

Traditional values attached to Female Genital Cutting (FGC) amongst the Pokot of West Pokot, Kenya

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Abstract

Most of the Pokot community members, occupy an isolated and remote area within a very harsh environment, and are one of the pastoralist communities in west Pokot County which highly depend on nature. They have many strong beliefs, and traditional practices which they nurture. With limited knowledge and influence from outside, the pokot are perpetuating traditions and practices that are adapted to their context. This paper is set to identify the values that are attached to Female genital cutting among the Pokot community. The study was carried out in Sook Division of West Pokot District randomly selected out of the four Divisions in the District. A descriptive cross-sectional, qualitative research design was used. The study considered 63 participants for interviews, all above 18 years, 9 key informants and 54 members of 7 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with between 6-10 participants. Interviews and focus group discussions were used to collect data. The study revealed divided opinions about Female Genital Cutting among the Pokot. It is evident that some individuals still hold to the cultural values thus are still practicing FGC despite the many interventions against the practice. The study recommends collaboration of Government and NGOs in designing Pokot culture-friendly long-term interventions such as the use of existing forums like the elders *barazas* in giving education concerning FGC, and girl child education advocacy. NGOs should ensure full participation of the community in interventions such as ARP in the region, together with implementation of the anti FGC law.

Keywords: Female genital cutting (FGM), Culture, Values, Tradition, Ethnicity.

Introduction

Among the communities that practice FGC in Kenya including, the Pokot in this study, the procedure is a highly valued and traditional ritual, whose purpose marks the transition from childhood to womanhood. In such societies, FGC is considered necessary to raise a girl properly and to prepare her for adulthood and marriage (Yoder, 1999). According to Kiletat women group (1991), both female and male circumcision ceremonies are integral components of the traditions of the Pokot of Kenya; boys are circumcised between the age of 15-20 years and girls between the ages of 12-16 years as they at this age, are regarded by community to be entering into responsible Pokot adulthood life.

Kenya has great ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic diversity. There are numerous health concerns associated with FGM. Immediate complications can include severe pain, shock, haemorrhage (bleeding), tetanus or sepsis (bacterial infection), urine retention, open sores in the genital region and injury to nearby genital tissue. Long-term consequences can include recurrent bladder and urinary tract infections; cysts; infertility; an increased risk of childbirth complications and newborn deaths; the need for later surgeries. For example, Type III infibulation needs to be cut open later to allow for sexual intercourse and childbirth (WHO, 2012).

Despite these endangering health concerns, most of the individuals in the Pokot community are still adamant to the change. Despite the many interventions by the government and non-governmental organizations, the practice is ongoing in some parts of the county on a claim of the cultural values attached to it.

To the Pokot girl the circumcision operation implies that she is ready for marriage. This happens especially in parts of West Pokot where girl child education is not a priority, where as in other sections of the district like Kapenguria division the girls are not necessarily married off after circumcision. In 2007, the World Health Organization classified Female genital cutting into four broad categories:

Type:

1. Clitoridectomy involves partial or total removal of the clitoris and/or the clitoral hood.

2. Excision is partial or total removal of the clitoris and the labia minora, with or without excision of the labia majora.
3. Infibulation which is narrowing of the vaginal orifice with creation of a covering seal by cutting and placing together the labia minora and/ or the labia majora, with or without excision of the clitoris.
4. Type 4 or unclassified; this comprises all other harmful procedures done to the female genitalia for non medical purposes, for example pricking, piercing, incising, scraping, and cauterization (WHO, 2008).

All the four types of FGC operations are widely practiced by various Kenyan ethnic groups, with each group specializing in a particular type. Type 1 (clitoridectomy) is said to be practiced by the Kisii, kipsigis and Nandi ethnic groups, Type 2 (Excision) is practiced by the Sebei community of Mt Elgon, Type 3 (Infibulation) is practised by the Pokot, Marakwet, Somalis and other communities in the northern Kenya. Excision is the type most commonly practiced whereas infibulation is the most severe form of Female genital cutting (Gachiri 2007; Setat Women Group Report, 2010).

Justifications for female genital cutting

The practice of Female Genital Cutting from the history above is reported to have been existing from as early as 2nd century B. Female circumcision, so referred to by the practicing communities is carried out with reasons ranging from socio-cultural, religious and even to medical reasons, for instance female genital cutting although not widely known, in the 1940's and 1950's, physicians in the United States and England are said to have used the procedure as a 'treatment' for hysteria, lesbianism, masturbation and female deviance (Klein, 1995). According to Ghawab and Khitan (2003), some from the Muslim community who advocate for Female genital cutting hold the following as being the merits of the practice, they state that:

- Female Genital Cutting maintains cleanliness, they report that bad smell in women notwithstanding cleanliness can only be eliminated by cutting off the clitoris and the labia minora.
- Female Genital Cutting prevents diseases, for instance nymphomania; in this they agree that the number of nymphomaniacs is less among circumcised women, that female genital mutilation prevents vaginal cancer and swelling of the clitoris which could drive the woman to masturbation or lesbianism.
- Female Genital Cutting makes a woman's face more beautiful and makes her more attractive to her husband and that it brings good health and feminine grace to the girl.
- It keeps a couple together, because female genital cutting reduces the sexual instinct in women which is viewed by this advocates of the practice as positive effect.
- It prevents girls/ women from becoming immoral and therefore become virtuous.

In Kenya like in other African countries, the communities that practice FGC consider it necessary as part of raising a girl properly and to prepare her for adulthood and marriage (Yoder, 1999; Ahmadu, 2000; Herlund, 2003; Dellenborg, 2004).

In FGC practicing communities; girls themselves may desire to undergo the procedure as a result of social pressure from peers and because of fear of stigmatization and rejection by their communities, if they do not follow the tradition (Behrendt, 2005). For the Pokot community, according to Kiletat women group report (1991), the rationale of the female genital cutting is to make a woman become an acceptable member of the community and be looked upon as a real woman, not a child. Also in Communities where FGC is practiced Pokot included, it is commonly believed that girls who do not undergo this procedure are "impure" and are of lower social status hence have lower chances of getting married. Therefore despite the pain involved in Female genital cutting, many girls are willing to go through the operation (Africa Recovery, 2003).

According to Kiletat Women group Report (1991), a woman must undergo female genital cutting as a preparation for childbirth labor pain. This is because during the genital cutting process, the subject is not supposed to cry or utter any word or produce any sound, because crying will mean shame and reproach to her family, especially her father, thus the genital cutting procedure to some extent is believed to check the girl's bravery and ability to withstand much pain, after withstanding the circumcision pain, the same bravery will apply when in labor pain during delivery. Another strongest motive behind female genital cutting given by most

African communities is that it reduces the sexual desire of girls and women, promotes virginity and chastity, and maintains fidelity in married women (FORWARD UK, 2007).

Materials and methods

A descriptive cross-sectional research design was adopted for the study. The author used a qualitative approach which helped explore feelings, attitudes and opinions of the Pokot community members and their social practices in order to understand the factors which influence decision-making in relation to FGC. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and individual interviews of key informants using semi-structured questions were conducted with selected respondents in the division.

The study was conducted in West Pokot District, West Pokot County, Kenya. It is situated in the North Rift and borders Trans Nzoia to the south; Central Pokot District to the East and Pokot North to the North. It is divided into four (4) administrative divisions, 23 locations and 82 sub- locations. Its administrative headquarters is situated in Kapenguria town while Makutano town centre, acts as a commercial centre. The four divisions in the district are Kapenguria, Chepareria, Sook, and Kongelai Division, with Sook being the target study area.

The target population were members of the Pokot community in Sook Division of West Pokot District. The respondents included: Ordinary women above 18 years from the general population within the community, women above 18 years who are campaigning against the practice of FGC, community leaders (men and women), young men over 18 years who are not married, married men over the age of 18, older men above 50 years and older women above 50years with whom the Focused Group Discussions were conducted; local administrators, manager from local agencies implementing FGC activities, a traditional circumciser, traditional birth attendants (TBA), a young woman over 18 years who underwent ARP and later underwent traditional female circumcision (FGC), School teacher, a village elder and a church leader (Pastor) who were key informants for interviews. Parents were included as they are among the key decision makers about whether a girl undergoes FGC. Even in cases where girls make the decision themselves, parents often influence their daughter's opinion, and are likely to arrange for the ceremony.

Community leaders including men and women who are influential in upholding cultural traditions in the areas were also involved. The Council of elders decides on the timing of the FGC season. Mixing of men and women in this group did not disadvantage the study instead it enriched the study as they normally work together serving the community and have authority concerning matters affecting the community. A traditional circumciser was included because of their direct involvement in perpetuating FGC, but can also because they can be powerful agents for encouraging its abandonment. School teacher was included as potentially influential person in the lives of young people. World Vision has been working with schools to establish student clubs to discuss and question issues like early marriage and FGC. Among them was also a young woman (over 18 years), who participated in ARP and later underwent FGC, she was chosen because of her experience in both the rituals; ARP and FGC, she shed light on why some women even after deciding not to undergo FGC later resort to the cultural practice. A Health professional on the other hand was included because of his work that involves treating those with health problems associated with FGC and also so as to find out what they are doing to address FGC.

Seven (7) Focus-Group Discussions (FGDs) and nine (9) Key Informant Interviews were conducted over a period of 14 days. Each FGD had between 6- 10 participants. Respondents were recruited with the help of the local leaders (Village elders) and the research assistants from the study area who were well conversant with the area. Purposive and convenient sampling was applied in selecting members of the Focus Group Discussion as well as the key informants.

Findings of the study

All the participants from the FGDs and the Key Informant Interviews reported that FGC is a highly valued ritual that has been going on in the Pokot community since time immemorial and no one knows when the practice started nor how it began, people just found it going on and is practiced without questioning, as stated by a participant in group 1 (Ordinary women above 18 years from the community).

The values and significance of this practice are said to range from the practice being a requirement for marriage, a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood, equality to male circumcision, an act to mark ethnic identification and make a girl become mature responsible woman who can be respected and listened to in the community among other values. The participants cited marriage as one of the main reasons why girls and families still prefer Female Genital Cutting, saying that no one asks for a hand in marriage to a woman who has not undergone FGC. A participant from FGD, group 2 (Women above 18 years who are campaigning against the practice of FGC) narrated that:

The Pokot here mostly prefer to marry circumcised women, as the uncircumcised ones are regarded as children and cowards who cannot withstand the pain of circumcision and are therefore seen not to be brave women, so this is why most families and girls continue to prefer it despite all the campaigns against it (FGD 2).

The Pokot ethnic group are also said to value the practice of FGC because they believe that FGC acts as a rite of passage that is necessary to graduate a girl from childhood to adulthood, pointing out that as long as a woman has not undergone FGC she will still be looked upon as a child regardless of her age. This was expressed by participants from group 5 (unmarried men above 18 years), who said:

FGC in this community acts as a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood and indicates that a girl is now a mature woman and ready for marriage. Here in this region as long as a woman has not yet undergone FGC she is still looked upon as a young girl, in fact she is just referred to as a child regardless of her age.

The study also found out that the significance of FGC practice in the Pokot community is to reveal bravery in a girl/woman, something that seems to be highly valued in the region and is said that the parents of a girl who has undergone FGC without crying, gets a lot of pride as their daughter is said not to have brought them shame during the operation, this is even further valued with giving of gifts like cows, goats and or money to the initiate as mentioned by a participant in group 6 (Elderly men 50 years and above) who said:

Yes we give our daughters gifts like cows and goats which are given by the father and uncles to the initiate. This is to congratulate them for their bravery during the procedure of the initiation, since they did not cry or utter a word and therefore were not cowards.

Going by these statements the Pokot community seems to look at FGC as a very important occasion in a girl's/woman's life and the entire family. The author found out that FGC is also performed as a mark of ethnic identification; this is because most of the participants in the different FGDs wondered why people should cause them to abandon their culture. This was in agreement with what a key informant (Village elder) said on the significance of FGC, "Female circumcision is our culture and is seen as a good practice which shows that one is a Pokot woman who is highly dignified and respected".

The study also established that the Pokot community look at the FGC practice as equivalent to male circumcision, as most participants were exclaiming, if they are to stop FGC why not do the same to male circumcision. This idea was mainly voiced by female participants (FGDs group1 and 7).

Another value of FGC according to the Pokot is that the practice is done as a means of cleansing a woman to improve her hygiene and remove bad odor which they believe women who have not undergone FGC develop as they grow older. This was stated by participants in FGD group 4 (married men above 18 years) who pointed out that, "People here believe that an uncircumcised woman is believed to have a bad smell especially as they grow older and older".

The following table summarizes Pokot community perceived advantages and disadvantages of FGC.

Table 1: Matrix of Advantages and Disadvantages of FGC

Views	Men	Women	Community Leaders
Advantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FGC acts as assurance for marriage. • It is a source of wealth to the Girl's family. • FGC brings recognition and respect to a girl/woman. • FGC matures a girl into womanhood and makes her beautiful. • Those women who have undergone FGC know the community's laws and taboos unlike those who haven't. • Women who have undergone FGC behave well compared to those who have not undergone the practice. 	<p>FGC enables a girl/woman gain community's acceptance and respect</p> <p>One who has undergone FGC receives community's secret teachings</p> <p>FGC helps a woman remain faithful to her husband.</p> <p>FGC washes away childish behaviour in a girl and makes her become a real woman.</p>	<p>FGC washes away childish behaviour in a woman</p> <p>FGC makes a woman acceptable and respected in the community.</p> <p>A girl gets rewards after undergoing FGC.</p> <p>FGC practice brings with it lot of celebrations and joy.</p> <p>Women who have undergone FGC are taught community's teachings unlike those who have not.</p>
Disadvantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FGC affects girl child education because in many cases girls drop out of school and get married after the ritual. 	<p>FGC has many negative effects on health, like it may result to excessive bleeding, pain, disease transmission when one instrument is used to cut several girls.</p> <p>Difficulty in child bearing.</p> <p>School drop outs are high for girls who have undergone FGC compared to those who have not undergone FGC.</p>	<p>Disease transmission where one instrument is used for several girls.</p> <p>Excessive bleeding.</p> <p>Girls drop out of school after undergoing FGC for marriage and because they perceive themselves as grownups.</p>

Discussion

The practice of Female Genital Cutting commonly referred by the Pokot ethnic group as Female circumcision is a traditional practice that has been ongoing for centuries with no one knowing when it began. Public health practice views it as unhealthy cultural practice that brings with it negative health effects to the girl/ women who undergo this practice. This study found out that this cultural practice is so much valued by the Pokot community members because of the significance that is accorded to it. Among the reasons believed to be behind the practice of FGC in the Pokot community is its ability to graduate a girl from childhood to adulthood, and that those women who have not undergone the practice are always looked upon as girls or children regardless of their age, and are prohibited from doing certain community services like taking food to visitors and milking cows, a similar view is held by the Sabiny community of Uganda (Namulondo, 2009) at Kapchorwa District of Uganda. Namulondo reported that the Sabiny People prohibit uncircumcised women from milking cows, climbing to the family granary and serving visitors among other responsibilities. Therefore girls are forced to make the decision and obey the culture so that they can be socially acceptable in the community.

Other merits that the practice is believed to bring with it are gifts and marriage, the participants reported that one of the advantage of the FGC includes the gifts given to the girls by their father and qualification for marriage, if she is not circumcised she is forever considered a child who cannot be married. A similar notion is held by the Kisii and Kuria communities as found out in a study conducted by Oloo, Wanjiru and Newell (2011), who mentioned that girls undergoing FGC are given gifts and are generally considered more suitable for marriage and more socially acceptable.

These girls would prefer to undergo the genital cutting so as to avoid frequent stigmatization, isolation and ridicule by the rest of the community members. Another advantage of FGC as perceived by the community is that those girls/ women who have undergone FGC know the community's teachings as opposed to those who have not undergone FGC and are seen as innocent children who are not supposed to know the community's secrets. Similar findings were reported in a study conducted by Maligaye (2007) as cited by Cheserem in her theses of 2010.

Conclusion

FGC is a traditional practice that is deeply embedded in the Pokot culture. Those in favour of the practice look at the custom as a form of cultural identity and a sacred ritual that is sanctioned by ancestors and protected by cultural beliefs and myths. Community members have the following as merits of the practice: Qualification for marriage, a girl receives gifts like cows, goats, sheep and money after undergoing FGC, source of wealth in form of bride price to the girl's family because she will be married, a girl gains community's acceptance and respect among other merits.

Human behaviours and cultural values, however senseless or destructive they may appear from the personal and cultural standpoint of others, may have meaning and fulfils a function for those who practice them. However, culture is not static but it is in constant flux adapting and reforming. People will change their behaviour when they understand the hazards of harmful practices and realize that it is possible to give up harmful practices without giving up meaningful aspects of their culture (Gruenbaum, 2001, p. 198).

Recommendation

The alternative rituals and Cultural days are initiatives aimed at affirming community identity and positive aspects of culture which boosts self esteem in the community while preventing physical and psychological harm to women and girls. For these ceremonies to have an impact the study recommends full participation of the community, so as to create a sense of ownership and belonging by them, for example in Alternative Rites of Passage (ARP) ceremonies; the old women in the community should participate fully and provide the community teachings/ secrets to the initiates. Study participants especially the old women reported not knowing what their daughters are taught in the ARP ceremonies because they are not involved.

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