

Female Genital Mutilation of Secondary School Students in Kapchorwa District, Uganda

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Abstract: - Carried out in Kapchorwa district of Uganda in the year 2017, the study investigated among other things, the extent to which Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) was practiced in Kapchorwa District of Uganda by the year 2017. The study employed a cross-sectional survey design with both quantitative and qualitative approaches, with a sample of 970 respondents all of whom were female students of S.4, S5 and S.6. They were chosen because circumcision among the Sabiny (Sebei) ethnic group who dominate Kapchorwa district is usually carried out to girls in the age group of 16-20 years. The respondents were got from 20 secondary schools which were classified as rural (nine schools) and urban (11 schools). The finding was that female genital mutilation was being practiced to a small extent; it had declined though not yet totally wiped out. Based on the above, it was recommended that there is need for the Government to continue sensitizing the masses about the dangers of that practice so that it can be wiped out completely.

Key words: Genital mutilation; constitution; education

I. INTRODUCTION

Uganda has a strong legal framework protecting the right to education as a fundamental human right enshrined in the 1995 Constitution. Uganda has signed and ratified several important regional and international conventions protecting the right to education, such as the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Convention on Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. These provide a comprehensive set of good education policies that aim at ensuring education for all. Despite this, some cultural values, such as female genital mutilation are alleged to exist which tend to impact negatively on the girl child education (Okurut, 2014).

Female Genital Mutilation FGM comprises all procedures involving partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs whether for cultural, religious or other non-therapeutic reasons and does not include medically prescribed surgery or that which is performed for sex change reasons (Abdallah, 2008). Acknowledging that the tradition brings shame and stigmatization upon the entire family and prevents girls from becoming full and recognized members of their community if not practiced, the United Nations has labeled female genital mutilation as one of the harmful cultural practices that need to be eliminated in society not only in Africa but also in the

African immigrant communities in Europe.

In Uganda FGM is practiced by a minority of a population primarily the Sabiny (Sebei), who speak Kupsabiny. These people belong to an ethnic group called the Nilotics. Isolated by geography, poverty and/or low levels of development, the Sabiny community which lives in widely dispersed rural communities are the only community known to circumcise women in Uganda. As a result of migration, this practice has spread to her surrounding areas in Uganda like Moroto, Nakapiripit, Bugiri, Bukwo, Kamuli, Pokot, and Masindi (Oguttu, 2005).

Article 33 (1) of the Constitution of the Republic of Uganda states thus, “*women shall be accorded full and equal dignity of the person with men; Article 33 (3) states that the state shall protect women and their rights, taking into account their unique status and natural maternal functions in society*”. Although in Uganda a woman is a female person who has reached the age of 18 years and above, in the context of this Constitution, protecting the rights of women includes the rights of all the female persons irrespective of their age. Thus, the Government of Uganda is against such practices which are intended to humiliate women or those which go against their rights. However, having laws is one thing and implementing them is another as Kayindu (2017) claims; the constitution is in place but some people go against it. As related to female circumcision, some people love the practice; they feel it should continue that those who want it to end are against the people’s culture, the culture which gives them identity. Because of this, the practice is still done secretly.

Statement of the Problem

Article 33 (6) of the Constitution of the Republic of Uganda states that laws, cultures, customs or traditions which are against the dignity, welfare or interest of women or which undermine their status are prohibited by the constitution. By implication, female genital mutilation was prohibited from the year 1995 when Uganda’s Constitution was promulgated. Despite this however, and whereas some parents are aware of the harm female genital mutilation can bring, the Sebei and Pokot ethnic groups in Eastern Uganda secretly continue to have their daughters circumcised because it is deemed necessary by their community for bringing up a girl correctly, protecting her honor and maintaining the status of the entire family (Oguttu, 2005).

Thus, the study was carried out to provide answers to the question, "To what extent is Female Genital Mutilation practiced today in Kapchorwa District?"

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Historically, circumcision especially for the males has been carried out, for example in the Bible in the book of Genesis chapter 15 God commanded Abraham to be circumcised together with all his descendants (the Hebrews/ Israelites), an external mark to differentiate them from the rest of the people. Whereas boys were to be circumcised, the females were not to be circumcised. Even with the advent of Islam, the males henceforth started circumcising males, but not females. The traditional mentality of men being masters of women, as well as men's dominion over women caused men to circumcise women. Since men were traditionally polygamous, and because polygamy was so much valued as well as the fact that men could spend much time in work such as looking after animals, digging, and sometimes spends the time in war fighting, there was a fear that the numerous wives men had could practice adultery. Because of that, they were circumcised so as to reduce their libido (Okurut, 2014). The practice was transmitted from one generation to another. The tribal conflicts and migration of people from one part to another, made the practice to spread from one area to another.

Mbiti (1975) asserts that many tribes in Kenya circumcised women apart from the Luo, Luia and Karenjin. He asserts that the Africans valued the practice so much and threatened girls that in case they were not circumcised their clitoris or labia would grow so long and develop several long branches which would cause challenges in the movement/ walking of women, thus making the women look very unattractive and in the end would fail to get married. Such threats caused women to value circumcision.

Though FGM is practiced in Uganda, Egypt, Mali, Eritrea, Sudan, Central African Republic, and northern part of Ghana where it has been an old traditional and cultural practice of various ethnic groups, the highest prevalence rates are found in Somalia and Djibouti where FGM is virtually universal. The extent to which FGM is practiced varies greatly across regions within countries, and is most markedly associated with ethnicity. Reasons given for the continuation of FGM varies across countries and cultures but generally it is done for chastity, or marriage ability, religious identity, ritual marking of a transition to womanhood, maintenance of family honor and respect and improve of beauty and hygiene. The FGC practice is intended to initiate girls into adulthood and it is also seen as an expression of cultural identity and a sacred ritual sanctioned by ancestors and protected by cultural beliefs. Advocates for FGM say that the practice is a deep-rooted tradition, believe that a girl will be sexually promiscuous if she has not been cut. A cut girl is considered clean and neat, and properly prepared for her journey into womanhood. Support for the practice is typically higher

among those with less education, who lives in rural areas, or who are from poor households (Geveva and Rushwan, 1997).

Several research conducted through interviews from communities supporting the practice gave major reasons as it is a norm to be passed on through generations, feminine hygiene, fertility enhancement, a rite of passage, virginity preservation, socio-political integration and maintenance of societal cohesiveness, as well as economic reasons. However, marriage ability and control of sexual morals accounts for the universality and persistence of FGM (Okurut, 2014). This is in line with an earlier study carried out by Oguttu (2005) among the Sebei. He found out that female circumcision was still being practiced despite being banned by the laws of Uganda because of the threats used by the elders such as getting curses from the ancestors, men totally hating uncircumcised women, uncircumcised women getting miscarriages, as well as political reasons such as the area members of parliament, L.C 1, L.C 2, L.C 3 and L.C 5 Chairpersons handling the perpetrators of female circumcision with kid gloves for fear that the local people who seemed to love their culture so much would get annoyed with them and refuse to elect them in office next time. There is however time factor as a gap. Oguttu (2005)'s study was carried out 12 years ago. In the year 2017 it was hoped that many changes could have taken place. This gap prompted the current study.

Female genital mutilation is a highly valued ritual in many cultures, whose purpose is to mark the transition from childhood to womanhood, therefore it is an important rite of passage from one stage of life to the other. It is intended to impart the skills and knowledge a woman needs to fulfill her duties as a wife and a mother. FGM is traditionally practiced as ritual signifying the acceptance of a woman into society and establishes her eligibility for marriage as it is extremely difficult, if not possible for a woman to get married if she has not have her clitoris cut off in such societies. A girl who does not have her clitoris removed is considered a great danger and a fatal to a man if her clitoris touches his penis. Immediately after the genital cut, an elaborate series of ceremonies accompany the event, and special songs are song with dancing and chanting intended to teach the already circumcised girls their duties and community desirable behavior as wives and mothers (Mbiti, 1995). Whereas this is relevant, it is not mentioned anywhere that these claims were a based on empirical studies done among students of upper secondary school level, thus the current study.

Traditionally, in marriage, circumcised girls do provide their parents a lot of wealth through dowry, also referred to as bride wealth or pride price payment from whoever they will marry typically in form of livestock and in some cases money exchanged. On the other hand, uncircumcised girls are not married within the community and if any marriage it is with the outcasts of the society or outsiders who will risk to do so. For those who are lucky to get husbands, it is a taboo for their parents to receive a dowry as they believe the bride is not pure. More often than not, the

girls who do not heed the call for the practice are cursed, blamed and ostracized or even banished from the society. They believe that an uncircumcised girl is unhygienic, smelling and their genital organs are unsightly. Because of this, FGM becomes a valued mandatory social rite in some societies. In fact most girls are willing to succumb to the tormenting pain amidst subsequent dangers of long term health problems to secure this pride, respect, and acceptance and to overcome prejudices shown to uncircumcised girls (Geveva and Rushwan (1997).

Like other men in many societies, pastoralist men in their jealousy and deliberate intent to subjugate women by controlling their sexuality, believe that FGM inhibits women's urge for sex, inspires submissiveness, reduces infidelity, promiscuity and instills chastity and therefore the deadening of woman's sexual pleasure by mutilation is the only way of guaranteeing her virginity and fidelity. In some cultures, a potential mother in law uses FGM to discover virginity status of the bride. If she is found not to be virgin, her husband-to-be has the right to reject her and demand a return of the pride price. When a woman is rejected in this manner, her family as well as the whole clan is disgraced and stigmatized, leaving the woman with little choice but to vanish from the area forever before facing the wrath of the angry family members. It is clear that there are still several myths surrounding the FGM practice such as FGM inhibiting women's urge for sex, inspiring submissiveness, reducing infidelity, promiscuity and instills chastity. Since fidelity and chastity are moral values in the society the communities still practicing FGM remain convinced that deadening of woman's sexual pleasure by mutilation is the only way of guaranteeing her virginity and fidelity. This belief itself poses a great challenge to the alternative rites of passage. The proposed study seeks to assess the potency of the alternative rites practice in mitigating the negative effects associated with FGM and in specific its capacity to enhance the girl-child self esteem and participation in education. Female genital mutilation practice has several psychological effects on the lives of girls and women. Girls have reported disturbance in eating, sleep, mood and cognition shortly after experiencing the procedure. Many girls and women experience fear, submission or inhibition and suppressed feelings of anger, bitterness or betrayal. Studies from Somalia and Sudan indicate resulting negative effects on self- esteem and self- identity (Serbin et al, 1993; Tembon & Fort, 2008). This belief contradicts the findings of the study by Munyagwa (2015) among the female Baganda of Uganda, who instead tend to elongate their labia (instead of cutting them). He found that though this practice of elongating the labia has reduced, many Baganda men prefer men with elongated labia. This reveals cultural diversity and its role in the psycho-social wellbeing of the people.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study was carried out using a cross-sectional survey design with both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The study targeted female students who have reached the circumcisable age of 16-20. These were 1,125 from 20 secondary schools, whereby nine of them were classified as rural schools (453 female students) and the rest, 672 students from 11 secondary schools were classified as being urban (being within or near towns in Kapchorwa). Kapchorwa District is a District in the Eastern Region of Uganda. The District is bordered by Kween District to the North east and East, Sironko District to the south, and Bulambuli District to the west and Northeast. The district was chosen because it is dominated by the Sebei ethnic group who by culture strongly believe in female genital mutilation.

Sampling

A sample of 970 respondents all of whom were female students from S.4 to S.6 was involved in the study; they were asked whether they are circumcised or not. S.4-S.6 students were the ones involved in the study because among the Sebei, girls are usually circumcised at the age of 16-20 years. Many times children in rural districts reach S.4 when they are aged 17 years and above, therefore by the time they reach S.4-S.6 they are expected to have been circumcised. The respondents were got using the Morgan and Krejcie (1970) method of determining the sample from nine rural schools and from eleven schools near towns in Kachorwa district.

Sample selection is shown in table 1.

Table 1: Showing selection of the sample

Table 1 (a) Rural schools

Rural Schools	Target Population of Girls, S.4-S.6	Sample Size
A	55	48
B	80	66
C	36	32
D	38	36
E	45	40
F	50	44
G	61	52
H	42	36
I	46	40
Sub-Total	453	394
Urban Schools		
J	66	56
K	60	52
L	40	36
M	74	63
N	66	56

O	60	52
P	55	48
Q	52	44
R	70	59
S	81	66
T	48	44
Sub-total	672	579
Grand total	1,125	970

Data Collection Instruments

Both questionnaires and oral interviews were used. The respondents of the study were required to fill a questionnaire indicating their age and class, as well as to indicate whether they are circumcised or not; and in case they are not circumcised whether or not they will accept to be circumcised in future. Questionnaires were used because of the desire to collect data from a large number of female students so as to be able to make sound conclusions which can reliably be generalized to all female secondary students in Kapchorwa, in addition, all the respondents were literate. In addition, 65 female respondents were subjected to oral interviews so as to get details on female circumcision in Kapchorwa district.

Data Analysis

To establish the extent to which Female Genital Mutilation is practiced today in Kapchorwa district, percentage distribution was used.

Limitations of the Study

The study was limited to the female students in the secondary schools which participated in the study. It left out those who were out of school. Future studies should address those females outside school.

Secondly, the researcher can not claim 100% of the accuracy of the answers the girls made while filling the questionnaire on their state of being circumcised or not; and if not circumcised whether they will or will not accept to be circumcised. Despite this, the researcher believes this study is worthwhile and has implications for practice.

IV. FINDINGS

It was found out that female genital mutilation is practiced to a small extent since only 28.5% of the girls in S.4-S.6 who are expected to be circumcised are the only ones circumcised. The rest, 71.5% are not circumcised, as shown in table 2.

Table 2 showing the extent to which Female Genital Mutilation is practiced today in Kapchorwa district

Rural Schools	Target Population of Girls, S.4-S.6	Sample Size	Circumcised	% of the circumcised	% of the non circumcised
A	55	48	12	25	
B	80	66	21	31.8	
C	36	32	20	62.5	
D	38	36	23	63.9	
E	45	40	16	40	
F	50	44	14	31.8	
G	61	52	16	30.8	
H	42	36	14	38.9	
I	46	40	13	32.5	
Sub-Total	453	394	149	37.8	62.2
Urban Schools					
J	66	56	14	25	
K	60	52	10	19.2	
L	40	36	10	27.8	
M	74	63	13	20.1	
N	66	56	12	21.4	
O	60	52	10	19.2	
P	55	48	12	25	
Q	52	44	10	22.7	
R	70	59	12	20.3	
S	81	66	16	24.2	

T	48	44	08	18.2	
Sub-total	672	576	127	22.1	77.9
Grand total	1,125	970	276	28.5	71.5

Source: Primary data from the filled questionnaires

Table 2 shows that in Kapchorwa district female genital mutilation is going down especially in the urban schools. In schools within and near big towns such as Kapchorwa and Kweni, it was found out that among the 576 students, only 127 students (22.1%) were circumcised; the rest, 77.9% of the girls in the circumcisable age were not circumcised. Whereas in the rural schools in areas like Chema, Tegeres and Kapchesom, female circumcision is practiced slightly higher there as shown in table 4.1 that out of the 394 female students of S4-S.6 circumcisable age, 149 (37.8%) were circumcised, yet 62.2% of the girls of circumcisable age were not circumcised.

In two rural schools code-named C and D due to ethical reasons, a relatively large number of students were circumcised (62.5% and 63.9% respectively). In the rest of the rural schools the percentage of the circumcised was low, such as in school a (25%). In urban schools the percentage of the circumcised was low, such as in school j (25%); school K (20.1%); school L (21.4%); School O (19.2%); school T (18.2%), among others. This shows that students and parents in urban areas are more sensitized about the dangers of female genital mutilation, and they appreciate such sensitization than their counterparts in rural areas.

The uncircumcised female students were asked whether they will later accept to be circumcised in future. Their responses are shown in table 3.

Table 3 Showing the responses of the non circumcised girls in circumcisable age whether or not they will accept to be circumcised in future.

Item	Sample	Will Accept	Will Not Accept
Rural Schools	254	23 (09.1%)	231 (90.9%)
Urban Schools	449	16 (3.6%)	433 (96.4%)
Sub-total	703	39	664
Grand total		5.5%	94.5%

Table 3 reveals that the female students of circumcisable age who reported that they were not circumcised, when they were asked whether or not they will accept to be circumcised in future, 94.5% of the girls said that they will not accept to be circumcised. Only 5.5% of the girls said they will accept to be circumcised.

Further investigation was made on the urban and rural schools (whereby urban schools in this context mean schools within and near the towns in the district of Kapchorwa). It was found out that a very large number of students (96.4%) of the girls said they will not accept to be circumcised, compared to their counterparts in rural areas whereby (90.9%) of the girls said

they will not accept to be circumcised. The difference between the rural and urban schools was however very small. This reveals that on average, female secondary students today in Kapchorwa hate the practice of female circumcision. Given that the majority of the girls who participated in the study were relatively mature since they were 16 years and above, it suggests that they have the ability to stick to their words. They even know the steps to take in case some individuals want to force them to be circumcised. This was confirmed during oral interviews when a S.6 student said, *“Nobody can force me to be circumcised; or else I report them to police or to the office of the RDC (Resident District Commissioner) for action, I know my rights as a girl child”*.

Female students in one school located on the village of Kwoti, said that elders usually argue that cutting the genitalia of a girl is a practice that has been passed on by the ancestors for generations and according to them it is a blessing to have a girl cut.

Those who are circumcised said that it is carried out in the month of August and December of every year. The reason for the choice of these months is plenty of food to feed the circumcised and that it is a holiday period for the circumcised to heal properly since healing takes between 2 to 4 weeks. The local name for the circumcision among the Sebei is *“tisyeti hatibiki”*. The respondents narrated that it is done by local female surgeons and they usually do it early morning, 6:00-7:30 am from bushes or in doors surely for fear and being arrested by the police and some government representatives such as the GISO (Gombolola Internal Security Operation), DISO (District internal Security Operatives) and RDC (Resident District Commissioner) since the practice is now illegal. Surgeons are only female elders but the practice has to be witnessed by both male and female elders. They said that some times, however, whereas some L.C 1 officials supposed to report to the police those to circumcise girls, sometimes the L.C1 officials who are in most cases men tend to connive with the circumcisers and shield them. This is because some Sabinu men still believe in the importance of that ritual, that it is a tool to prevent immorality among women which was handed over to them by their ancestors.

The respondents reported that if a girl tries to resist they can use force to circumcise her. They said it is more prevalent among the less educated parents than the educated parents, as well as more in the rural areas than in the urban areas.

This was proved in table 2 whereby in the rural schools located on Kwoti village neighboring Teteri village, 62.3% and 63.9% of the girls who participated in the study reported that they were circumcised, yet in one school located in

Gamadin village, a village near a town only 20.1% of the girls who participated in the study reported that there were circumcised. The 79.9% of the girls were not circumcised.

Thus, female genital mutilation is now low in Kapchorwa but it has not yet died out completely. It is still being practiced to a small extent.

V. DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Discussion

It was found out to be low. According to qualitative data from the interviewees, the reasons advanced from the respondents, female genital mutilation reduction in Kapchorwa district is not accidental. It has occurred due to a number of reasons such as government legislation, that it is illegal and can attract penalties for the perpetrators of the practice, as reported by 23.7% of the interviewees, because of this, some people fear to bring themselves problems by perpetuating the practice. In addition, 26.6% of the interviewees said that women activists in the area such as the women members of parliament have done much to sensitise people on the dangers of this practice. As a result, some people have adhered to their advice and abandoned the practice. However, only 07.1% of the interviewees said that some men do not like circumcised women. They elaborated that with the current increasing rate of cross-cultural marriages especially among the elites, circumcised women are not liked by men who come from societies where women do not circumcise such as Acholi, Lango, Arua, Busoga, Buganda, and Ankole.

Genital mutilation has however not died out completely. The respondents said that the practice is a cultural act, a practice which distinguishes a typical Sabinian woman from a non Sabinian, so it is for identity. The respondents said that there is a belief among the Sabinian that if the Labia are not cut at age of 16-20 years and they are left, a woman gets curses in her life as a result of the annoyance of the ancestors from whom one is descended. There is even a belief that if they are not cut, they can grow so long and make a woman very uncomfortable while walking. This issue relates to the Kikuyu cultural practice of circumcising women because of the belief that the Labia if not cut at an early age, can grow like branches of a tree thus making the movement of the woman very hard (Mbiti, 1975). This however contradicts the Baganda cultural practice of pulling the Labia to elongate it as Kagwa (1991) and Munyagwa (2015) assert. They assert that the Baganda like the Labia so much that they pull them to become long so as to make a woman warm in her vagina, hence creating warmth for a man during sex, which in the end stabilizes marriage.

34.4% of the interviewees said that Sabinian men do not want a woman who did not undergo circumcision. They perceive her as a prostitute and she can therefore fail to get married. Since however the interviewees were students who seemed to be exposed to relevant literature on female circumcision, some of

them said that it is a sign of the traditional men's' dominion over women that is why men want to reduce the desires of women since traditionally Sabinian men are polygamists. Having many wives creates fear in men that the women can commit adultery, so to prevent that adultery among women; they decided to circumcise them to reduce their sexual urge, a similar reason raised by Mbiti (1975) on female circumcision in many Kenyan tribes.

Conclusion and Recommendation

In Kapchorwa district, female genital mutilation is going down. This is because of government legislation, influence of women activists, as well as the influence of education and social media, however, it has not yet died out completely. Therefore, there is need for the Government to continue sensitizing the masses about the dangers of that practice so that it can be wiped out completely.

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