

## **Genital Stretching and AIDS/HIV in Africa** **News**

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Genital Stretching (GS) is an expansive genital modification improperly classified by WHO inside the Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) forms (4th type)<sup>1</sup>. Ritual GS<sup>2</sup> is a traditional practice of the Central-Eastern and Southern African populations settled on the migration ways of the ancient Khoisanid populations<sup>3</sup>, who possessed labia minora elongation as an hereditary trait.

At present, this morphology is an acquired trait, highly rated in Africa as it enhances coital pleasure and facilitates orgasm. Usually traditional caseworkers teach manipulation to the girls consigned to their care, following their psychological maturation towards a full sexuality thanks to prescriptions that very often stimulate sexual promiscuity. Here we show that a logistic link between this tradition and HIV diffusion in Africa exists . During field campaigns we found in Buganda region (Uganda)<sup>4</sup>, in Western and Eastern Kasai and Kivu (Congo Democratic Republic)<sup>5</sup>, and in central-southern Malawi<sup>6</sup>, a “leopard’s spots” diffusion for ritual GS, connected to the single ethnic groups. Correspondingly, the higher percentages of viral infection are found exactly inside the populations practicing ritual GS<sup>7,8,9,10</sup> The map<sup>8,2</sup>, shows that all the African regions interested in the expansive rites lie inside the area of higher diffusion for HIV, with peaks in South Africa and Botswana, still today inhabited by the last Bushmen’s heirs. This connection does not appear among the northern tropical areas of reductive FGM forms (the focus of infibulation in the Horn of Africa is found where the viral infection is almost absent), while in countries with sporadic cases of excision (Ivory Coats, Nigeria and Ethiopia) the percentages of HIV infection are quite poor. WHO underevaluates the importance of ritual GS and considers less harmful by comparison with excision or infibulation for the health of women. Here we show that ritual GS, however, is an important sociocultural determinant linked to HIV diffusion in Africa.

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