

Socio-cultural issues in FGM/C by: Dr. Owuor Olungah

The practice variously referred to as:

- Female circumcision (FC)
- Female genital mutilation (FGM).
- Female genital cutting (FGC)

Historical Perspective

- Origin is unknown
- It is not known when or where the tradition of female genital mutilation originated. Widespread female genital mutilation seems to have originated in Stone Age Central Africa and travelled north, down the Nile into ancient Egypt. It was not until Arab Muslim armies conquered Egypt in the eighth century that the practice spread out of Africa in a systematic way; parallel to the dissemination of Islam reaching as far as Pakistan and Indonesia. They drifted back to a few places on the Arabian Peninsula; in the Buraimi Oasis in the United Arab Emirates. However, it is not known when or where the tradition of female genital mutilation originated

Reasons for performing FGM

- **Socio-cultural reasons “*It’s our tradition, and hence we can’t leave it. The uncircumcised are sexual hypes and hence contribute to the high rate of STI’s. Uncircumcised girls are promiscuous. [FGD, 65-year-old member of Nyabasi Council of Elders]***
- Circumcision among the Kuria is something that came from God and was not decided by the Kuria. Therefore it cannot be stopped by anyone.
- ***“It is the tradition of the Kuria people since time immemorial. God gave every tribe what they should do and for us he gave us circumcision of both male and female and will never end...”***
- ***[FGD, 70-year-old elder, Bugumbe Council of Elders]***

The Samburu community believe that unless a girl’s clitoris is removed, she will not become a mature woman, or even a full member of the human race. She will have no right to associate with others of her age group, or her ancestors.

Among the Somali, female genital mutilation is believed to ensure a girl’s virginity. Virginity is a prerequisite for marriage, which is necessary to maintain a family’s honour and to secure the family line. The societies that practice FGM are patriarchal and largely patrilineal. Women’s access to land and security is often through marriage, and only excised women are considered suitable for marriage.

In the Ameru community, FGM is the rite of passage into womanhood and is accompanied by ceremonies to mark the occasion when the girl becomes a mature woman. In communities that practise FGM, girls are generally under social pressure from their peers and family members to undergo the procedure.

It is considered a necessary mark for ethnic identity: among the Kisii, circumcision is seen as a necessary identity for the Kisii woman, to distinguish her from other non-circumcising communities. They are threatened with rejection by the group or family if they do not follow tradition.

Hygienic and aesthetic reasons

Among the Somali and the Borana communities where FGM is a traditional practice, it is believed that a woman's external genitalia are ugly and dirty, and that they will continue to grow if they are not cut away. Removing these parts of the external genitalia is believed to make girls hygienically clean. FGM is believed to make a girl beautiful.

The Maasai

- Fathers are proud when they circumcise their first-born daughters because they become *'true men'*.
- If a man marries an uncircumcised girl, that woman is expected to be circumcised during delivery at the latest. In the meantime the man is despised and considered an outcast for marrying a woman who is not fit to live in a Maasai home.

Several **myths** associated with FGM, which serve to propagate FGM in the community.

- a) Blood of an uncircumcised woman is bad.
- b) If a girl is not circumcised, her clitoris will grow long.
- c) If a girl is not circumcised, then her parents will die.
- d) Female circumcision controls a woman's sexual urge.
- e) Female circumcision makes childbirth easy.

Psycho-sexual reasons-*be promiscuous which is unlike an uncircumcised girl.*

- ***"...belief of the Kuria if a girl is circumcised she doesn't like boys"[19-year-old uncircumcised girl]***
- Among the Somali and Borana, the uncut girl is believed to have an over-active and uncontrollable sex drive so that she is likely to lose her virginity prematurely, to disgrace her family and damage her chances of marriage, and to become a menace to all men and to her whole community. The belief is that the uncut clitoris will grow big and pressure on this organ will arouse intense desire. It is also believed that the tight opening of infibulation or narrowing of the vaginal orifice, enhance male sexual pleasure, which prevents divorce or unfaithfulness. In Somali community it is believed that mutilating the genitalia of a woman who fails to conceive will solve the problem of infertility.
- The type of procedure, the age when it is performed, the prevalence in the community and the socio-cultural and economic factors, which support its continuation, vary widely across the communities that practise FGM.

Spiritual and religious reasons

- The Somali community believe that removing the external genitalia is necessary to make a girl spiritually clean and is therefore required by religion. In Muslim societies, which practise FGM,

people tend to believe that it is required by the Koran. However, FGM is not mentioned in the Koran.

- It is important to note that neither the Bible nor the Koran subscribe to the practice of FGM, although it is frequently carried out by communities – especially Muslim communities – in the genuine belief that it is part of their religion. FGC is not a ritual specific to any religion; infact it is practiced by Jews, Christians, Muslims and followers of indigenous religions like the Maasai of Kenya.

Who does the cutting?

- Traditional practitioners, commonly elderly women in the community.
- Sometimes traditional birth attendants
- Medical workers perform FGM.

Involving Communities in FGM elimination

- Understanding gender socialisation, social responsibilities and social networking
- Addressing cultural beliefs, myths and sexual behaviour
- Understanding gender-based social expectations for women and men
- Fostering communication strategies for social behavioural change that address negative myths and beliefs
- Increasing dialogue for policy formulation, especially for girls & women's education
- Increasing women's accessibility to resources and opportunities (Community Empowerment Programme (CEP))
- Fostering networks and coalition addressing female and male vulnerability to STI/HIV/AIDS and FGM

Empowering Women in FGM Elimination

- Education circles with women, men and adolescents on adverse consequences of FGM, SGBV, and reproductive rights violation.
- Counselling and communication strategies for social behavioural change that address negative myths and beliefs
- Policy on formal/informal education, especially for girls & women
- Increase women earning capacity through sound proven income generation activities