

SOCIAL BENEFITS VERSUS PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES IN FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION AS PERCEIVED BY SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

EMMANUEL CHUKWURA N.

Abstract

The major thrust of the paper was to examine the social benefits and psychological consequences of Female Genital Mutilation as perceived by Secondary School Students. Two research questions were formulated to guide the study. The study adopted a survey research design. A stratified random sampling technique was used to select 800 students from 20 schools in Anambra State. Data were collected using a well-structured questionnaire titled “Social Benefits and Psychological Consequences of Female Genital Mutilation Questionnaire (SBPCFGMQ). The instrument used was a 14-item questionnaire structured on a 4-point likert type rating scale. Data collected were analysed using statistical mean. Results show that the students accepted that there were social benefits derived from female genital mutilation. The students also identified some negative psychological consequences associated with this practice. Based on these, the study recommended among other things that legislation should be put in place to arrest and prosecutes perpetrators of this harmful practice. Provide shelters for students who were abused and provide education to rehabilitate and adjust them psychologically.

Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines female genital mutilation (FGM) as all procedures involving partial or total removal of the external female genital or other injury to the female genital organs whether for cultural or other non-therapeutic reasons (Green, 2005). Many other terms are also used to describe female genital mutilation. The most common being female circumcision (FC) and female genital cutting (FGC) (Essen, & Johnsdotter, 2004). However, the term is almost exclusively used to describe traditional or religious procedures on a minor, which requires the parents’ consent because of the age of the girl.

In Nigeria, most girls between the ages of four and twelve undergo this practice without giving their consent. It is rather imposed on them by their parents (Okoye, 2000). Female genital mutilation is therefore a complex multifaceted practice deeply rooted in a strong cultural and social framework. It is endorsed by the community and supported by parents. For such families – FGM provides women with many social and cultural benefits. For many societies, FGM is quite clearly about curtailing a women’s sexuality and preventing her from engaging in promiscuity. FGM is also believed to promote fertility and increase a man’s sexual pleasure, both of which enhance a women’s attractiveness in marriage (Badawi, 1989).

Whether the practice is shrouded in rituals and celebrations, is not the issue, rather the practice is deeply embedded in the social norms of the community and there is also social pressure on all young girls to conform (Lewnes, 2005). The rationale for this study is that in spite of the physical and psychological trauma experienced by girls who undergo FGM, the benefits seems to outweigh the negative consequences. It is against this background that the study sought to examine psychosocial factors in female genital mutilation.

Social Benefits in Female Genital Mutilation

Some of the sociological benefits given for this practice include identification with cultural heritage, initiation of girls into womanhood, social integration and maintenance of social adhesion. However, psychosocial factors along with other factors such as powerlessness of the woman in African context, cultural rights, economic and political factors and a whole range of other social issues contribute in no small way in perpetration of female genital mutilation (Hosken, 1993).

In many societies the practice of FGM is considered a vital part of a young girl's social development and initiation rights. The practice is commonly accompanied by ceremonies, celebrations and coming of age rituals (Koromah, 2004). In a society that is dominated by male, most female are under pressure to perform the ritual so as to have access to social amenities when they get married, such as education and farmland (Meze, 1998). From this perspective, FGM is inevitably viewed in a very positive light in spite of the psychological consequences posed by this obnoxious practice.

Psychological Consequences in Female Genital Mutilation

Female genital mutilation decreases or eliminates the sensitive tissue of the outer genitalia, particularly the clitoris, in order to attenuate sexual desire in the female. This forced removal of the clitoris creates tension, anxiety and emotional scar on the mind of the girl. Some girls go as far as committing suicide (Jacobs, 2009).

The women performing the mutilation often frighten the girls into submission. The aftermath is that the girls became more conscious of their condition. They may question their womanhood and may feel abnormal. The girls also go through nightmares, emotional instability as to whom to trust in their lives. Emotionally, they are trying to conform and satisfy their parents, but psychologically, they are confused (Alison, 1988). Negative psychological effects that have been reported also include feelings of fear, bitterness and betrayal, loss of trust, suppression of feelings, feelings of incompleteness, loss of self-esteem, panic disorders and difficulty with body image (Ehrenreich, 2005). When considering the psychological consequences of FGM, it is important to balance the traumatic impact against the social and cultural benefits that FGM procedures bring to the young girls in the community where it is practiced. Psychologically, after going through the practice, the girls appear to be much stressed and develop aggressive behavior (Baashar, 1999). The girls were more likely to have relational problems, or had fears of establishing a relationship.

Legal Considerations

Female Genital Mutilation is clear violation of child right against any form of abuse and exploitation. In Nigeria for instance, the prevalence for type I, II and III types of mutilation is about 25.1%. There is no existing federal law banning the practice of female genital mutilation in Nigeria. However, there is still hope for millions of young girls subjected to this inhuman practice (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2006).

The actualization of human dignity, development and education of the girl child underpins the African union struggle for gender equality and eradication of harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation. The key issues are anchored on how to eliminate harmful traditional practices against girls and women, equal education, livelihood and decent work opportunities, eradication of all forms of gender based violence, elimination of stereotypes and sexism.

Enabling laws should be put in place to help protect the girl child from abuse under the guise of socio-cultural and religious belief. Gender mainstreaming and enacting the child right act will go a long way in eliminating female genital mutilation.

Statement of the Problem

Female genital mutilation (FGM) is any procedure involving the partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs (WHO, 2005). The practice of this harmful procedure originated from Egypt and later spread to other parts of the world. Okoye (2000) identifies the ages between 4years and twelve years at which FGM is performed. This is a clear violation of the child's right, since it is done without the child's consent.

Another problem is that the procedure is carried out using special knives, razorblades, or scalpels that are not sterilized. Most often no anesthetics or antiseptic is used. Without proper medical procedure, the girl can bleed to death through shock. Psychologically, the child may be traumatized, anxious and develop emotional strains associated with the practice (Bashar, 1999).

Female Genital Mutilation is practiced in male dominated societies and used to subjugate women and repress their sexuality. Girls after going through the procedure are most likely to have relational problems or had fears of establishing a relationship (Hosken, 1993). There is no legislation restricting or even punishing offenders. It is against this backdrop that the study sought to examine the social benefits and psychological consequences of female genital mutilation among students in Anambra State, Nigeria.

Research Questions

The following research questions were formulated to guide the study.

What are the social benefits derived from female genital mutilation?

What are the psychological consequences of female genital mutilation?

Methods

The study adopted a descriptive survey design. The rationale for the use is that it is used to study a group of people by collecting and analyzing items to be representative of the entire population. The population of the study consisted of all the secondary school students in Anambra State. The population of the students was estimated at 90,000. The study used stratified random sampling technique to select 20 schools from the zone, 800 students were selected for the study.

The instrument used for data collection was a questionnaire titled Social Benefits and Psychological Consequences of Female Genital Mutilation Questionnaire (SBPCFGMQ). The instrument contains 14 items, and was structured on a 4 point likert type rating scale of Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree and Strongly Disagree. The instruments were validated by three experts in the faculty of education, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.

Reliability was obtained using 200 students selected from some secondary schools in Onitsha Education zone. The Cronbach reliability co-efficient was used and the result yielded a co-efficient of 0.80. This was considered high enough for the reliability of the instrument. The researcher used three research assistants to administer and collection of the questionnaires. The data were analyzed using statistical mean. Items with a mean score of 2.5 and above were accepted, while scores below 2.5 were rejected.

Results

Table I: Mean scores on students responses on social benefits derived from female genital mutilation.

S/N.	Items	\bar{X}	Decision
1.	It helps communities to identify with their culture.	2.63	Accepted
2.	It is a form of initiation into womanhood.	2.50	Accepted
3	It leads to social integration and maintenance of social adhesion.	2.53	Accepted
4.	In some cultures, it facilitates girls' marriage.	2.60	Accepted
5.	Girls that are mutilated get access to education	2.70	Accepted
6.	There are no existing laws restricting the practice.	2.52	Accepted
7.	It leads to economic and political emancipation of the girl.	2.80	Accepted

Table I show that secondary school students are generally aware of the perceived social benefits from female genital mutilation. The positive benefits are listed in order of their perceived importance, 2.80, 2.70, 2.63, 2.60, 2.53, 2.52 and

2.50 for items 7, 5, 1, 4,3 6 and 2 respectively. The result reveals that secondary school students identified with the positive social benefits derived from Female Genital Mutilation (FGM).

Table 2 Mean scores of students on the psychological consequences of Female genital mutilation.

S/N.	Items	X	Decision
1.	Girls go through psychological trauma.	3.96	Accepted
2.	Girls are often stressed after the procedure.	2.75	Accepted
3	It creates emotional scare on the mind of the girls.	2.65	Accepted
4.	It leads to anxiety.	2.80	Accepted
5.	It leads to lack of trust.	2.90	Accepted
6.	They find it difficult forming stable relationship	2.70	Accepted
7.	It affects their marital health	2.49	Rejected

Table 2 shows that secondary school students are aware of the psychological consequences of Female Genital Mutilation. This is evidenced from the mean responses on items, 1, 5, 4, 2, 6, and 3; with mean scores of 3.96, 2.90, 2.80, 2.75, 2.70, and 2.65, while only item 7 was rejected with a mean score of 2.49.

The results reveal that Female Genital Mutilation leaves a long lasting impression on the minds of the students who may have been victims of this practice. Female genital mutilation has a profound negative psychological consequence on the girls.

Discussion

The result of the study on table I showed clearly that secondary school students perceived some social benefits could be derived from practicing Female Genital Mutilation. This agrees with the view expressed by Hosken (1993) who opines that female genital mutilation helps in initiating the girl into womanhood. It also leads to social integration and maintenance of social adhesions.

The result of the study on table 2 revealed that there were negative psychological consequences associated with female genital mutilation. This agrees with the view expressed by Jacobs (2009) that the forced removal of the clitoris creates some tension, anxieties and emotional scare on the mind of the girl. He further opines that some commit suicide after being mutilated.

Conclusion

Female genital mutilation is the removal of the female genitalia without the consent of the girl. This practice has often resulted in medical and psychological problems. Some of the problems include the use of unsterilized razor by untrained women, leading to scarification of the victim. The consequences are most of the time psychological trauma, anxiety and emotional instability. However, some cultures accept female genital mutilation as a social norm and identified the benefits thus: it helps to liberate the women; it leads to social integration, economic and political freedom. However, there are no legislations that will help reduce the practice or eliminate it completely. It is hoped that in future, through African Union initiative on gender equality, that the girl child will be protected and given access to education and eventual elimination of obnoxious practices such as the one under preview.

Recommendations

The war on eliminating the practice of female genital mutilation should be a multifaceted war fought from the home, the school, the governments and international organizations. To this end, the following steps must be taken to checkmate this canker worm.

- Put the necessary laws in place to arrest and prosecute any person still practicing FGM
- Enforce the child right act.
- Educate the parents on the negative consequences of this practice
- Government should provide shelter for those who were abused by giving them psychological counseling on how to adjust to life after F.C.M.

References

- Akuezuilo, E. (2002). *Research Methodology and Statistics*. Awka: Nuel Press.
- Alison, S. (1988). "Female Circumcision: A critical appraisal", *Human Right Quarterly* 4 (10): 437 – 486.
- Babawi, M. (1989). "Epidemiology of Female Sexual Castration in Cairo", Egypt, *The Truth Seeker*, July/August pp. 32.
- Baasher, T. (1999). "Psychological Aspects of Female Genital Circumcision: Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women", *WHO Technical Publication*, Egypt.
- Ehrenreich, N. (2005). "Intersex Surgery, Female Genital Mutilation and the Selective Condemnation of Cultural Practices: *Harvard Civil Rights, Civic Liberties Law Review* 40(1): 71 – 140.
- Essen, B. & Johnsdotter, S. (2004). "Female Genital Mutilation in the West Traditional Circumcision versus Genital Cosmetic Surgery", *Acta Obstet Gynecol Scand*, (83): 611-613.
- Green, F. (2005). "The Medical Construction of Heteronormative Female Bodies and Sexuality Through Female Cutting", *Sexualities, Evolution & Gender* 7(2):153-187.

- Hosken, A. (1993). *“Female Genital Mutilation of Young Girls”*, Lexington: M.A. Sisco Publishers.
- Jacobs, F. (2009). “Commemorating International Day of Zero Tolerance to Female Genital Mutilation”, *Journal Abnormal Beh.* 5(9): 160 – 170.
- Koromah, H. (2004). “Effects of Female Genital Mutilation on the Education of the Girl Child”, *Law Review* 41(2): 60 – 65.
- Lewnes, A. (2005). *Changing a Harmful Social Convention: Female Genital Cutting*, Florence: Italy.
- Meze, K. (1988). *The Nigerian Peoples and Culture*. Enugu: Ikenna Press.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2006). Ways to Eliminate Female Genital Mutilation. *Human Rights Quarterly* 5(12): 460 – 480.
- Okoye, N. (2000). *Basic Issues in Psychology*, Awka: Erudite Publishers.