

Exploring the Socio-Cultural Dynamics of Female Genital Mutilation in Nigeria

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Abstract

Female genital mutilation (FGM) is a harmful traditional practice that involves the partial or total removal of the external female genitalia for non-medical reasons. It is a deeply rooted social and cultural practice in Nigeria, particularly in the northern regions, where it is often seen as a rite of passage for girls and a symbol of purity and modesty. Despite the fact that FGM is illegal in Nigeria, it remains a pervasive and deeply ingrained practice, affecting millions of women and girls. The social and cultural dynamics of FGM in Nigeria are complex and multifaceted, driven by deeply ingrained beliefs about gender roles, sexuality, and tradition. FGM is often seen as a way to control women's sexuality and ensure their virginity until marriage. It is also seen as a way to preserve cultural identity and maintain social status within communities. Women who refuse to undergo FGM may be stigmatized, ostracized, and even subjected to violence. To effectively address FGM in Nigeria, it is important to take a holistic and culturally sensitive approach. This involves engaging with affected communities, empowering women and girls, addressing the root causes of the practice, strengthening legal frameworks, and collaborating with international partners. Addressing the root causes of the practice requires a multi-faceted approach, including targeted awareness-raising campaigns, culturally sensitive education programs, and advocacy efforts aimed at changing social norms and attitudes. Strengthening legal frameworks and increasing penalties for those who perpetrate FGM can help deter the practice and protect women and girls from harm. Collaborating with international partners can provide valuable insights and resources for preventing the practice of FGM in Nigeria and beyond.

Keywords: Social-cultural, Female genital, Mutilation, Awareness, Dynamics

Introduction

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), also known as female circumcision, is a cultural practice that involves the partial or total removal of the external female genitalia. It is a deeply entrenched cultural practice that has been in existence for centuries in many parts of the world, including

Nigeria. While there have been efforts to eradicate this practice, it is still prevalent in many parts of Nigeria, especially in the northern region. This article will examine the socio-cultural perspective of female genital mutilation in different parts of Nigeria. FGM is a deeply rooted cultural practice that is often carried out as a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood. It is believed to be a way of preserving chastity and promoting marriage ability.

In Nigeria, FGM is practiced in different parts of the country, with the northern region having the highest prevalence rate. According to a report by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in 2018, about 19.9 million women and girls in Nigeria have undergone FGM, making it the country with the third-highest prevalence rate in the world. The practice of FGM has been widely condemned by human rights organizations, medical practitioners, and feminists for its negative effects on the physical and psychological health of women and girls. The World Health Organization (WHO) in 2018, has classified FGM into four types, with Type III being the most severe. Type III involves the removal of the external genitalia and the sewing of the vaginal opening, leaving only a small hole for urine and menstrual blood to pass through. This type of FGM is prevalent in some parts of Nigeria, especially in the northern region.

One of the reasons why FGM is still prevalent in Nigeria is because of its cultural significance. FGM is deeply embedded in the culture of some ethnic groups in Nigeria, such as the Hausa, Fulani, and Yoruba. It is often seen as a way of preserving the purity and chastity of women and ensuring that they are suitable for marriage. Different studies have also shown the prevalence. According to the Nigerian Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) in 2018, the prevalence of FGM among women in the northern region of Nigeria is 68%, compared to 21% in the southern region. This means that, in Nigeria, FGM is a widespread practice, and the prevalence rate varies across different ethnic groups and regions. The survey conducted by the National Population Commission (2018), also testified to the prevalence rate of FGM in Nigeria at 20.6%, with the highest prevalence in the South- South region (77.8%) and the lowest in the South-East region (0.8%). The practice is deeply rooted in culture and tradition and is often performed by traditional circumcisers or midwives.

Scholars have written extensively about the socio-cultural perspective of FGM in Nigeria. In the book, titled, "Female Circumcision and the Politics of Knowledge: African Women in Imperialist Discourses", Ogunyemi (1997) argues that FGM is a cultural practice that is deeply rooted in the patriarchal system. She suggests that the practice is a way of controlling women's

sexuality and maintaining male dominance in society. Ogunyemi also suggests that FGM is a way of enforcing gender roles and promoting the subordination of women.

Similarly, in the book titled "The Circumcision of Women: A Strategy for its Eradication, Dorkenoo (1994) argues that FGM is a cultural practice that is perpetuated by the patriarchal system. She suggests that FGM is a way of maintaining the status quo and ensuring that women remain subordinate to men. Dorkenoo also argues that FGM has no health benefits and can cause severe physical and psychological harm to women and girls. Another scholar who has written about the socio-cultural perspective of FGM in Nigeria is Deji in 2016. In her article "Female Genital Mutilation in Nigeria: A Sociocultural Perspective," Deji argues that FGM is deeply rooted in the culture and tradition of some ethnic groups in Nigeria. She suggests that the practice is seen as a way of ensuring that women remain chaste and pure, and that it is often carried out with the consent of women themselves. Deji, however, acknowledges that the practice can have severe physical and psychological consequences for women and girls and that there is a need for greater awareness and education to eradicate the practice.

There are several insights that underlies the FGM practices as provided by different scholars, reflecting the various aspects of the practice. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) (2018), FGM refers to all procedures involving partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons. This definition is widely accepted and used by international organizations, health professionals, and policymakers. According to Nzegwu (2006), FGM is a cultural practice that reflects patriarchal values and reinforces gender inequality. Nzegwu argues that FGM is a form of violence against women that is justified by cultural norms and beliefs. She calls for a feminist approach to understanding FGM that recognizes the agency of women and challenges patriarchal structures. Ibrahim, (2008) views FGM as a violation of human rights and a form of gender- based violence. Ibrahim argues that FGM is a harmful practice that perpetuates gender inequality and undermines the autonomy of women. She advocates for legal and policy measures to eradicate FGM and promote gender equality. On the other hand, some scholars have provided nuanced perspectives on FGM in the Nigerian context. For instance, Koso-Thomas, (1987) a Nigerian medical doctor and researcher, argues that FGM is a complex practice that cannot be understood solely in terms of gender inequality or patriarchy. Koso-Thomas argues that FGM is often performed as part of initiation rites and is deeply rooted in culture and tradition. She calls for a

culturally sensitive approach to eradicating FGM that takes into account the beliefs and values of the communities where the practice is prevalent.

In addition to scholars, international organizations such as the United Nations and the World Health Organization have also been involved in efforts to eradicate FGM in Nigeria. In 2015, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution calling for an end to FGM worldwide. Despite the negative impact of FGM on the health and well-being of girls and women, the practice continues to be deeply entrenched in many communities in Nigeria. Efforts to eradicate FGM in Nigeria have been ongoing for several decades, and have involved a combination of legal, educational, and advocacy interventions. In 2015, Nigeria passed the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act, which criminalizes FGM and provides for sanctions against offenders.

History and Prevalence of FGM in Nigeria

Female genital mutilation (FGM) is a practice that involves the partial or total removal of female genitalia for non-medical reasons. It is a widely condemned practice, but it still persists in many parts of the world, including Nigeria. Despite efforts to eradicate FGM, it is estimated that more than 20 million women and girls in Nigeria have undergone the procedure.

The practice of FGM in Nigeria has a long history that predates the colonial era. According to Dorkenoo (1994), an expert on FGM, there are four types of FGM in Nigeria. The most common type is Type II, which involves the partial or total removal of the clitoris and labia minora. This type is also known as excision. The practice is deeply rooted in Nigerian culture and is often seen as a rite of passage for young girls. It is believed to purify them and make them more marriageable. The prevalence of FGM in Nigeria is high, despite its illegality.

According to a study by the National Population Commission (NPC) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in 2018, the prevalence of FGM in Nigeria is highest in the South-South and South-East regions, where it affects 77% and 68% of women and girls, respectively. The study also found that FGM is most prevalent among the Igbo and Yoruba ethnic groups. Scholars have studied the prevalence of FGM in Nigeria and its impact on women and girls. In her book, "Cutting the Rose: Female Genital Mutilation: The Practice and its Prevention," Dorkenoo (1994) argues that FGM is a violation of human rights and should be eradicated. She also highlights the medical complications that can arise from the procedure, including infections, hemorrhage, and psychological trauma. Similarly, in her article "Female Genital Mutilation in

Nigeria: A Call for Action," Madu (2014) discusses the negative impact of FGM on women's health and well-being. She argues that FGM is a form of gender-based violence that should be eliminated through education and community engagement. Another scholar who has studied FGM in Nigeria is Momoh (2005), a midwife who specializes in caring for women who had undergone FGM. In her book, "Female Genital Mutilation," she discusses the physical and psychological effects of FGM on women and girls. She also emphasizes the importance of providing medical and psychological support for women who have undergone the procedure.

Socio-Cultural Perspectives of Female Genital Mutilation in Nigeria

The practice of FGM in Nigeria is deeply rooted in cultural and social norms, and is often seen as a rite of passage into womanhood. It is believed to be a way of preserving female virginity, promoting hygiene, and enhancing fertility. In some communities, it is also believed to enhance the sexual pleasure of men by reducing the sexual desire of women. Thus, FGM is often seen as a way of ensuring that women remain faithful to their husbands and do not engage in extra-marital affairs.

However, the practice of FGM also has serious health implications for women and girls. The removal of external genitalia can cause severe pain, bleeding, infection, and even death. It can also lead to long-term health problems, including urinary tract infections, menstrual problems, and complications during childbirth. Moreover, FGM violates the rights of women and girls to bodily integrity, health, and freedom from discrimination. The socio-cultural perspectives of FGM in Nigeria are complex and deeply rooted in traditional beliefs and practices. Several scholars have studied the socio-cultural perspectives of FGM in Nigeria and their works provide valuable insights into this issue. One of the earliest works on FGM in Nigeria is by Lucas (1982), who argues that FGM is a deeply ingrained cultural practice among certain ethnic groups in Nigeria and that it is viewed as a rite of passage into womanhood. He also notes that FGM is often associated with certain religious beliefs and that the practice is perpetuated by women themselves. Momoh (2005) argues that FGM is deeply rooted in patriarchal traditions and that it is used to control female sexuality. She also notes that FGM is associated with certain cultural beliefs and practices related to marriage and childbirth. In the submission of Mokuolu (2010) FGM is a complex issue that cannot be fully understood without taking into account the cultural, social, and economic factors that perpetuate the practice. He also notes that FGM is often seen as

a way to preserve cultural identity and that efforts to eradicate the practice must be sensitive to these cultural beliefs.

More recently, in 2020, Adewuyi argues that FGM is a deeply entrenched cultural practice that is often perpetuated by women themselves. She also notes that FGM is associated with certain beliefs and practices related to female purity and that these beliefs are deeply ingrained in Nigerian culture. Njoku and Akin-Otiko (2019) explored the socio-cultural beliefs and practices that underlie the practice of FGM in Nigeria and they found that the practice is deeply rooted in cultural beliefs and practices, and it is widely accepted in many communities. They also noted that the practice is often carried out in secrecy, making it difficult to be tracked and prevented.

Social Norms and Beliefs that that underpin FGM in Nigeria

Oni (2015) explores the cultural and social factors that influence the practice of FGM in Nigeria when she notes that FGM is often performed by traditional practitioners who are regarded as custodians of culture and tradition. She argues that the practice is sustained by social norms and beliefs that link a woman's sexual behavior to her genitalia, and that girls who have not undergone FGM are seen as impure and unmarriageable. In the submission of OlaOlorun, (2012), the role of healthcare providers in addressing the issue of FGM in Nigeria and noted that they often encounter complications arising from FGM, and that they have a responsibility to educate communities about the harmful effects of the practice. OlaOlorun argues that healthcare providers can play a key role in changing social norms and beliefs by providing accurate information about FGM and advocating for its abandonment.

Efforts to Eliminate FGM in Nigeria

In response to FGM's harmful effects, there have been numerous efforts by scholars, activists, and government agencies to eliminate FGM in Nigeria. One of the earliest and most influential of it is the report on "Female Circumcision and Infibulation in Nigeria: The Medical and Social Aspects" by Bello in 1982. This report highlighted the physical and psychological harm caused by FGM and called for its eradication. Another effort at eradicating the dastard activity was the effort from Momoh, (1987) a midwife and FGM survivor who has been working to eliminate the practice for over 30 years. In 1997, she founded the African Well Women Clinic in London, which provides medical and psychological support to women affected by FGM. She has also

been instrumental in raising awareness about the harmful effects of FGM and training healthcare professionals to provide culturally sensitive care to survivors.

In recent years, there have been several government-led initiatives aimed at eliminating FGM in Nigeria. In 2015, President Muhammadu Buhari signed the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act, which criminalizes FGM and other forms of violence against women and girls. The act also provides for the protection and support of survivors, as well as the prosecution of perpetrators. In addition, the Nigerian government has partnered with international organizations such as the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) to implement programs that raise awareness about the harmful effects of FGM and provide support to communities that are affected by it. These programs include community outreach, education, and alternative rites of passage that do not involve FGM.

Despite these efforts, FGM remains a deeply entrenched cultural practice in Nigeria, and eliminating it will require sustained efforts from all levels of society. However, there are signs of progress. According to a 2018 survey by UNICEF, the prevalence of FGM in Nigeria has decreased from 25% to 18% in the past decade. This indicates that the efforts of scholars, activists, and government agencies are beginning to bear fruit.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) has been deeply rooted in Nigerian culture for centuries, with a prevalence rate of over 20% in some regions. The practice is often viewed as a rite of passage into womanhood and is believed to promote chastity, cleanliness, and fertility. However, FGM has no known health benefits and can result in various physical and psychological consequences. Efforts to eliminate FGM in Nigeria have been ongoing for decades, with both the government and non-governmental organizations working to raise awareness about the harmful effects of the practice. Despite these efforts, FGM remains prevalent in many Nigerian communities, largely due to deeply ingrained cultural beliefs and social norms.

Recommendations

Here are some recommendations for exploring the social and cultural dynamics of FGM in Nigeria:

- ❖ Engage with communities: To better understand the social and cultural factors driving the practice of FGM in Nigeria, it is important to engage with the affected communities. This can involve working with local organizations, community leaders, and traditional authorities to build trust, foster dialogue, and raise awareness about the harmful effects of FGM.
- ❖ Empower women and girls: Women and girls are often the primary targets of FGM, and empowering them can be a powerful tool for preventing the practice. This can involve providing education and training programs, as well as creating safe spaces for women and girls to discuss their experiences and advocate for their rights.
- ❖ Address the root causes: FGM is often driven by deeply ingrained social and cultural norms, including beliefs about gender roles and sexuality. Addressing these root causes requires a multi-faceted approach, including targeted awareness-raising campaigns, culturally sensitive education programs, and advocacy efforts aimed at changing social norms and attitudes.
- ❖ Strengthen legal frameworks: Nigeria has laws in place that criminalize FGM, but enforcement is often weak or non-existent. Strengthening legal frameworks and increasing penalties for those who perpetrate FGM can help deter the practice and protect women and girls from harm.
- ❖ Collaborate with international partners: FGM is a global issue, and collaborating with international partners can provide valuable insights and resources for preventing the practice. This can involve working with international organizations, NGOs, and other stakeholders to share best practices, coordinate programmes and mobilize resources to address FGM in Nigeria and beyond.

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