circumcision permanently alters the body, is done without consent from the patient himself, and can lead to scarring, deformity, or death. Sardi (2011) has also noted that Intactivists tend to prioritize human rights as an inherently Western, individualistic concept that does not take into account the understanding that other rights, which include the ability to practice one’s religion, are fundamentally at odds with each other. As Shell-Duncan (2008:230) writes, “The portrait of the human rights movement as a Western hegemonic civilizing mission often employs a static image of human rights, one cast with the creation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.” However, the notion of human rights as a fixed and narrow



understanding does not take into account the fact that such rights continually develop and evolve over time; thus, human rights now include those rights that are both collective and cultural as well (Sardi 2011; Shell-Duncan 2008).

Other researchers have also noted that the act of circumcision indelibly “marks” the body and makes it possible for people to be “differently sexed” as well as have different sexual experiences (Fox and Thompson 2009; Glick 2005; Henerey 2004; Kennedy 2015). Fox and Thompson (2009) explore the role circumcision plays in the construction of gendered bodies. Just as opponents of “FGM” have suggested that the practice is an attempt to control women and differentiate their bodies from “male bodies,” a similar argument can be made about male circumcision. Circumcision removes the fleshy, penetrable part of the male genitalia, producing a penis that embodies a particular vision of masculinity. It creates a penis made for thrusting and penetrative sex, and limits the potential for sex outside of heteronormative standards (Harrison 2002). Some of these same critiques appear in the Intactivist community as well.

The overall argument is particularly nuanced, but a number of key issues repeatedly emerge in Intactivist conversations on social media (Ross 2009). Such concerns tend to revolve around a number of thematic arguments, one of which being made by Intactivists is the issue of health/sexual consequences. As various Intactivist groups such as Intact America and Doctors Opposing Circumcision (DOC) note, removal of the foreskin can result in disfigurement or death and may also lead to long-term sexual dysfunction later on in life (Goldman 1997; Hill 2007).

Other Western Intactivist groups,<sup>1</sup> such as the National Organization to Halt the Abuse and Routine Mutilation of Males (NOHARMM), also discuss a number of

psychological consequences surrounding male circumcision, in which they assert that men report feeling traumatized upon learning that their foreskin was removed as an infant, which may also result in feelings of grief, rage, depression, low self-esteem, and parental betrayal (Goldman 1997; Hammond 1999).

Still other Intactivist groups, from The Whole Network and The Bloodstained Men to Men Do Complain (MDC), regard male neonatal circumcision as a human rights violation. Numerous anti-circumcision groups assert that removal of a normal, healthy, functional part of one's genitalia shortly after birth for non-medical reasons is a direct violation of one's right to bodily autonomy, the right to informed consent, and a violation of freedom from torture (Attorneys for the Rights of the Child 2014; Doctors Opposing Circumcision 2008; Svoboda 2001). Many Intactivist groups note that all individuals, regardless of age or gender, have the right to bodily integrity, in that people do not have the right to make changes to others' bodies without that individual's informed consent. As a result, some Intactivist groups argue that a boy's right to equal protection (as described under the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment to the United States Constitution) is violated during circumcision. If baby girls are protected from any form of genital cutting or modification for non-medically necessary purposes, then baby boys should also be protected under those same laws, as boys, girls, and those born intersexed all have foreskin (see Earp 2015; Holmes 2006).

Although the more nuanced arguments outlined above are present on Intactivist websites, much of their social media engagement reflects the emotional side of the movement—especially its anger and hostility toward anyone seen as pro-circumcision or anti-Intactivist. This may be due in part to Intactivism's un-interrogated relationship with

Men's Rights activism (MRA), another movement known for its so-called "angry" online presence. Some of the major Men's Rights online groups, like A Voice for Men and the National Coalition for Men, have identified circumcision as a major problem facing today's men, and as an example of what they call "misandry," society's supposed hatred toward men (Elam 2013).

For example, in a recent article on A Voice for Men's homepage, author Gary Costanza (2016), a self-reported "longtime MRA from Long Island," offers a picture of a blood-soaked wooden carving board with a long kitchen knife placed across it; what the reader can assume is raw meat scraps are a reminder of what has just taken place on the board and then describes the circumcision services performed by Dr. Hammad Malik in London. Costanza reports that Dr. Malik has recently been placed on a "Known Genital Mutilators" directory and provides a link to a "...terrifying video of Dr. Malik mutilating an infant, making permanent amputation seem like nothing more than a tooth extraction." Costanza concludes with providing Malik's complete contact information and a meme which was cross-posted from the author's Twitter account. The meme features a white infant sitting up on an exam room table who is looking at a white medical doctor; the doctor's image is complete with a lab coat and stethoscope hanging around his partially obscured face.<sup>ii</sup> The wording on this meme—"I'm human, just like a girl baby"—highlights the key concern of MRAs, namely that men have been subordinated in society while women (or girl babies) have been protected and empowered.

Simultaneously, this statement also attempts to link Western notions of human rights as individual rights, in the assumption that if baby girls have individual bodily rights and autonomy, then so too should baby boys. Thus, some MRAs seek to gain the

recognition and protection of boys' individual human rights by drawing parallels to baby girls' rights—at the same time that they actively choose not to align with feminist-based movements.

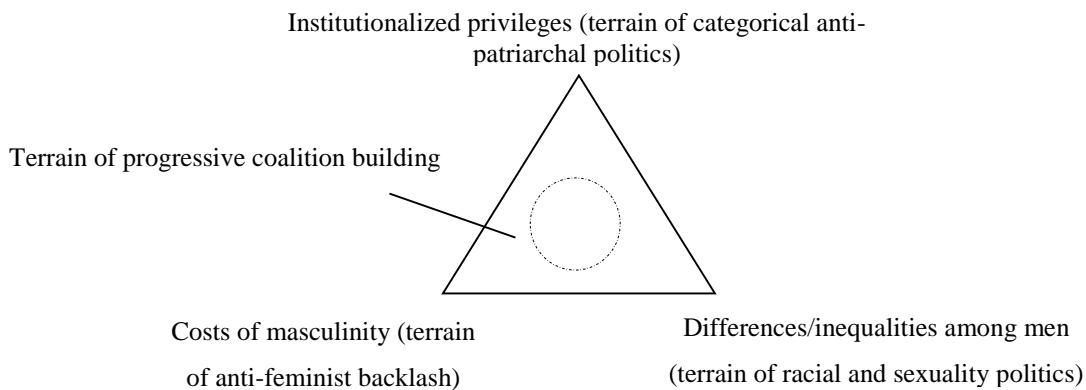
While not as visually compelling, the National Coalition for Men's homepage has a dropdown menu of Issues which includes a link to "Genital Integrity—Circumcision." While there are no blood-stained images, a meme of a white, scowling baby appears with the words "L-E-A-V-E M-Y P-E-N-I-S A-L-O-N-E!" are written underneath.<sup>iii</sup> Notably, the bottom of the webpage contains links to well-known Intactivist organizations including The Whole Network, the Circumcision Resource Center, Attorneys for the Rights of the Child, and Beyond the Bris, demonstrating that, at least for this MRA website, cross-posting of these types of social movement websites is welcome and even encouraged.

Commenters have also suggested additional sites such as [www.yourwholebaby.org](http://www.yourwholebaby.org), another mainstream Intactivist site. There are other obvious connections between the movements; for example, National Coalition for Men's Public Relations Director is attorney, J. Steven Svoboda, founder and director of Attorneys for the Rights of the Child, or ARCLAW, an Intactivist organization specializing in litigation and policy work. It is this connection with Men's Rights that ends up alienating positive and progressive coalition building. Few feminists are willing to associate with the movement, despite Intactivism's large female contingent; likewise, some LGBT groups and Intersex activists may also be wary when a few clicked links lands them in the depths of MRA territory (or vice versa).

## How Intactivist Tactics Inhibit Progress of Their Social Movement

This connection to Men’s Rights emerges out of unexamined heterosexual privilege and overly biologized accounts of gender within the movement. These currents exist in the Intactivist movement without the influence of MR rhetoric. In fact, in many ways, the movement has problematic leanings on its own. Michael Messner’s model of men’s movements would likely place Intactivists somewhere in what he calls the “terrain of anti-feminist backlash” (Messner 1997: 91) even without their loose affiliation with MRAs. This is because Messner locates movements in his triangular model based on how they address three themes: 1) men’s institutionalized privileges; 2) the costs of masculinity; and 3) differences and inequalities among men. A focus on one or more of these themes affects the movements’ potential for social justice. His basic model is represented in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Messner’s Triangular Model of Men’s Movements**



Male circumcision, as a political question, could easily lead to men’s organizing in the center of the triangle, the ideal spot that Messner calls the “terrain of progressive coalition building” (1997:103). Messner explains the unique position of this terrain:

Discourses and practices that move about this part of the terrain offer the greatest promise for the development of a politics that can simultaneously confront men's structured power and privileges over women (a contribution of radical and socialist profeminist men's movements), in addition to confronting some men's structured power and privileges over subordinated and marginalized groups of men (a contribution of some expressions of racialized masculinity politics, socialist feminism, and gay liberation). It is also within this terrain that this commitment to confronting the privileges of hegemonic masculinity can be joined with the call for a healthy humanization of men that will eliminate the costs of masculinity to men (a contribution made by the progressive wing of the mythopoetic men's movement) (1997: 100).

Activism around circumcision could fit here. For example, activists might offer a clear analysis of the costs of masculinity, balanced with an understanding of men's privilege over women (and certain men's privilege over other men).<sup>iv</sup> Their argument, we propose, might look something like this:

Routine neonatal male circumcision was developed as part of an effort to literally create men in service of economic prosperity. White, middle class boys were circumcised by white, middle class doctors so that they might embody a vision of masculinity that was dominant (privilege) and prosper

in the face of immigrant challenges (hierarchy). The soft, penetrable, even feminine, part of the penis was removed in service of the image of the phallus (privilege). To meet the requirements of this dominant masculine vision, though, boys' bodily integrity was taken away, and grown men experience pain, sadness, and sexual problems (costs).

But in practice, many Intactivist arguments focus exclusively on the costs of masculinity, while ignoring their privilege and location within the social hierarchy. Specifically, men are subjected to the bodily torture of circumcision while women's genitals are protected by law and cultural convention. Reading the anti-circumcision medical literature and the Intactivist literature, circumcision is framed as painful, desensitizing, disfiguring, disabling, psychologically traumatizing, unhealthy, deadly, unnecessary, and unethical. This focus on costs places the Intactivist movement generally within the "terrain of anti-feminist backlash."

To the extent that Intactivists consider the privileging of the circumcised penis over the intact penis, they could be seen as concerned with the differences and inequalities between men; yet, they rarely consider the structural differences and inequalities between men, for example, the situation of racial minority or economically disadvantaged men. In fact, some of the research that Intactivists use suggests that white, economically advantaged men are in a *worse* position relative to circumcision; that is because white American men are more likely than racial minorities to be circumcised, and because higher economic status also increases the likelihood of circumcision (Ross

2009). Many of the graphics and imagery used by the movement highlight their protection of white boys while tokenizing racial/ethnic minorities.

For example, in looking through numerous images produced by the organization Intact America,<sup>v</sup> whose images are widely disseminated and shared among numerous social media sites, one ad shows a white man and boy looking at themselves in a mirror; the father's face is full of shaving cream as he holds a razor to his cheek. His son is similarly depicted with shaving cream on his face and he too is holding a razor. The wording at the top of the image states, "If your *son's* circumcision is botched, will you then make *your* penis match?" (Emphasis is in the original.) In another image, a smiling white father in a hat with his infant son held close to his face has the wording, "Leave your son intact, and your grandson will look like his dad." In both ads, father and son pairings evoke a consistently white racial/ethnic family unit; and in both images, the wording makes it clear that the organization is attempting to argue against the common belief that boys are circumcised in order to "look like" or to "match" their fathers (see Sardi and Livingston 2015; Tiemstra 1999; Wang et al. 2010).

However, there are notable exceptions to this general pattern, but they are few and far between. In one image on Intact America's public Facebook page, a white man is featured prominently in front of a group of other men; the six men behind appear to be differing ages and races/ethnicities, and yet, the focus of the image is not primarily on them. Questions appear at the top of the image: "Circumcised? Were you asked? Did you say 'yes?'" and at the bottom of the image, a statement reads, "If not, then the circumciser violated your body and your rights." Thus, while this discourse is invoking the concept of bodily integrity and informed consent, the underlying notion is that infants



cannot give consent, and so their rights were violated. This is an argument promoted by many scholars and activists, and, as we discussed earlier, some Men's Rights pages have also echoed these concerns as well.

In one last example, a Black man is holding his son and feeding him with a bottle while smiling and gazing into his eyes. The words in the white space of the picture state, "Let your son keep his foreskin. Take the whole baby home."

Intact America's public Facebook photos reveal the racial bias—only a few of their dozens and dozens of ads/memes depict non-white males or babies. And suddenly, it becomes clear who is really meant by "America." Over and over again, white baby boys and the men they will grow up to be are presented as the "norm" that is "worth saving" from the torture and barbaric practice of circumcision.

What is noticeably absent from these discussions is the consideration of the privileges of white, heterosexual masculinity.<sup>vi</sup> If society has failed to protect boys and men as it has protected girls and women, it is because of the characteristics that have given men power—the assumption that they are independent, strong, brave—and have propagated women's subjugation—the assumption that they are weak and dependent. If men, as individuals, have been violated, it has gone hand-in-hand with the provision of power for men, as a group.

### ***Foreskin Man and Intactivist Privilege***

While we have previously presented a number of examples of Intactivist social media from what we consider to be primarily mainstream sources of anti-circumcision information, our next analysis involves an example of the ways in which various forms of

privilege we have previously discussed can emerge more prominently from imagery that perhaps represents one of the more extreme voices of the Intactivist Movement—

*Foreskin Man*, a comic book series.

Thus, while this series is not exemplary of the way in which the entire Intactivist Movement represents itself, *Foreskin Man* actually embodies many of the messages that more mainstream groups have either failed to consider as being problematic within their own debates or have not recognized due the ways in which various forms of privilege are situated within the movement. One quick Internet search provides instantaneous access not only to mainstream Intactivist messages but also to more extreme forms we describe below.

One of the clearest examples of Intactivism's failures is the comic series, *Foreskin Man*, written and produced by Matthew Hess, the founder of MGMBill.<sup>vii</sup> Although the comic series is contested and debated in the Intactivist community, Hess continues to produce the series, which is easily accessed and shared online via the social media platform, Scribd, and can also be found publically on Facebook. In spite of its popularity in some Intactivist circles, this comic series alienates any possible connections between the movement and potential feminist allies and reaffirms the movement's placement in the terrain of anti-feminist politics. Evident throughout the series is a celebration of white masculinity, a sexist rendering of women (including the one female superhero who appears in the issue tackling Kenyan ritual circumcision), and a deeply problematic depiction of racial/ethnic Others.

In the comics, protagonist Miles Hastwick, known as the superhero Foreskin Man, combats circumcision around the globe.<sup>viii</sup> He is described as "...an Intactivist superhero

who rescues innocent boys from the clutches of the world's cleverest and most dangerous circumcisers" (Hess 2010). In three issues, Foreskin Man fights white, American villains: an American doctor (Dr. Edric Griswold) who transforms into a monster (Dr. Mutilator; he returns in Issue 7), and a company that uses foreskins in cosmetics creams, headed by a sleazy looking businessman (CEO Max Warmong). In the four other issues, Foreskin Man combats non-white or non-Western villains: Monster Mohel, a Jewish circumciser, and his goons, Jorah and Yerick; Githinji and Ghinjo, ritual circumcisers from Kenya; Kudret Çelik, a Turkish man who falls under the spell of evil Sunnet Knife, a circumcising tool that is "most powerful in the hands of the weak-minded and the morally bereft" (Hess 2013); and finally, Jovelyn Luansing, a nurse associated with "Operation Tuli," a Philippines-based group intent on circumcising young boys, and her boyfriend, Banta Tubo.

Hastwick, aka Foreskin Man, is the embodiment of phallic masculinity (Phelan 2001), ready to defend others (especially children), imposingly masculine, and unignorably virile. As a character, he represents what the author, and what many Intactivists, value: whiteness, heterosexuality (or, at least, heteronormativity), and masculinity, as many of the prior examples have shown. Foreskin Man not only rescues baby (and young) boys from circumcision, he regularly romances their mothers.

In his interactions with women, the comic reinforces commonplace understandings of sexual dimorphism; Foreskin Man is impossibly tall and broad shouldered, the women are unnaturally busty with long hair and narrow waists. The women swoon over him to receive love and protection for themselves and their newborn sons. For example, in Issue 6, we meet one of Miles' employees, whose cell phone

ringtone is a sex song about Foreskin Man: “Foreskin Man, I need your lovin’ tonight/  
It’s the only thing that makes me feel right/ Foreskin Man, I want that slip and slide/  
Won’t you please come glide inside?”<sup>ix</sup> Women characters fulfill subservient roles in the series and exist to provide a need for Foreskin Man to “save” baby boys and uphold his heterosexuality. The women never question his authority, his masculinity, or his role as a superhero.

The relationship between Foreskin Man and the women of his universe not only relies on stereotypical and biologically determinist tropes, but also certainly would alienate many, if not most, feminist readers from the cause. They might wonder, just as we the authors wonder, what space is there for me in a movement that imagines women in this way? If this is how the movement sells itself on social media, women readers might also wonder just what kind of men would be joining its ranks.

### **Racial/Ethnic Othering**

In contrast to Foreskin Man’s “phallic masculinity” (Phelan 2001), we are given the villains, decidedly Othered, many of them dehumanized racial minorities. Perhaps most alienating to possible American audiences is Monster Mohel, a villain in the most controversial issue of the comic series, and the namesake of the issue.

Issue 2, “Monster Mohel,” revolves around a bris ceremony.<sup>x</sup> His appearance and the publication of the issue coincided with political tensions for Intactivism in real life—specifically, Intactivists were attempting to get legislation passed that would outlaw non-medical circumcision on minors in San Francisco and were facing criticism from a variety of groups, including the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), for religious

intolerance. As the ACLU (2011) noted, people have the right to practice their own religion in accordance with previously established law, and because there is no law against male circumcision, then group rights (to practice one's religion through ceremonial marking of another) supersede an individual's rights to bodily autonomy (see American Civil Liberties Union of Northern California (2011) and Sardi (2011) for more information).

Needless to say, this issue of *Foreskin Man* added fuel to the fire—and, rightly so. Monster Mohel is a gruesome looking creature—one might call him a man, but he borders very obviously on the monstrous. He appears as something out of a Nazi or neo-Nazi rendering (see Blumenfield (1996) for more information). He has a long hook nose and claw-like fingernails, and his teeth drip with saliva and his eyes glisten, pupil-less, as he forces a lily white baby boy down on a pool table for his “sacred cut.” The baby is clearly the helpless victim in the clutches of what can only be described as a monster—as all of what would make this character appear human is gone. Monster Mohel does not welcome babies into the Jewish community through ritual. He sadistically inflicts pain on infant boys for satisfying what seems to be a fetishistic need, all while representing the Jewish Other.

Blumenfield argues that this “immutable biological type” (152) solidified into a particular popular image, almost always of the Jewish man. The Jewish male had a “...hooked nose, curling nasal folds, thick prominent lips, receding forehead and chin, large ears, curly black hair, dark skin, stooped shoulders, and piercing, cunning eyes” (Isaacs (1940) cited in Blumenfield 1996: 152). Monster Mohel, who appears in 2011, fits these centuries-old depictions almost perfectly. Hess also includes a quick reference

to *metzitzah b'peh*, an uncommon Orthodox addition to the circumcision ceremony, wherein the mohel sucks the blood from the wound in a ritual cleansing.

Between this reference and the hodgepodge of mismatched Jewish symbols (the *simonim*, or curly sidelocks, and *yarmulke* on Monster Mohel's goon, Jorah; the brimmed black hats donned by both Monster Mohel and his other goon, Yerik; Monster Mohel's prayer shawl), Hess clearly intends to incite disgust for Judaism, and religious Jews, among his readers. Because these symbols are mixed—in fact, they come from different ethnic groups and specific religious traditions—Hess implies that the only “good” Jews are secular Jews. He perpetuates the old myth of the “immutable biological type” (Blumenfield 1996), a type which not only suggests biological difference, but also different moral capacities. The Jewish threat, however it is defined, is legible on the body.

Just as the images of women in the comics would serve to alienate feminist alliances, these depictions of Jews and Jewish circumcision (or similarly, of Muslims and their circumcision rites; or Kenyans and their circumcision rites, and so forth) would very well provoke suspicion and concern within these communities. Depictions like these would raise questions in the groups Intactivists supposedly wish to influence—would Jewish communities be open to Intactivist messages if they are accompanied with imagery easily confused with Nazi propaganda? Clearly, not all Intactivist messages are so blatantly racist or sexist. However, if tactics such as the cross-posting of ideas is so prominent across a variety of social movement ideologies, it would be difficult for a reader to know when one movement's rhetoric ends and another begins. It would be

equally difficult to understand the nuance that exists within the umbrella of one widely used term such as the Intactivist Movement itself.

The *Foreskin Man* series actually visualizes the problematic tactics of some of aspects of the Intactivist Movement—a lack of awareness of masculine and white privilege (embodied here by Foreskin Man/Miles Hastwick himself), an overly biologized, hyper-sexualized understanding of sex/gender (seen in the sexually dimorphic bodies of Foreskin Man and the women who desire him), and finally an insensitivity to the (racial/ethnic/Othered) differences between men (evidenced in the depiction of villains).

## **Conclusion**

There are a number of ways in which the Intactivist Movement has inhibited its own progress as a social movement, many of which we discuss above. But what would such progress look like, if it were to occur?

The best versions of feminism are built on questioning, critique, and dialogue, which is how progress has been achieved both within and outside the feminist movement. And the Intactivist movement, for all of its shortcomings, has engaged with some important questions: about the role of men in gender equality, about the medicalization of bodies and sexuality; about the trouble of balancing group versus individual rights; about consent and bodily integrity.

Feminists have grappled with these questions—not always arriving at unified answers—for much of the movement's history, and thus, there is room for conversation between feminists and anti-circumcision activists. There is obvious overlap between

Intactivists and those feminists opposed to female genital cutting, as well as groups like New View Campaign, which opposes medicalization of women's sexuality. But it is unlikely that even these obvious connections would come to fruition unless Intactivists come to terms with their privilege and distance from the problematic Men's Rights discourse that has propelled the movement thus far.

Social media is a key tool in Intactivism and in many other social movements as well. It is an important space where individuals seek out information about circumcision. If men and women alike are turning to these social media spaces for information about circumcision, it is important that the movement consider how their messages are received. Thus, as a movement ostensibly committed to human rights and gender equality, their social media presence, especially ties to the Men's Rights Movement and the *Foreskin Man* comic, is often problematic and counterproductive. While there are many important, even if oversimplified, human rights arguments present within the dialogue of the Intactivist movement and the anti-circumcision movement more broadly, they can be associated with the various forms of bigotry, racism, and stereotyping commonly produced and supported by a few threads of the movement. By becoming more aware of where the Intactivist Movement falls within the typology of Men's Movements, the movement can take purposeful and comprehensive steps to move toward realizing their goal of true equality, aligned with Western versions of human rights, rather than being at odds with it.



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<sup>i</sup> Much of what we reference in this article refers to U.S.-based Intactivism. However, there is significant sharing of information between Intactivist groups in the United States and those in other English speaking countries. For example, the National Organization of Restoring Men (NORM) has a British counterpart, NORM-UK. The authors have met Australian, Canadian, and British Intactivists at U.S.-based protest events. If readers started on a U.S. Intactivist site, a few clicked hyperlinks could easily bring them to a British or Canadian page. Thus, we have selected examples that are representative of the patterns that are the focus of the paper, some of which may have originated from other Western nations, but are emblematic of the discourse here.

<sup>ii</sup> For the direct link to the page we are describing, please visit <http://www.avoicemen.com/male-reproductive-rights/dr-hammad-milak-of-london-known-genital-mutilator/>

<sup>iii</sup> For a direct link to this specific page, please visit <http://ncfm.org/2011/04/issues/genital-integrety-circumcision/> [sic]

<sup>iv</sup> Kimmel (1987) offers an account of male circumcision that pays significant attention to privilege.

<sup>v</sup> Intact America's website is [www.intactamerica.org](http://www.intactamerica.org), and their Facebook page is available at <https://www.facebook.com/intactamerica/>

<sup>vi</sup> Many thanks to one of our reviewers who pointed out our discussion as being inherently focused on heterosex. Our analysis reflects the heteronormativity present within mainstream messages of Intactivist Movement as well as MRAs.

<sup>vii</sup> It is worth noting that Hess' website, MGMBill.org, contains information regarding a proposed bill that would outlaw male circumcision in the United States, which is regarded as "male genital mutilation" in the language of the bill. This bill proposal seeks to rewrite the federal Female Genital Mutilation Act of 1996 by including boys and those born with ambiguous genitalia such that the law provides equal protection as granted by the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment. Alongside much of this information is access to the comic book series *Foreskin Man*. In many ways, hosting the Male Genital Mutilation bill proposal alongside *Foreskin Man* has continued to alienate many potential supporters of the bill, who see its founder as promoting a problematic agenda that they do not wish to support.

<sup>viii</sup> To see images of Foreskin Man, set up as trading cards, please visit <https://www.scribd.com/doc/205514799/Foreskin-Man-Trading-Cards>.

<sup>ix</sup> Readers of the comics can listen to the full song through the *Foreskin Man* website here: <http://www.mgmbill.org/foreskin-man.html>.

<sup>x</sup> For images of Monster Mohel, please visit <https://www.scribd.com/doc/57293430/Foreskin-Man-No2>.

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