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# HISTORICAL DYNAMICS OF FEMALE CIRCUMCISION IN NIGERIA: PUBLIC PERCEPTION, EFFECT, DENOUNCING AND GOVERNMENT INTERVENTION

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**Abstract**
Female genital mutilation (FGM), is immeasurable for girls as they become young women, marry or give birth. The discrimination of female circumcision is one of the most debated issues in modern history. Despite the vehement denouncing of female circumcision from the perspective of feminist ideals and underpinning this as a violation of human rights from feminist organizations and Western countries, those cultures which have female circumcision embedded within them believe that it is part of their cultural identity. Most of the world's nations have banned female circumcision, but the practice persists widely in Africa and parts of Asia. The paper through historical, analytical and descriptive methods of research explores the effect, public perception of Female Genital Circumcision, and government effort in ending the practices. It was discovered that cultural aspects regarded by many people make it a challenge to evaluate the social impacts of female circumcision on women. The practice of female circumcision often has fatal, physical and psychological consequences. However, the paper recommends that the federal government of Nigeria should proffer a reliable solution on the need to end the practices.

**Keywords**: Female, Mutilation, Nigeria, Effect, Girls, Women and Government

## Introduction

Female circumcision also known as female genital mutilation or (FGM) is a practice with significant cultural meaning in many different societies around the world, particularly in Africa. This phenomenon occurs for different reasons in Nigeria, mainly historical, cultural, social, and is especially common in certain ethnic group. The practice is almost certainly far older than the history books suggest, believed to be based in a number of pre-colonial traditions that reinforced social values about femininity, sexuality and belonging to the community. In the past, the Yoruba, Hausa-Fulani, and Edo ethnic groups were known to have practiced FGM as rites of passage, marriage anticipation, and social integration (Hernlund & Shell-Duncan, 2007). These functions indicate that female circumcision was an important marker of a cultural event, that is, a girl's passage through the threshold of womanhood and her assumed fitness to marry and bear children.

Anthropological articles and books on female circumcision tend to encourage cultural relativism. Anthropological narratives, however, shed light on why this practice persists (Afolabi, 2010). In many communities, female circumcision is interlaced with the social

structure and framed by ideas about purity, morality and cleanliness. "The ritualistic aspects of female circumcision are rich events full of symbolic meaning and social cohesion, it is impossible to disentangle cultural identity from the act itself" (Afolabi, 2010). The practice remains a potent cultural symbol for a number of Nigerian peoples.

Western gender and sexuality were enforced on Nigerian societies during the era of British colonialism. This colonial discourse often contradicted local cultural beliefs by portraying FGM as a savage practice. These tensions created a divide between how the practice was received internally and externally. When viewed through the lens of cultural resistance, the persistence of FGM amid colonial challenge and Western condemnation transforms into a form of cultural identity asserting defiance against foreign overshadowing (Ocholla-Ayayo, 1997).

**The Historical Context of Female Genital Circumcision**

FGC has historical roots within different ancient civilisations. Although the exact time of emergence of FGC is difficult to determine, some researchers indicate that the tradition has its beginning in Egypt. The archaeology is disputed, but the earliest archaeological evidence of such a practice in ancient Egypt suggests a date at least 2,000 BCE. But inscriptions from this era conjure events in which women underwent certain changes (Mackie, 1996) which could involve genital cutting. These findings have been interpreted in ways that could be evidence of FGC, although others argue that maybe these beliefs refer to more symbolic purification or preparation for adulthood. The cultural importance of FGC has been often associated with ideas about cleanliness and virtue. The practice has been seen in many societies, particularly in parts of Africa and the Middle East, as a way to control female sexuality and guarantee the fidelity of a woman. Set against the background of patriarchal social order trying to regulate women's bodies, these values are sounding bells (World Health Organization, 2023).

The role of religion, as an individual belief system but also as a societal determinant, is significant for the persistence of FGC. Within the Islamic context, however, the perception of FGC as a religious mandate is notably prevalent in several Islamic communities, even though not all Muslim communities share that perspective. A link between FGC and religious claims can be traced to interpretations of texts and teachings that at least endorse if not condone the practice. The Qur'an does not explicitly prohibit FGC, and some scholars take the position that FGC became part of ethnic Hispanic culture by way of cultural assimilation through integration with local customs (Shell-Duncan & Hernlund, 2000). Additionally it was justified by religious framework, within certain Christian and other ethnic communities. In locations where FGC is woven into the local tradition, religious leaders may continue the practice to secure cultural heritage and solidarity, reinvigorating its status within that community (WHO, 2023). The way that religion and culture come together to maintain existing hierarchies often works against the health and autonomy of women.

A new dimension to the discussion about FGC came about during the colonial period. European colonial powers frequently dismissed native tradition with contempt, describing practices such as FGC as barbarous or savage. This is part of a wider 'civilising' project that attempted to impose Western practices on colonised societies (Ylva, 2011). Colonial administrations frequently

imposed laws attempting to suppress what they considered deleterious practices such as FGC without consideration of the culture and the meaning surrounding such practices.

Colonial efforts to "protect" women in certain nations, while biblically and humanely inspired, silenced. Hence, in diverse areas, the outlawing of FGC provoked a complex kind of resistance from local actors, who perceived the legal prohibition as an assault against their cultural identity (Austrian, 1992). This makes it so not only the history of FGC gets complicated, but that the real architecture of power gets illuminated through the lens of capital creation that naturalizes, solidifies the practice and results in entrenchment of FGC.

According to the World Health Organisation, FGC is a health risk that has severe health consequences including complications during child birth and psychological trauma (WHO, 2021). It is part of a larger historical trend toward acknowledging women's human rights and bodily sovereignty, which dovetails with international campaigns for gender equality. Contemporary FGC campaigns often emphasize cultural sensitivity. They aim to find their way into the folds of local life, operating from within, while calling for the abandonment of harmful habits. Education is one aspect of programs that has evolved, helping to galvanize women and communities to question the cultural underpinnings of FGC (Hernlund & Shell-Duncan, 2000). But the fight faces considerable headwinds, especially in areas where traditions run deep and where change can provoke backlash.

**Cultural Identity and the Practice of Female Circumcision**

Cultural identity is a major factor of female circumcision in Nigeria. Communities consider the practice to be vital to maintaining their traditions and customs in the face of globalisation and cultural homogenisation. Female circumcision is an institution, seen as a rite of passage that connects generations of women. Older women may even try to learn the procedure and transfer the cultural narratives by offering meaning behind the procedure (Kandalaft, 2014).

Female circumcision can foster feelings of belonging and continuity that are hard for the practitioner to question or reject. For many Nigerian women, circumcision can bring a sense of pride and cultural allegiance. The ritual blurs the lines of class and status, engendering solidarity and communal ties among women (Obiora, 2016). Understanding the gendered and power dynamics in Nigeria is crucial to the cultural significance of female circumcision. In several Nigerian societies, power relations are such that men are given a superior standing while women occupy subordinate positions. Female circumcision can be considered as a patriarchal instrument that perpetuates these hierarchical power structures. These practices reinforce gender inequalities by exerting control over women’s bodies and sexuality. According to Shell-Duncan and Hernlund (2000), "FGM may be a way of enforcing subservience, as it is often associated with controlling women's behaviour and maintaining male dominance" (Shell-Duncan & Hernlund, 2000).

Moreover, it should be emphasized that disapproval of female circumcision is often a product of the same communities. Within Nigeria, women's groups and activists have increasingly voiced their opposition to the practice, calling for reform and a reassessment of cultural practices that

may violate women's rights (Hernlund & Shell-Duncan, 2007). These attempts, however, are often met with resistance — not just from traditionalists, but from women who recognize the importance of the practice for cultural identity.

Non-governmental organizations and community leaders also work to educate communities on the health risks of the procedure, including complications in labor and increased risk of infections (UNICEF, 2020). Such initiatives seek to empower women with real options rather than imposing judgments about what devout women do culturally. In the words of Patricia J. Williams (1999), "Empowerment for women is rooted not only in the cessation of that which diminishes us, but also in the reclamation of that which restores us, that which restores our humanity" (Williams, 1999).

As such, the intersection of culture, gender and health is important in the advocacy narrative. Argumentative discourse over female circumcision, as a subset of women' right would therefore be ideal in order to find a balance between keeping cultural identity alive while having women push for health and autonomy. Interestingly, women-led grassroots movements at the local level often do take this perspective alternative by both traditional norms and contemporary health perceptions (Narayan & Chatterjee 2016).

**The Tensions between Tradition, Gender, and Female Circumcision**

Understanding the balance between culture and practice of female circumcision is important in addressing the rights of women and girls within their society while respecting cultural beliefs. Ethnicity, religion, geography, and historical events all contribute to cultural identity. For many communities that perform female circumcision, this practice is part of their cultural identity. Supporters contend that FGM is a mark of passage, denoting a girl's coming of age and embodying social values and beliefs of the community (Shell-Duncan et al., 2018). It is frequently associated with ideas of purity, honour and social cohesion. In many cultures, the practice is viewed as necessary for the preservation of family and community ties, and those who have the procedure often are considered more acceptable as spouses (Mackie, 1996). Yet, this cultural notion of identity needs to be contextualised in the grander narrative of imperialism and colonialism, which has defined the meaning of 'civilisation'. The most vocal opposition to FGM usually originates within a Western context, branding the practice barbaric and supporting the colonial narrative that vilifies non-Western societies. This leads to important questions about who should define cultural practices.

Female circumcision cannot be separated from the social organizations of societies. By regulating women's bodies and their sexualities, communities uphold patriarchal structures that contribute to gender inequity. Where this is common, cultures have distinct gender roles where women are required to play certain roles in the home, and play a heavily supervised, or controlled role in the society in general (Thomas, 2015).

Furthermore, the rite is frequently rationalized in terms of protecting women's positions in society. According to some FGM advocates, the procedure guarantees a woman's proper marriageability and fidelity (Kaplan, 2020). Therefore, it could also be seen as a tool for

preserving cultural practices, whereby women are required to conform to certain standards in order to preserve their identity and social status. This often puts extreme pressure on women and girls, who may feel forced to go through the procedure against their will and prioritize cultural uniformity over individual freedom.

**Power Dynamics and Gender in Female Genital Circumcision**

In reforming FGC, it is important to comprehend the gender and power relationships that drive the practice in order to be able to treat its effects and champion women's rights. It takes the context of the practice of FGC and the enshrined cultural norms and socio-technical and socio-legal constructs behind the practice. FGC is rooted in a patriarchal system where women are considered vessels for reproduction and maternal honour. The male superiority ideology is central in influencing the perceptions around women's bodies as the bodies of women are often seen to be dehumanised and female sexuality perceived as a threat to social order (Mackie, 1996). One of the biggest factors driving FGC in many of the cultures that practice FGC is the control over women's sexuality, and it is believed that the procedure will keep women 'modest' and 'faithful' to their husbands.

A critical perspective on men's role in FGC illustrates how patriarchal authority shapes the continuance of the practice. FGC importantly serves to entrench cultural norms that much of existing social policy, cultural practice and law is largely prescriptive towards men who stand to benefit the most from the practice especially in patriarchal societies (Shell-Duncan & Hernlund, 2000). This pressure for FGC in regard to women, in order to be considered "marriageable" is an exercise in male power and is an exercise of the power dynamics present in many societies around the world regarding gender relations.

Although FGC is frequently imposed on women, it is important to give credit to the agency that some women have within these oppressive structures. FGC may be continued by women on the grounds that it is necessary for cultural beliefs and family honour. Women that have undertaken FGC are perceived to be protectors of the culture and tradition (UNICEF, 2021). Many of these women try to negotiate their identities within the confines of these practices, attempting to reconcile cultural pride with autonomy.

However, we must remember the difference between agency gained in suppressive environments and the agency that rewards choice. Everyone to whom this concession is offered must do so in order to ensure the maintenance of their standing before others in their communities and families, making it an act that many women are forced to engage in (Yoder & Wang, 2014). Additionally, the introduction of education and empowerment programs into these communities can change the attitudes towards FGC. Women given education about their rights and the health risks associated with FGC strongly oppose (Ethiopian Public Health Institute, 2020). It shows what women are capable of when they can get their hands on the tools to level the playing field, and those entrenched traditions that get in the way.

**Efforts to Combat FGC**

A plethora of programs to advocate against FGC have been spearheaded by the United Nations and different NGOs in this regard, to learn more about the risks to health and human rights violations linked with FGC (UNFPA, 2021). These efforts to help communities engage in conversations about gender equity and women's rights, giving women—and men, by extension—resources to question harmful practices. Some of the proffered solutions in fighting the practice can be explain as follow.

**Education and Advocacy in the Fight Against Genital Circumcision**

Female genital mutilation is still a major public health and human rights concern worldwide across cultures and societies. Despite increased global consensus to abandon the practice, it is estimated that approximately 200 million women and girls have undergone some form of FGM (World Health Organization, 2021). Education and advocacy are two of the actors which are significant in putting an end to the cultural practice as complex and rooted as FGM/C. FGM/C is one of the 3rd most persistent and controversial practices in the world, one of the results of strong cultural, religious, and societal narratives. Advocates usually justify the practice as a rite of passage or a prerequisite to marriage, so reinforcing gender inequality and managing female sexuality (Mackie, 1996).

Education, is the main tool for combating FGM. It is important to educate the affected communities on the dangers that FGM poses. Considering the socio-economic impacts along with medical ones can help create a bottom-up change. Other studies illustrate how impactful educational programs can be, with some programs even showing a stark decline in the rate of FGM as the judgement around this practice changes (UNICEF, 2020). For example, UNICEF (2020) observed such transformation in areas across East Africa, where by implementing a community-based approach, parents were increasingly aware of the potential health implications, leading to an overall decline in support for the practice.

Additionally, education gives women and girls the awareness of their rights, body and reproductive health. Educational campaigns can also empower women with the tools to fight traditional practices that are not in their favor. World Health Organization (2021) for example highlights the need for understanding of the physical and psychological damage associated with FGM/C, such as permanent pain, infections and childbirth complications.

Grassroots movements such as the Girl Generation– a campaign established to aid the abandonment of FGM (The Girl Generation, 2021) – have been successfully using educational outreach to promote and foster community engagement. This program not only teaches women but also engages men and boys, confronting deep-seated stereotypes and promoting action across genders. Such a holistic education would ensure that the message is carried far beyond women in isolation.

In all cases, working with decision-makers, including legislative bodies and international organisations, is critical to cementing commitments against the practice. Significant campaigns have been led by national and international organisations like Amnesty International (2022) and

Human Rights Watch (2022), which seek to expose and publicise the human rights violations resulting from FGM, as well as lobbying for protective legislation (Amnesty International, 2021). For example, in countries where FGM is endemic, the advocacy in calling for the practice to be prohibited has led to legal statutes being written that ban the practice, providing a singularly powerful example for advocacy leading to legislative reform. However, advocacy is not limited to the formal political world. Community led advocacy is one of the avenues of engaging local influencers and traditional leaders to advocate against FGM. Then, Using respected figures from within societies can trigger discussions on the issue and change community norms better than any top down intervention. Projects spearheaded by local organisations often show positive results, such as the partnership between the U.N. Population Fund and local NGOs that has provided communities with campaigns and resources to challenge FGM/C practices (UNFPA,2020).

One of the most effective methodologies to combat FGM is through synergism between stakeholders — governments, grassroots organisations and international bodies must work in tandem. These types of partnerships lead to holistic approaches that leverage the capabilities of each party. Collaborative efforts can also enhance sharing of expertise, pooling of resources, and ultimately amplifying educational initiatives and outreach campaigns. A notable illustration of these joint efforts is the UN Joint Programme on FGM. (United Nations, 2021). This partnership encompasses more than 15 United Nations agencies, non-governmental organisations, and civil society in a concerted effort to implement campaigns, share educational materials, and push for legislative measures. As such, it is a multi-pronged approach that makes initiatives unique to the issue that is being addressed, as it moves beyond just the medical aspects, on to the tradition, culture and norms that perpetuate the practice.

**Cultural Implications for the Female Circumcision in Nigeria**

FGM has attracted the international human rights community in recent years, and best viewed through the lens of the customs that lie in inherent opposition to more modern notions of values. One should note that Female Circumcision is practised among different ethnic groups in Nigeria in varying degrees with the Northern and South-Eastern parts of Nigeria being the worse hit. For many, it is not just tradition but a vital rite of passage into womanhood. It is rooted in centuries-old traditions, where the act of getting circumcised carries connotations of purity, family honour and societal acceptance.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), approximately 200 million girls and women globally have undergone FGM, many of whom are in Nigeria (WHO, 2023). In tribal groups like the Hausa and the Yoruba, female circumcision is notoriously entrenched in cultural practices, sometimes with elaborate rites signifying the girl's entrance into womanhood. Conversely, among those who undergo the procedure, many report feelings of pride and inclusion, showing how the act can confer status and acceptance in their similar religion context.
The health effects of female circumcision are frightening and well-documented. According to studies conducted by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the practice exposes women to serious physical and psychological complications, such as chronic pain, infections, sterility, and childbirth complications (UNICEF, 2022). In a country where healthcare

infrastructure is often stretched thin beneath the burden of underinvestment, the effects of these methods can deepen already difficult circumstances.

Some communities do see FGM as a way of protecting a woman's health believing that it prevents promiscuity and secures fidelity. These beliefs have gendered implications and this is where it gets ugly: The Nigerian authorities have, over the years, tried to criminalize it, but legislative approaches have struggled against the powerful obstacle of customary law. Attitudes towards Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) are also influenced by complex interactions among law, culture and individual rights. Traditional beliefs die hard so even with brilliant initiatives from national and international NGOs to educate communities about the dangers of FGMs, cultures are hard to change.

In addition, examining the cultural significance and implications as to why female circumcision is still a thing in Nigeria opens the floor to the conversation of women's autonomy and empowerment. Many advocates for women's rights say that the debate around FGM often leaves out the voices of women who are actually treated by it. For these women, choice and agency are everything. They struggle to find their place in the cultural landscape while negotiating identities within the shadow of family and cultural expectations.

In trying to strike a balance, some communities consider alternative rites of passage that don't involve the act of circumcision physically. Education about FGM and its repercussions has faced mixed acceptance. Although a recent research report among Nigerian women indicated that many women were still in support of the practice, some of these women also expressed support for abandonment of FGM in their communities seeking some kind of balance between the relevance of the practice and its health implications (Ahinkorah et al., 2020).

Gender empowerment needs to be contextualized in relation to rights-based decision-making, and critique of an entire infrastructure of belief systems can't overlook the criticality of culture in navigating the path towards a robust 'rights' assertion for women. Yet the response by local activists and health professionals underscores a crucial transformation — that empowering women needn't come by way of culture destruction but by embracing conversations and mutual understanding.

**The Effect of Female Circumcision on Nigeria Society**

The health consequences of female circumcision are severe. FGM has four types according to the World Health Organisation (WHO), including partial or total removal of the external genitalia, and other harmful procedures (World Health Organisation, 2020) Understanding the direct health risks of FGM — pain, bleeding, infection, complications during childbirth and long-term psychological effects is vital.

Undoubtedly, the ramifications of female circumcision, or female genital mutilation (FGM), are immeasurable for girls as they become young women, marry or give birth. The discrimination of

female circumcision is one of the most debated issues in modern history. Despite the vehement denouncing of female circumcision from the perspective of feminist ideals and underpinning this as a violation of human rights from feminist organizations and Western countries, those cultures which have female circumcision embedded within them believe that it is part of their cultural identity. Most countries in world have banned female circumcision, but the practice persists widely in Africa and parts of Asia as noted earlier. The cultural aspects regarded by many people make it a challenge to evaluate the social impacts of female circumcision on women.

The practice of FGC is a major consequence to the standing of women in their own communities. This practice often serves as a means to control female sexuality as it reinforces patriarchy. In many societies that hold strong beliefs in these ideas, women who undergo FGC are often considered more 'pure' or 'modest,' giving this practice both cultural significance and weight for women's perceived value. Such beliefs often lead to perpetuation of gender inequality and limitation on women's agency, as it implies that the value of women lies in following cultural practices, rather than their individual capabilities or aspirations.

A study by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) (2021) shows that in the communities where FGC is common, women who have undergone the procedure are often regarded as more desirable as marriage partners. It underpins their worth in society with their role as wives and mothers, which cements a status that is ultimately in a patriarchal framework.

**Social Pressure and Community Social Dynamics**

Beliefs and social structures are entrenched, ensuring social cohesion to FGC communities. For girls, peer pressure can frequently be a driving force behind the decision to undergo FGC. Most are afraid of missing out or being judged by their peers, families or community leaders if they say no to this rite. The practice, therefore, can become perpetuated through generations, as individuals feel societal pressure to adhere to it (Garlick, 2007).

In addition, mothers are pressured to perform FGC on their daughters because they want to protect them, thinking protection will boost their social and marriage urgency. A qualitative study across multiple countries in Africa found that mothers often experience conflict between the desire to protect their daughters from anticipating society's chastisement and potential concerns about not being able to ensure their daughters' future.

**Psychological Effects**

Practitioners of FGC undergo long-term psychological effects. In addition, the trauma of the FGC experience can have lasting emotional and psychological effects. Women speak of fear, anxiety and being violated. For example, one 2019 study in the *International Journal of Women's Health* highlights how women have been found to experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression while trying to cope with the physical and emotional effects of FGC ( *International Journal of Women's Health*). Stigma surrounding FGC often exacerbates the mental health issues of its survivors. A deep sense of shame and inadequacy is something many women internalise, leading to isolation and a deterioration of self-worth.

**A Critical Analysis of the Nigerian Federal Government Efforts in Fighting Female Genital Circumcision**

In an age where ideologies around gender equality and women's rights dominate people's thoughts and perspectives, FGC continues to be practiced in various forms and intensities across the world. The Federal Government steps against this practice are broad, ranging from legal to educational to healthcare systems.

**The Legal Framework:** A strong legal framework constitutes the backbone of the federal government's fight against FGC. The practice was explicitly criminalised in the United States with the Female Genital Mutilation Act of 1996, which prohibits FGC from being performed on minors (U.S. Department of Justice, 2021). This law was later strengthened by the Federal Anti-Mutilation Act of 2013, expanding the scope of punishments to any person that either performs or attempts to perform FGM (Nathanson, 2020). This sends a clear message that the government is determined to safeguard vulnerable demographic groups, particularly young girls, from the callous exploitation to which this practice exposes them.

**Educational Initiatives:** Education is another crucial component of curbing FGC, and part of federal approaches. Different educational initiatives have been implemented by the government to increase their knowledge and understanding about the harms and ethical considerations of FGC. Organizations like the CDC have initiated extensive educational programs directed towards the significant communities of FGC (2021). These campaigns are intended to raise awareness among both men and women of the health risks of such a practice, which can include serious psychological trauma, infections, complications in giving birth as well as higher rates of maternal and infant mortality.

Research evidence has shown that the prevalence of FGC is significantly dropped among well-informed communities, which further supports the effectiveness of educational intervention. In a study by the Population Council, it was shown that when people in communities are informed about the health impact of FGC, their populations of girls subjected to the procedure also plummeted (Population Council, 2020).

**Healthcare & Support Services:** Healthcare and support services access are central to the federal government's response to FGC. Medical professionals must be trained to know the unique health challenges associated with FGC and how to treat patients as necessary. Cooperation among federal agencies and NGOs is also essential in meeting the medical care and other needs of individuals affected by the biological attack. UNICEF, offers resources for eliminating FGC if the health-related services improve. But the issue of access is still an existent problem in rural and underserved communities. (UNICEF, 2022)

**Religion as a Tool in the Fight against Female Circumcision in Nigeria**

In Nigeria, one of the most deep-seated cultural practices remains embroiled in questions about women's rights, health and the role of religion in social reform. It affects millions of women and girls around the country. Although some secular and humanitarian organisations have tried to

stamp out the practice. Religious institutions hold the most sway over communities and play a key role in the FGC battle.

In many parts of Nigeria, especially among certain ethnicity groups, female circumcision is practiced. Cultural belief systems, perceptions of femininity, and definitions of purity have all been cited as motivations for the practice of FGC. In many communities, the practice is seen as a rite of passage—an important custom that prepares girls to become women (Obiora, 2019). Widespread condemnation of it among international health organisations has not curbed its emergence in Nigeria, where it is estimated that 20 million women and girls have undergone the procedure. The consequences of FGM are dire, leading to both physical complications, as well as psychological trauma and social stigmatization.

In Nigerian society, religion is part of the fabric of society and has both unifying and divisive potential in dealing with the challenges posed by FGC. Nigeria is among the most religious in the world, with Christians and Muslims dominating. Overcoming FGC requires these religious institutions — whose convictions shape the values and behaviour of millions of people — to support its eradication. In recent years, there has been a change of tone in the conversation about FGC among these faith groups. FGC has also started being seen by numerous religious leaders as contradictory to their teachings. In Islamic contexts, for example, scholars have been involved in reinterpretations of religious texts that have been historically used as a basis for justifying the practice. Leading religious figures have claimed gallant role of women in Islam, that there is no Islamic basis for female genital mutilation (FGC), but rather, it is contrary to the kindness, compassion, and respect of women's rights values (WHO, 2018).

Meanwhile, several faith-based organisations in Nigeria have made tremendous progress towards eradicating FGC. The Interfaith Coalition for the Abandonment of Female Genital Mutilation hosts the TyDan Programme, which involves: working towards creating opportunities for inter-religious dialogue and dynamics among religious leaders and mobilising grassroots women on issues of health risks associated with FGC. The new programme does this through painstaking outreach tactics, working with community leaders and returning to families over and over again to rally support for an end to the practice. The results of such campaigns are visible, as many families are re-evaluating the value of FGC.

Alongside the TyDan Programme, the African Women's Development Fund has worked with religious institutions to embolden the dialogue of sexual health, rights and FGC in a faith-based framework. Religious leaders receive training through workshops that helps legitimise the call for change in front of their congregations, for example the advocacy against female circumcision. Such a faith-based means creates a space for faith in action where friends and neighbors can openly talk about their beliefs with one another in a safe space, leading to a transformative discussion.

Bringing global religious leaders on board helps legitimize local efforts and creates space for critical conversations that challenge the negative consequences of FGC in a culturally sensitive manner. In addition, these networks counteract the idea of FGC being a culturally specific

practice with no links to international human rights or equal gender rights. As such, religious leaders — from all corners of the world — are increasingly using their platforms to claim FGC is a violation of fundamental human rights — a message that resonates across borders and cultures.

**Public Perception on Female Genital Circumcision in Nigeria**

Female Genital Circumcision, is a widely-discussed practice at both the global and local levels. As a nation characterized by its multifaceted cultures, public perceptions regarding FGC in Nigeria are complex and influenced by cultural, religious and socio-economic elements. Given the health risks involved in female genital mutilation a form of gender-based violence, as well as the violations of women rights, the Nigerian government, and other NGOs and international organisations have been working towards an end to the practice. However, the persistence of FGC is a reflection of deeply embedded cultural traditions that are still in line with the current health and human rights discourses.

In Nigeria the practice of FGC seems to be concentrated within particular ethnic groups, the most commonly cited being among the Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa communities (UNICEF, 2021). In many communities, FGC is part of their cultural identity, religious beliefs, and social norms. It is widely seen as a coming-of-age moment for girls, a sign that they are entering womanhood. Traditional beliefs say uncut girls might be viewed that way and might be social outcasts or have trouble finding a spouse — a powerful incentive for families to go through with the procedure, often in defiance of laws barring it.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), FGC is a human rights violation with serious health implications, such as chronic pain, infections and childbirth complications (WHO, 2023). However, many people around the world do not see this practice as strictly a physical action, but rather a key aspect of an individual's identity and social acceptance (Hodgson, 2019), making the narrative more complicated when cultural symbolism is introduced. This creates an entrenched opposition to the abandonment of FGC, as many feel that to do so would rob them of their cultural identity.

Many international organisations have condemned FGC but, in Nigeria, it is a polarising issue. Education, urbanisation, religious affiliations and exposure to global discourses on women's rights all contribute to the perception and acceptance of the practice within countries. Although some demographic sectors — particularly urban dwellers with more education — are becoming ever more critical of FGC, many rural communities continue to champion the practice as a crucial aspect of social solidarity and cultural identity.

Some positive results have been achieved from educational initiatives in which the health risks of FGC were told. For example, the Nigerian national non-profit organization, "The Orchid Project", endeavours to end FGC through the promotion of non-harmful alternative rites of passage. Some traditional leaders have resisted these efforts and view such interventions as a threat to their cultural heritage. Such a tension between modern values and traditional beliefs provides a compelling backdrop for public perception around FGC to be examined. According to

a large analysis by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), higher educational attainment was associated with a decreased likelihood of supporting FGC in women (UNFPA, 2020).

The Nigeria Urban Reproductive Health Initiative (NURHI) undertook a study that concluded that religious leaders have significant influence on public attitudes, and can facilitate or hinder discussion about FGC (NURHI, 2019). By providing faith leaders with information about the health and human rights aspects of FGC, organisations can mobilise their sites of influence to change community norms. Such a strategy underscores the necessity of fitting this fight against FGC within local religious contexts during advocacy.

## Conclusion

It is a fact that female genital circumcision affects women in many dimensions. However, confronting the roots of this practice requires a multilayered response, that include education, legal action and international partnership. To sum up, the fight against female circumcision is fraught with many hurdles, but the strength of those affected and the passion of their supporters remains a source of hope. Female circumcision in Nigerian culture goes beyond the individual act itself, intertwining with themes of feminism, tradition, and community. To grapple with this practice is to appreciate that it's not simply a problem to get rid of, but a social form that demands attentiveness and nuanced understanding of the feelings, identities and relationships at play.

Communities are the foundation for transformation; through negotiation between new ideas about health and cultural identity, fertile ground can shift us toward truly meaningful changes. It is vital to emphasize education, community engagement, and respect for cultural stories. The empowerment should come from within—an understanding that combines both cultural heritage and present-day human rights—and it is within these fabrics that women's future in Nigeria can begin to weave a new narrative. Education and awareness campaigns are among the most promising frontiers in the fight against FGC. It is important to educate the men and women about the health hazards of FGC. Educational programs could sensitize all population groups on the effects that the practice has on women's health and promote conversation about rights and freedom of choice.

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