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Socio-Cultural Issues Associated with Female Genital Mutilation (Fgm) in Rural Communities in Nigeria

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Abstract
The ban and campaigns against Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) notwithstanding, cultural beliefs still pose as barrier to ending FGM in some communities in Nigeria. The study explored cultural issues associated with FGM in rural communities in Ebonyi State, Nigeria using qualitative approach. In-depth interviews were conducted with forty-four adults (18 years and above) from four communities in Ebonyi State. Thematic analysis was done with NVivo 11 software. Six themes emerged after the analysis: cultural names and significance of FGM, FGM a cultural norm before childbirth, belief on usefulness of FGM, attitudes towards FGM, traditional rituals associated with FGM, and religion, a factor in FGM. Based on the findings, we concluded that cultural norms and beliefs, attitudes and traditional religion were associated with FGM. We suggested that government should scale up campaign against FGM in rural communities and also engage community leaders and elders in a community-based sexuality education programme.

Keywords: Culture, Female Genital Mutilation, Rural Communities, Nigeria

Introduction

The practice of Female Genital Mutilation, (FGM) is a global public health issue that affects millions of women annually. It is estimated that at least 200 million girls and women living in 30 countries have undergone FGM (UNICEF, 2018). It is still highly prevalent in Africa where about 3 million girls are at the risk of undergoing FGM annually (Population Reference Bureau 2014). Though the prevalence is reducing, FGM is currently underreported because of campaigns and legislation against the practice in many African countries (Odukogbe, et al. 2017), including Nigeria. The continued practice of FGM could be mainly because it is deeply rooted in the culture and tradition of the practicing societies (The Lancet 2018).

The respect for culture and tradition is a major challenge facing the abolition of FGM in many countries especially in Africa. Female Genital Mutilation, which is also called Female Genital Cutting or female circumcision (though, not quite the same in meaning) is both cultural and traditional practice that involves cutting or altering the female external genitalia (Uwe, Ekuri, and Asuqo 2007). World Health Organization (1998) defined FGM as all the procedures which involve partial or total removal of the external female genitalia and/or injury to the female genital organs, either for cultural or any other non-therapeutic reasons. There are basically four types of FGM as categorized by WHO. However, the type practiced by any community depends on its tradition.

Many unfolded cultural norms, beliefs and attitudes are associated with the practice of FGM (Goldenstein 2014). Female genital mutilation or circumcision or cutting has different cultural names and significance. For many cultures, it signifies maturity and condition for marriage (Women' Health 2018), while in some cultures, it accords women great respect and admission into womanhood (Chingonikaya and Salehe 2018). In most African countries, marriage is a yard stick that measures a girl's worth in the society and societies that practice FGM considers a child marriageable only when she has undergone circumcision. Some cultures perform FGM just to ensure that the clitoris is removed before the woman gives birth to a child and they believe that any woman who is not circumcised would not conceive and bear children (Porterfield 2006). Some other societies do it to initiate the girl child into adulthood (USAID 2016). Others perform FGM to preserve virginity and prevent promiscuity (Yirga, et at. 2012). The belief is that the clitoris increases female sexual desires and responses and should be cut off, if not, it will grow to the size of the penis, and with circumcision, the girl is finally free to become a woman (Cassman 2007). Furthermore,

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some cultures believe that the clitoris is unclean and makes one dirty. So, they cut off the clitoris for aesthetic purposes (Adams 2004). The clitoris is also seen by some cultures as toxic and would cause the death of any infant that its head encounters the clitoris at delivery. Cultural values and beliefs of any community or ethnic group determine to a great extent the activities or practices of the people. This could be explained by the health belief model.

The health belief model assumes that health behaviours result from a set of core beliefs and has been used to predict why people will take action to prevent, screen for, or to control illness conditions. The primary concepts include; perceived susceptibility to disease, perceived severity, perceived benefits, perceived barriers, cues to action and self-efficacy (Glanz, Rimer, and Viswanath, 2008). The strong belief in culture and tradition is one of the major challenges facing the abolition of FGM in Nigeria. People respect the ways of their ancestors and believe that their ancestral spirits protect them, and any attempt to offend the spirit may bring evil to their land. This tends to overshadow their perception of being susceptible to severe health consequences of FGM. People have different perceptions and attitudes towards FGM. The varying attitudes could be a result from socio-cultural background or religion. Though, studies have shown that there is no particular religion that has FGM as its tradition (UNICEF 2005; UNFPA 2018), it is observed that traditional religion is the prime promoter of FGM in rural communities in Nigeria. It is therefore, important to consider every community's norms, values, and beliefs associated with FGM, as peculiar to the community, and should inform the strategies or campaigns aimed at ending the practice.

Methods

Study area, design, sample selection and inclusion criteria

The study was conducted in four rural communities (Inikiri Effium and Akparata Effium both in Ohaukwu LGA, Odeligbo in Ikwo LGA and Ofiaorji in Abakaliki LGA) in Ebonyi State, Nigeria. The prevalence of women who are circumcised in Ebonyi State, Nigeria decreased from 74.2% in 2013 to 53.2% in 2018 (National Population Commission and ICF, 2019). The state is one of the states in Nigeria with FGM prevalence between 51-75%. The population of Ebonyi State during the 2006 national census was 2,176,947 with a projection of 2,880,400 in 2017 and land mass of about 5,670 km^2 (City Population, 2017). The present study therefore, aimed at exploring the socio-cultural norms and values, beliefs, and attitudes towards FGM in these rural communities.

The qualitative research approach was used to explore the socio-cultural norms and values, beliefs, and attitudes towards FGM among the adult rural community members in Ebonyi State, Nigeria. In-depth interviews were conducted among 44 adults (4 males and 40 females) through the help of a non-governmental organization (AMURT) in the state that has been working in the rural communities. The in-depth interviews were conducted within three months (October-December, 2017). The interviews were audio recorded, translated, and transcribed verbatim into English language using the express scribe transcription software. The data were thematically analyzed using NVivo 11 Pro software. Details of study area, design, sample selection and criteria inclusion are described in previous publication (Odo et al., 2020).

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of participants (n = 44)

S/N		F (%)
1	**Age**	
	Mean	28.05
	Mode	32
2	**Gender**	
	Male	4(9.09)
	Female	40 90.91)
3	**Level of Education**	
	Primary	20(45.45)
	Secondary	15(34.09)
	Post-Secondary	6(13.64)
	No Formal	3(6.82)
4	**Marital Status**	
	Married	42(95.45)
	Single	2(4.55)
5	**Occupation**	
	Trading/Business	23(52.27)
	Civil servants	6(13.64)
	Artisan or Farming	9(20.45)
	Students/Unemployed	6(13.64)

6	**Religious Affiliation**	
	Christianity	40(90.91)
	Traditional	4(9.09)
	Islamic	0(0)
7	**FGM Status (Females only (n-40))**	
	FGM Survivors	9(22.5)
	Non-victims of FGM	14(35.0)
	Unwilling to disclose	17(42.5)

Table 2: Major Questions for the Interviews

Themes	Core questions
Cultural norms and values	1. What names do your community call female circumcision? 2. What does the name signify in your community? 3. Why should females undergo female circumcision in your community? 4. When is it culturally ideal for a female to undergo circumcision?
Cultural beliefs	5. What does your community believe are the usefulness of female circumcision? 6. What are the cultural rituals associated with female circumcision in your community? 7. What general belief does your community have about female circumcision?
Attitudes	8. How do you feel about circumcising females? 9. What do you think about the practice? 10. What do you think about the abolition of female circumcision? 11. Do you think that female circumcision infringes on the human rights of the women?

Results

Table 1 shows that the average age of the participants is 28.05. Out of the 44 participants, 40 are females, 42 are married and 20 had only primary education. Majority (23) are traders or engaged in a business and 40 are Christians. Seventeen of the female participants chose not to disclose their FGM status, 14 were non-victims while nine are FGM survivors.

Cultural names and significance of FGM

There are several names that are culturally assigned to FGM in the rural communities visited. Some of these names are “Ikpu isi ugwu” “Iseugu” “Ibe ugu” “ibe ivu” “Obefu Akpapi” “Ibe Akpapi” However, all of these names have the same meaning, which is removal of the clitoris and signifies full maturity of a woman. “We call it ibe ivu or obefu akpapi” (P3). “It is an act in which the female child is circumcised to remove the clitoris which tends to arouse their sexual feelings unnecessary” (P1). “It shows that the person has come of age” (P16). “It is our tradition and a woman does it to show that she is now a fully-fledged woman” (P8). “…is because any person that has been circumcised see herself as a full grown woman but they see those that has not been circumcised as half human” (P4). Furthermore, FGM has traditional significance. “They see it as a holy practice or sanctification” (P13). “Like our elders explained to us, female circumcision is one of the traditional rites carried out on women and it is considered to be very important because for certain gatherings involving titled persons, if a woman is not circumcised she cannot join their discussion because she is considered not fully matured”. A woman is culturally not allowed to give birth to a child with her clitoris.

FGM a cultural norm before childbirth

Female genital mutilation is a cultural norm in these rural communities. It is performed on a girl-child before she gets married. While some do it during the neonatal period, others do it during adolescence or during the first pregnancy, just to ensure that the woman does not give birth to a child with her clitoris. “It is often seen as one of the important aspect of our culture, is taken as a mark of respect to the culture of the land that every woman should be circumcised before marriage” (P16).“It was done previously like ceremony to prepare a lady for marriage” (P23).

“It is our culture which formally was done after marriage when the woman gets pregnant, but now the child is taken to the hospital for FGM. It used to be cultural festival, but now, things are changing and it is

now done any time. It is like giving birth, women give birth any time"(P13).

"We see it as what we inherited from our parents. So we see it as something we should do since our parents did it. Another thing is that FGM prevents a woman from delivering a baby with uncircumcised clitoris (the clitoris is traditionally referred to as "akpapi" and is seen as ritually unclean) since it is only after the circumcision that a lady is consider a fully fledge woman who can give birth" (P5).

If a woman gives birth to a girl-child without circumcision and her girl-child is circumcised, the child will be recognized as being older than her mother in the community. "A mother who is not circumcised and gives birth to a female, and child gets circumcised, the child by implication is matured while the mother remains immature" (P1)

Cultural beliefs about the usefulness of FGM

Female circumcision is believed to make a woman clean and great. "… helps to prevent dirt in the female genital organ, and after the process, people will assume that you are now a great person" (P2). It is culturally believed that FGM reduces sexual urge in women. The clitoris which is one of the erogenous parts of the female is cut off so that the women will not have sexual desire, thereby helps to prevent promiscuity. Most of the interviewees attest to this belief. "It is only a belief; some people say it makes a woman not to be adulterous before and after marriage" (P14). "Some people said that a circumcised woman can control her sexual urge while uncircumcised woman cannot. This is the reason why their husbands do all their possible best to see that their wives are circumcised" (P6).

There are some false beliefs just to make the younger ones to accept the practice. "Some people that have not been circumcised will bleed while some will not but if you are circumcised you will not bleed at all" (P5). "They said that any woman that is circumcised will not have problem during labour or child delivery" (P10). "You do it to have balance during delivery" (P13). "……believe that if a woman is not circumcised, she may not conceive and bear children" (P14).

Traditional rituals associated with FGM

FGM was not merely a cultural practice; it has rituals that were done to get one initiated to the tradition of the land. "When done traditionally, it is for the purpose of maturity and as well initiation" (P4). "things are done in a different ways, before they don't circumcise one till the person performs "achi" ("achi" is a traditional initiation ceremony), even if the person is not in her parents' house they will perform the achi before or the husband will take her to her parents to show that the wife have been circumcised before performing the "achi" (P9). "It is away of inducting one fully in her community" (P22).

Attitude towards FGM

There are varying feelings and thoughts about FGM among the participants. Some view FGM as good and useful. "I see it as something good because it prevents delay in childbirth" (P1). "It does not affect one negatively, it is good" (P3). "I do not see anything bad in it but since people now said it should not be done, women who go to deliver no longer request for FGM since the government is now against FGM. But during our own time we were doing it and it was a thing of honour" (P17).

However, some fell that FGM is not a good practice and should be abolished. "I see it as something wrong because it deprives female of that sexual sensation" (P4). "For me I don't like it because there was a girl that was circumcised in our side and she bleeds heavily that was in the year 2007" (P5). "Female genital mutilation should be abolished because it is not good" (P6).

Some people think it is a good practice because the family takes good care of the circumcised for up to one month. "…because I like the way they do care for them by giving them food which make them to look fresher like before" (P13).

Religion, an important factor in FGM

Two main religion practiced in the study area are traditional religion and Christianity. Traditional religion has promoted the practice of FGM in rural communities in Nigeria. However, Christianity is playing a very big role in curtailing the FGM in these communities. Most Christians now believe that FGM is not good and only unbelievers that perform it. "I don't believe in FGM because I am a Christian, believers do not engage in FGM" (P15). "I am a Christian and we don't practice FGM" (P13). "I will not do it because I don't believe in culture or tradition, am a Christian" (P8).

Discussion

Our study explored the cultural norms, beliefs and attitudes associated with Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in rural communities in Ebonyi State, Nigeria. This study has confirmed that cultural heritage of a people is a strong determinant of health (Fernandez 2014). It strengthens the people's beliefs and makes unhealthy cultural practices difficult to be changed. Sexual issues in many ethnic groups in Nigeria remain confidential (Odo, et al. 2018), therefore, posed as a challenge when seeking firsthand information for this study. However, the one-on-one cordial discussion created by the in-depth interview helped to get majority of the participants relaxed and willing to share information about FGM in their communities

(Steber 2017). The probing questions that followed some responses served as gate way to getting more information from the participants on cultural norms, beliefs and attitudes associated with FGM.

Several cultural names but the same meanings were assigned to female circumcision (FGM) in the Ebonyi State. Female circumcision in the State is commonly called "Obefu Akpapi" or "Ibe Akpapi", which means "cutting off the clitoris". The removal of the clitoris (clitoridectomy) is classified as Type I FGM (WHO 2018[a]). The people see clitoris as "unclean" part of the female genitalia, which makes a woman to have high sexual desire and become promiscuous (Abdel-Azim 2013). This belief has been refuted by studies that found that removal of the clitoris makes a woman not to reach orgasm, thereby wanting more sex (Akintunde 2010). We found out that FGM accords a woman full respect in the community. It signifies "full maturity". A circumcised woman is regarded as "full fledge woman", while uncircumcised woman is seen and referred to as "immature" and as such should not be allowed to give birth to a child without being circumcised.

Female genital mutilation is still a cultural norm performed before childbirth by some rural communities in Ebonyi State (Ibekwe, Onoh, Onyebuchi, Ezeonu and Ibekwe 2012). We found out that FGM is normally done before childbirth to ensure that awoman does not give birth to a child with her clitoris. In other words, girls preparing for marriage or women with their first pregnancy are circumcised (Akintunde 2010). This ancestral practice is rooted in culture and traditional religion (Perez and Turetsky 2015), which had taken deep into the psyche of the people that many do it just to respect culture and tradition of their land. FGM is harmful and has no scientific benefits (Efferson et al. 2015) and therefore, should be stopped, despite the culture. Many African countries have legislated against harmful cultural norms like FGM but the existence of such laws has not really stopped the practices (Cotton 2016; Vogt et al. 2015). Nigeria currently has a law against FGM, but the problem is enacting the law (Babalola 2016). We found out that FGM in most places in Ebonyi state is currently done in secret because of the law, but some of the community members still hold the belief that it should be practiced to ensure female respectability (Cook 2016).

The reason and perceived usefulness of FGM to the community members include the belief that it makes a woman clean and great, and that it reduces the sexual urge of females, thereby, preventing promiscuity. An uncircumcised woman was seen as unclean. Every woman would like to be labeled "clean" before having her first baby. We also found out that girls were made to believe that they will not get married if they were not circumcised (Schafroth, 2009), and that FGM helps them to conceive and have safe and painless delivery. This information is used to convince young women to accept FGM. Studies have shown that FGM is one of the main causes of prolonged labour (WHO 2018[b]; Berg, et al. 2014; Kaplan, et al. 2011) and consequently leads to stillbirth. Such false information needs to be refuted through comprehensive community-based sexuality education and effective advocacy (International Planned Parenthood Federation-IPPF 2015). The cutting off of the clitoris not only cultural but has traditional implications. Previous studies reported that the main reasons for the practice of FGM are to initiate the girl-child into womanhood and also to control women's sexuality (Rushwan 2013).

The aspect of the FGM activities most valued by the community members was the ceremonial part of female circumcision. The ceremony is a traditional ritual that is done to initiate (Kinyanjui 2002) the girl into the adulthood. During the initiation ceremony, the woman is checked to ensure that the clitoris had been cut off in order to be fully qualified for this final stage of FGM. This initiation ceremony which involves incantations, promotes the practice of female FGM. The belief is that any woman who was initiated cannot have sexual contact with any other man except her husband, even when the husband is dead, the woman cannot remarry. This practice infringes on the fundamental human rights and freedoms of women (Christou and Fowles 2015). Women were forced to obey the traditions of the land to the detriment of their health and life. Moreover, most people like to be associated with the tradition of their land and to participate in social activities that bring people together to eat, drink and dance, just for entertainment. As such, socializing through the ceremony could be seen as social events that promote both social and mental health of the people (Troyer 2016). Some community members may attend to meet friends, feel relaxed and enjoy themselves.

There were varying feelings and thoughts about FGM. While some people think that there is nothing bad in FGM, some feel that it has caused a lot of harm than good to childbearing women. Studies have shown that people's attitude informs their practice (Feghhi 2016). Moreover, someone's attitude could be influenced by his or her environment, belief and life experiences (Gele, Sagbakken and Kumar 2015). People do something because others around them give credence to the act, or belief that the act is good. In our study, most people that expressed negative attitudes towards FGM were people that have had or had seen women who had bad experiences either during or after circumcision, such as profuse bleeding, severe pain, and difficulty during delivery. Cultural norms, beliefs and attitude could be modified through community-based education and other institutions like religious institutions.

Religion has helped in both promotion and reduction of FGM in Ebonyi State. In our study, we learnt that Christians were less likely to accept FGM, while traditionalists were the key promoters of FGM. Traditional religion which is the first ever practiced religion in the State was actually the pivot of FGM. People depended on the traditional "Chief Priests" to make decisions on what should be the dos and don'ts of the community. The traditional religionist made FGM compulsory for every woman irrespective of her wish. However, Christianity brought education to enlighten the people on the effects of FGM and persuade them to reject traditional religion and its harmful practices. Hence, most Christians recently started to refuse FGM on the basis of their faith. So, Christianity has helped a lot in the reduction of FGM in Ebonyi State. Studies however, had reported that FGM is cultural not a religious practice (UNICEF 2005; Centre for Reproductive Rights 2006; UNFPA 2018). They argue that FGM has not been found to be a particular religion's requirement.

Conclusion

In conclusion, cultural norms and beliefs, attitudes and traditional religion are associated with FGM. Most rural communities where FGM is still practiced hold on to their culture and tradition to defend the practice of FGM. However, Christianity has played a significant role in refuting the harmful cultural beliefs and practices including FGM in Ebonyi State, Nigeria. We suggest that government should scale up campaign against FGM in rural communities and also engage community leaders and elders in community-based sexuality education. Such education programme would equip them with clear understanding of the urgent need to refine their culture and stop FGM.

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Conflict of Interest

We declare that we have no conflict of interest.

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