

An Exploration of Subjugation of Women among the Communities Practising Traditional Male Circumcision Rite in Eastern Cape, South Africa

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ABSTRACT Importantly, the world cannot be fair if women's rights in various facets of society continue to be stifled. The innumerable initiates' deaths year-in-year out, the pains and agonies of women because of their son's irreparable initiation damages have necessitated a desire to increase women's bargaining power in issues pertaining to the rite. The aim of this article using desktop review method is to discuss and debate subjugation of women in traditional male circumcision. Findings indicate that: women suffer huge exclusion in cultural and social domain; subjugating women a sure way of men's hegemony; Women's involvement in some cultural activities considered a taboo; deaths of the initiates has shaken gender dynamics associated with male initiation rite; and religious and other belief systems downplaying women's empowerment generally. The paper recommends following strategies: Embracing cultural rights of women; women's rights should not allow cultural oppression; and the need for effective gender based education.

INTRODUCTION

Inarguably, women in many contexts have suffered various cultural-based blows when societies use cultural lenses and cultural-ordained prerequisites to undermine, condescend, oppress and subjugate them, making them be passive while men take full control of some cultures (Kang'ethe 2014a). Ironically, women are also expected to participate in aspects of hospitability and service to all. This has not augured well as far as their cultural rights are concerned. These researchers contend that none of either the international, regional or national cultural rights have made a gender demarcation of the phenomenon (Nomngcoyiya 2015). These gender based dynamics are socially constructed and need to be explored with the hope of not only bringing to the fore the circumstances in which women's cultural rights have been violated, but also possibly come up with plausible and pragmatic suggestions to mitigate the situation. This is to make issues of modernization and globalization gender friendly (Kheswa et al. 2014). Contextually, traditional male circumcision (TMC) has been informed by patriarchal power dynamics which have shaped African societies to believe

that men should overly control women and children, with women being expected to be passive in various aspects of life and men to take the lead (Gudani 2011). However, the current cultural dispensation and life generally present a need to question these patriarchal demands if globalization is to be embraced in equal measures by both genders.

Evidently also, in no culture has the phenomenon of women's subjugation being apparent than in the traditional male circumcision in South Africa. One pertinent reason for this form of subjugation is the fact that traditional male circumcision rite just like other various African cultural practices is both patriarchal grounded and informed (Kang'ethe and Nomngcoyiya 2014). This means that it is only men who have the ultimate control of all the processes, while women are passive and play an insignificant role (Mgqolozana 2009). It has therefore become apparent that the process subjects women to a state of discrimination, prejudice, and social injustice.

Pragmatically also, undermining the role and participation of women in traditional male circumcision practice violates not only the South African constitution and Bill of Rights (Maseko

2008), but also the eight United Nations driven global development benchmarks and gender empowering international instruments such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (The Millennium Development Goals Report 2014). However, it is poignantly clear that the process of women achieving their rights in many countries of the African continent is taking a snail's pace to entrench itself. To this end, Nomngcoyiya (2015) is of the view that majority of the communities in Africa still undermine the role of women and their contribution to many facets of life, traditional male circumcision being one of them. Since the phenomenon is very rife in the culture of traditional male circumcision, it follows, then, that women are also oppressed and subjugated (Mubangizi 2012). This is an indicator that the culture, then is a poignant hurdle towards the goal of the emancipation of women generally (Kang'ethe 2013).

However, with the wind of women rights blowing and penetrating all the corners of the globe, it is then pertinent that women's cultural rights are achieved. This will possibly increase their participation and ownership of the traditional male circumcision. And women indeed have the right to claim ownership because it is their children who are involved in the rite. Perhaps this is even more urgent with the increasing phenomenon of female headed households in South Africa where women perform the role of being the mother and the father at the same time (Makiwane and Berry 2013).

Problem Statement

Since time immemorial, the voices of women in traditional male circumcision (TMC) in societies that practise the rite in South Africa continue to suffer oppression, prejudice and discrimination. This is because women are supposed to be passive and submissive. However, there are feelers that it is women who continue to psychosocially handle the affairs of the initiates, especially when they experience mishaps during and after the rite of passage. Some researchers and even women themselves feel that their voice and participation is critical. This is also in line with countries' gender empowerment paradigms espoused in the constitution, Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), as well as other International Protocols. This paper, therefore, serves as a platform for discussions, debates and dis-

courses that seek to advocate for the need to engender the traditional male circumcision to accommodate women in the practice.

Aim and Objectives

The aim and objectives of this paper is to make debates and discourses towards emphasizing the need to engender the traditional male circumcision (TMC) to accommodate women in the practice; as well as to provide answers to some of the important questions that have been asked by everyone such as: For how long should women remain voiceless in various cultural phenomena such as the traditional male circumcision?

METHODOLOGY

This paper has adopted a literature review methodology and has immensely benefitted from an array of contemporary literature sources such as newspapers, magazines, academic journals, online resources, as well as the books. It has also benefitted from these researchers' experiential knowledge on the domain of traditional male circumcision; and their passion for women empowerment in various facets of life. The desire to raise women's cultural emancipation as well as convince societies of the need for more involvement and engagement of women in the culture of traditional male circumcision in South Africa has formed the thrust of this paper.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

Dynamics Surrounding Women Subjugation in Various Cultural Domains of Life

Women Suffer Huge Exclusion in Cultural and Social Domain

The ever broadening lacuna towards gender differences in the traditional male circumcision domain poses international, national and local challenges as the hegemony of male dominance continue to be entrenched in cultural practices such as traditional male circumcision (Feni 2014). This is because the culture of traditional male circumcision has embedded a lot of patriarchal characteristics making the place and participation of women a difficult terrain (Ngcukana 2014). Even as the wind of human rights especially the rights of the vulnerable groups in the societies

such as women and the children continue to blow, the phenomenon of traditional male circumcision continue to rear its ugly head of subjugating, suppressing and oppressing women especially among the groupings that practice the norm in South Africa. Appreciably though, women have been instrumental in cooking and preparing the food that is required by both the initiates and those who are involved in various stages of the ceremony (Ntombana 2011). Pathetically though, women have not been accommodated in any important decision making process pertaining to the actual process of circumcision (Kepe 2010). This is ironical because in the event that the initiates experience some kinds of mishaps, it is women who have to shoulder the responsibility of nursing and taking care of the victims. This is critical especially to single mothers (Nomngcoyiya 2015). With South African families increasingly becoming matrifocal, it is critical that the role and place of women in decision making pertaining to their sons' initiation process is reconsidered and culturally reworked (Feketha 2014).

While the phenomenon of patriarchy and masculinity are inseparable, irrefutably, they are symbols of power and hegemony (Lindegger and Maxwell 2005), with the men who undermine women's involvement in the rite feeling that women empowerment is a process geared towards diluting and weakening their power dynamics and thereby undermining their masculinity (Langa 2012). Analytically, an inextricable relationship between patriarchy and masculinity exists. For example, what the traditional male circumcision holds in esteem, its ideals and tenets such as physical hardship, endurance or pain and courage, are believed to be the underpinnings that enhance patriarchal and masculine virility (Mavundla et al. 2009; Peltzer et al. 2009).

Subjugating Women a Sure Way of Men's Power Hegemony

Philosophically, African leadership has not completely embraced democratisation for all the population segments in many countries. Instead, power has been championed through making and driving many people desperate so that they can adore, fear, and to pay allegiance to those holding power (Prager 2012). Since patriarchy is a perfect facilitator of power hegemony, African

leadership has capitalized on controlling children and women as a way of upholding and maintaining power (Dunne 2009). The power dynamics have also been defined and maintained through some forms of gender demarcation and differentiation (Women and Law in Southern Africa 1998). Men have therefore put themselves at the helm of important social and cultural activities (Afolayan 2004). This is why the culture of male circumcision has overly been controlled by men while women have been relegated to a passive position (Ntombana 2011). Realistically also, Africa's cultural norms and standards have created power difference between men and women by defining their roles in societal settings, religious, occupational, family, marriage and sexual relationships (Kang'ethe 2013). For example, Sommers (2012) contends that in various spheres of society, whether traditional or western, women have been viewed as mere sex objects and sex suppliers, with little or no authority over sexual engagement or sexual encounters, and are expected to remain submissive to their male counterparts and even monogamous in marriage (Mgqolozana 2009). Contrastingly, and on the other hand, their male counterparts normally receive a societal open cheque slate to behave the way they want, for example, to have multiple sexual partners, be polygamous and have more authority and power over sexual relationships (Kang'ethe 2014a).

Women's Involvement in Some Cultural Activities Considered a Taboo

Ideologically, cultures in many corners of the globe have been considered strong enough to give the societies a direction to determine the societal do's and don't's, the thinking as well as the attitudes of their people (Kang'ethe and Nomngcoyiya 2014). Cultures; therefore have also been responsible for drawing gender boundaries. Perhaps the fact that many African societies, life events have followed myths, cultural stereotypes and taboos, can help to explain this allegation. Among the amaXhosa (Xhosa speaking people) of the Eastern Cape, for example, who have upheld and maintained the culture of circumcision since time immemorial, it has been a taboo to involve women, children, and outsiders, as it is believed the act could possibly make the societal ancestors and deities angry (Kepe 2010; Ntombana 2011). Since circumcision is

believed to link and unite the initiates with the spirits of the ancestors and the deities, maintenance of the norm has been stringently upheld (Feni 2014). The society also believes that behaving contrary is a recipe of possible chaos such as the deities bringing sickness to the initiate and the deviants (Mavundla et al. 2009). Even in the contemporary world, the aforementioned gender dynamics have been integrated in virtually all the cultural practices such as traditional male circumcision with the result that women continue to be undermined and suffer various forms of subjugation (Commission on Gender Equality 2014). Therefore, women have been relegated to some apparently important but an insignificant tasks as far as having a say in the actual process of circumcision. They have been expected to stick to their passive position (Connell 2007). Purposively, men have seen them fit to carry the role of ensuring all the required material for the cultural practice to be a success and are well organized (Mubangizi 2012). However, modernization and globalization, as well as reality on the ground are slowly creating opportunities for such beliefs to be challenged. As eluded above, therefore, the phenomenon of increased matrifocality among the families forms such an opportunity (Makiwane and Berry 2013). With families that are matrifocal, women may feel they are ready to take charge of all the affairs of their children whether cultural dictates proves otherwise (Prager 2012).

Deaths of the Initiates Have Shaken the Gender Dynamics Associated With the Circumcision Rite

Perhaps the need for women to be more involved in the male circumcision rite has arisen due to the increasing death rate among the initiates making women to be concerned with the lives of their sons. Apparently, the act has made the cultural arrangement to be undermined, not only by women, but also by many people who value the sanctity of human life (Kang'ethe and Nomngcoyiya in press). Perhaps this is why some cultural architects such as these researchers are calling for a succinct conduction of cost benefit analysis to pit the apparent social capital still left embedded in the rite against the social, financial and psychological costs that the families of the initiates and the initiates themselves have been forced to bear. This has to

take into consideration the immense agony of the initiates losing especially their reproductive sexual organs, and of course that of their families and relatives who may have to continually take care of these victims of the rite (Peltzer et al. 2009). Therefore, the year-in-year-out innumerable mishaps that have been associated with the rite have provided a fertile ground for the society to challenge the cultural fibre associated with traditional male circumcision (Ntombana 2011).

Religious and Other Belief Systems Downplaying Women's Empowerment

Incontrovertibly, many religious belief systems in many African settings, South African notwithstanding appears to emphasize the supremacy of men compared to their female counterparts (Kang'ethe 2011). This is perhaps why in many religious groupings; one is likely to have men as leaders and women, perhaps occupying other insignificant positions in the religious structure. Perhaps this lays a strong ground for the men who are custodians of the culture of traditional male circumcision to follow the largely accepted cultural and religious beliefs to keep men at the helm of cultural and social domains (Mavundla et al. 2009). Of course the events driven by increasing modernization, eurocentrism, westernization, civilization and globalization form formidable grounds to shake these belief systems in order to lay bare the position of a woman as far as her human rights are concerned (Kang'ethe and Nomngcoyiya 2014). However, the process appears to unduly dragging its feet.

Strategies towards Bolstering the Position and Rights of Women to be more involved in Traditional Male Circumcision

Embracing Cultural Rights of Women

Realistically, articles 30 and 31 of the South African constitution, backed by other international culture based testaments and protocols uphold the enjoyment of all the people in the cultures of their land (Peltzer et al. 2007). However, this does not have a gender demarcation, perhaps reflecting how much a man should enjoy or take control and the slice of the enjoyment that women should enjoy and to what ex-

tent (United Nations 1993). These researchers think that the definition and allotment of cultural rights between men and women in any cultural process has been a societal construction, which can as well be deconstructed (Kang'ethe 2011). This thinking, therefore, heralds a possible turning point in which societies can achieve social deconstruction and bestows women with power to get more involved in the traditional male circumcision, in a significant and a satisfactory measure to women. This would make them come out of the cultural trap they have been since time immemorial. Perhaps women involvement could possibly bring in a new wave of thinking and concern that can help to avert the tide of year-in-year-out state of unrelenting deaths of the initiates in some parts of Eastern Cape Province (Kang'ethe and Nomngcoyiya in press).

Women's Human Rights Should Not Allow Cultural Oppression

Undeniably, in any country of the world, human rights' dispensation knows no gender boundaries (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) 2008). This means that gender should not be a factor to undermine one's human rights (Commission on Gender Equality 2014). Because gender is a social construct in any society, it can be deconstructed to effectuate human rights of all men and women of any country. Apparently, even if cultures are believed to embed immense social capital for the adherents as well as for the whole society at large, it has been a naked fact that most African cultures abuse and undermines the human rights of women (Barker 2005). This is because cultures constitute ingredients of customs, traditions, taboos, myths and stereotypes, most of which are either patriarchal informed or grounded (Tjale and de Villiers 2004). Perhaps it would be critical that the retrogressive aspects of the cultures that undermine women's human rights are diluted, or annihilated altogether (Kang'ethe 2014b).

CONCLUSION

Incontrovertibly, it is critical, timeous and topical that cultural practices such as traditional male circumcision (TMC) espouse human rights especially those pertaining to gender if countries such as South Africa expect to achieve pertinent gender based Millennium Development

Goals, specifically, the Millennium Development Goal number three, by the close of year 2015. The fact that traditional male circumcision has been gender skewed presents a human rights violation and abuse towards women. Therefore, time for recognising and repositioning the niche of women as main stakeholders in a traditional male circumcision terrain is critical. Importantly, the rights of women in the involvement and engagement of cultural activities need to be realised, more so in this current dispensation where boys are being raised and socialised in single-mother-headed households.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Need for Gender-based Education

Importantly, effective gender education is one of the major tools that can help in harnessing, tapping and unleashing the potent and capacity of women as well as fostering the autonomy of women. Optimistically, effective gender based education will enable the shunning away of the dependence of women on men, as well as strengthening both their social cohesion and socio-economic fibres. There is therefore a need to mainstream effective gender-based education targeting both boys and men with the hope that they will positively change their attitudes and practices around gender and sexuality.

Cultures Should Respect Human Rights of Women

The human rights of women in cultural participation should be appreciated and due to matri-focal nature of the contemporary society in South Africa. It is imperative that women fully participate in cultural activities and operations especially if they involve them and their children. There's a need for societies to disallow cultural dispensation to be deterrents to women's enjoyment of the rights that are succinctly enshrined not only in their countries Constitution and Bill of Rights, but also strongly anchored in the global gender empowering instruments and protocols.

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