

Female Circumcision: Its Psychological Effects on Victims, Family and the Society

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ABSTRACT The paper attempts a definition of female circumcision and identification of its various forms. The probability of certain psychological consequences of female circumcision on both the victims and the society were highlighted. For example the probability of suffering from frigidity, low self esteem and achievement motivation, all of which have their effect on societal level of development was highlighted. It was then suggested that there should be an attempt at eradicating this cultural practice.

INTRODUCTION

Let me first start the discussion by defining and identifying terms such as psychology and female circumcision.

When we talk of psychology, we are interested in individual behaviour. How do individuals influence and are influenced in their behaviours by the environment. The environment can be internal such as the effect of too much sugar in the blood on overall (overt) behaviour or external environment such as parents, peers, school, church, culture and even space and buildings. It is the interaction and the product thereof, between the human being and the environment that forms the basis of psychology in the contemporary world. Any behaviour at all, that can be traced back to one or all of these environmental variables, singularly or interactively, can be described as the psychological consequence(s) of that/those variable(s).

Female circumcision (FC) is the partial or total removal of the female genitalia by whatever means that is acceptable within a given culture. By this definition we have allowed for cultural diversification in the types or forms of FC. There are three types of FC as identified by Institute for Development Training (1986), Balogun (1995) and Owumi (1994). The first one which is the less severe form is called Type I (Sunna) circumcision which involves the removal of the prepuce of the clitoris which is similar to the foreskin of the male organ. The Type II (excision/reduction) is a severe form of circumcision, which involves

the removal of the prepuce and the glands of the labia minora or the whole of it without including the labia majora and without the closure or the vulva. Type III (Pharaonic infibulation) or circumcision is the most severe form. Here, the whole of the clitoris, the labia minor and majora are removed. The two sides of the vulva are then stitched together, using silk, catgut or thorns, leaving a small opening to allow urinary and menstrual flow. According to Owumi (1994), apart from the primary process of the method, the system of de-infibulation and re-infibulation make the entire process a "hell" on earth for the victims. This may be responsible for the limitation in number of culture/people who subscribe to this practice (Cook, 1982). Cook (1982) even identified a more devastating type he called introcision. This involves the enlargement of the vaginal orifice at puberty by tearing it downward manually (!!!) or splitting of the perineum with a stone knife. No wonder a more encompassing name is being given to the practice now, i.e. Female Genitalia Mutilation.

The form and age at which a victim is subjected to this practice varies from culture to culture as well. While among the Yorubas of Nigeria, the sunna type is common; the act is usually performed on the child at about a week old to one month. On the other hand, among Okpes of Delta State of Nigeria, the age is commonly fixed for 13 – 21 years, i.e. at puberty (Owumi, 1994), though earlier years i.e. 10 – 12 or later years (22 years and above) were equally reported. This perhaps might be a better point at which psychological implication of FC on victims and the society be reported.

FEMALE CIRCUMCISION: ITS PRACTICE AND PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPLICATION

As earlier explained, psychological consequences are manifestation of environmental stimulation, this time around that of cultural practices. Perhaps, because the common FGM, i.e. the sunna which is adopted in this country, may not have great psychological consequence (s)

as others since its performed very early in life, but its implication in later life can not be overemphasized. For example, since there is a reduction in genitalia openings or birth canal as its properly called, the victim during childbirth may experience prolonged labour. Unattended to prolonged labour could be very scary and life threatening as most girls/adolescents end up experiencing Vesico Viginal Fistula (VVF); a condition or urine incontinence; thereby rendering the victim artificially unproductive again. The sufferer is then isolated, rejected at a very early age in life and therefore become depressed. This is so because childbearing is highly treasured in this part of the world. The sufferer is now treated as a social outcast in a holistic society thereby compounding her depressive mood, which is caused by cultural values she was forced to subscribe to.

FC as its being practiced among Okpes of the Delta State of Nigeria has many psychological implication for the victims and the society at large. For example, Owumi (1994) described how a girl is tricked into performing the act and held down with legs tied like a ram about being slaughtered. The harrowing experience leaves a scar on the psyche of the victim for life sometimes leading to nervous wreck, a phobic individual who is constantly terrified by the sight of razor-like objects. She is reduced in her psyche to a second class human being because she is at first treated equally as a ram, secondly at the age the act was performed, the process is being paid for by the would-be husband who sees her thereafter as his property, to be "toyed" with according to his dictates.

With the kind of rites performed and the accompanying gifts, what kind of social and moral values are being inculcated into the psyche of the victims and the society at large? A society that would encourage dastardly acts as means of getting cheap rewards, a society that should be materially conscious in life without concern for human life or feelings. This is because an association is established between negative acts and positive rewards. Another perspective to this act is that there are two conflictual approaches i.e. avoidance-approach conflict. Unresolved conflict is the basis of all neurotic disorders.

Coupled with the above is the fact that the trauma associated with the practice in Okpe and Type II and III forms of FC could lead to psycho-sexual disorders. First, when sex which is supposed to be enjoyed by both parties, was being

anticipated, it is possible that the girl experiences frigidity, a kind of fright associated with possible pains experienced in the past as that which is about to be experienced. Both she and her partner would not enjoy the act and as a result the girl either feels inadequate and end up a nut case or the man looks for another, thereby encouraging promiscuity and its attendant consequences such as STD and HIV/AIDS, or even population explosion. Again the process of de-infibulation and re-infibulation, makes childbearing a curse to the womenfolk. The pains associated with this act could be killing that the woman may end up being hysterical for life during a particular stage or process in Type III, thereby wasting a human resource in the society to a cultural practice that could have been avoided.

Another psychological problem is that of autism – withdrawal into one's shell. If a woman were to be given Type III form of FC, she may end-up feeling incomplete because some parts of her body is missing. The material self, that we all extend to all our possessions and would want to take care of has been greatly abused, defaced and rendered unattractive. Since this most treasured part (according to Sigmund Freud) of the female is "missing", why mix with complete people who may ridicule and stigmatized her as "*alabo ara*" i.e incomplete person or whatever term they may use.

Equally related to this sense of loss is the probability of experiencing low or negative self-esteem. Self-esteem is the degree of self worth individual places on him/herself. It is a form of self-evaluation. Because of a loss of a pride possession, it is possible that the woman/child sees nothing good in her any more. This may eventually affect her level of achievement motivation which is a kind of strive towards societally approved standard of excellence. Both factors i.e. self-esteem and achievement motivation have been reported to correlate highly with a society's level of development (Balogun, 1994; McClelland, 1961). A society whose citizens have, collectively and individually, low levels of self-esteem and achievement motivation, does not strive to improve itself socio-economically and remain retarded. FC victims may have adorn the toga of self-worthlessness making them human vegetables and therefore useless to the family and society in general.

CONCLUSION

An attempt to cover all the possible conse-

quences of FC in this paper would be an exercise in futility. I or even psychologists in general can not attempt to be a Nostradamus. After all, life itself is a probability, but the probability of having a post FC psychological consequence(s) is high. What forms and how the victim, the family and the society experience this will be a function of their tolerance level. Many have said that "its our culture", "its been done over generations in my family and nothing even happened". But nobody knows what would happen with the next person put through this experience, hence it is advocated that this practice should be eradicated forthwith.

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