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Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)-Cultural Practices and the Role of Education in its Eradication in Nigeria

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Abstract

The study investigated the role of education in eradicating female genital mutilation (FGM) cultural practices in Nigeria. The study was conducted in multiple regions of Nigeria, targeting communities where FGM is prevalent. A representative sample of health workers were selected for the study. Data collection was conducted using an instrument titled "The Role of Education in Eradicating Female Genital Mutilation Cultural Practices, TREEFGMCP." Three experts validated the instruments and its reliability was established using Cronbach Alpha. Specifically, the instrument had a reliability coefficient of 0.77. Six research assistants aided the researcher in the collection of data. The data collected were analysed using weighted mean with a criterion mean of 2.50 since the items in the question were framed on a four-point scale. The study revealed that: the practice of FGM is a deeply entrenched cultural tradition in Nigeria that poses serious health risks and violation of human rights to women and girls, and the prevalence of FGM is highest in South East, South West and North East regions due to persistent cultural beliefs; and education plays a crucial role in combating and eradicating FGM by raising awareness, changing societal norms and empowering individuals to make informed choices. It was recommended that government should integrate education on the harmful effects of FGM into the school curriculum to raise awareness and empower young women to make informed decisions about their bodies.

Keywords: Female Genital Mutilation, Cultural Practice, Education, Eradication

Introduction

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is a culturally entrenched tradition characterised by the partial or complete excision of external female genitalia, typically for non-medical purposes. FGM engenders substantial physical, psychological, and social ramifications for women and girls, so infringing upon their fundamental human rights and continuing the cycle of gender inequity. (Abimbola, 2018). In Nigeria, FGM is practiced in various forms and has been a longstanding tradition in many communities despite efforts to eliminate it. It is practiced particularly in the southern part of the country, among ethnic groups such as the Yoruba, Igbo, and Ibibio. The practice is often carried out as a rite of passage, believed to ensure a girl's purity, enhance her marriageability, and uphold societal norms and traditions. Nevertheless, FGM has detrimental outcomes such as intense agony, haemorrhaging, infections, birthing problems, and enduring psychological repercussions.

FGM is prevalent in Nigeria, with an estimated 20 million women and girls having undergone the practice. The prevalence of female genital mutilation varies across different regions and ethnic groups in the country, with higher rates in rural areas compared to urban centers (Okonofua, 2013). FGM is often performed on girls between infancy and adolescence, and the practice is deeply ingrained in cultural beliefs and traditions. Some communities view FGM as a rite of passage, a symbol of purity, or a way to control women's sexuality and ensure marriageability. Despite efforts to curb FGM through legislation and awareness campaigns, the practice persists due to cultural norms and societal pressure.

In Nigeria, various justifications are given for the practice of FGM, including social acceptance, religious beliefs, preservation of virginity and enhancement of fertility (Okeke & Ogugua, 2017). Some communities believe that FGM promotes hygiene, reduces promiscuity, and upholds tradition. Additionally, FGM is often linked to cultural norms surrounding female sexuality, marriageability, and social status. These justifications reinforce the perpetuation of FGM as a cultural practice and hinder efforts to eliminate it.

FGM in Nigeria has been found to have significant physical, psychological and social ramifications for women and girls (Asekun-Olarinmoye et al., 2018). The immediate ramifications of FGM encompass intense agony, haemorrhaging, infections and sometimes fatal outcomes. The potential long-term ramifications encompass persistent discomfort, challenges during the process of birthing, psychological distress and impaired sexual functioning. FGM perpetuates gender inequality, limits women's autonomy and decision-making power, and reinforces harmful stereotypes about female sexuality. The practice also has intergenerational effects, as women who have undergone FGM are more likely to subject their daughters to the same practice. In recognition of the harmful effects of FGM, the Nigeria government has taken steps to address the practice through legislation and policies. The Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act, signed into law in 2015, criminalizes FGM and provides penalties for offenders. Despite these legal provisions, enforcement remains a challenge and FGM continues to be practiced in many communities. Education could be the key to raising awareness about the legal implications of FGM and promoting compliance with anti-FGM laws.

Education has the potential to be significant in addressing and eliminating FGM in Nigeria. Progress towards the eradication of FGM can be achieved by the dissemination of knowledge on its detrimental consequences, the advancement of gender equality, and the empowerment of communities via educational initiatives. Education can challenge harmful beliefs and stereotypes surrounding FGM, engage community leaders and influencers, and empower women and girls to reject the practice (Okonofua et al., 2019). Schools, universities, health centers, and religious institutions can serve as platforms for educating individuals about the risks of FGM and promoting alternative rites of passage that do not harm women and girls.

FGM is a harmful cultural practice that persists in Nigeria despite legal prohibitions and awareness campaigns (Ashimi & Amole, 2015). Education could be a potential tool in eradicating FGM by raising awareness, challenging harmful beliefs and empowering communities to reject the practice. By prioritizing education as a key strategy for combating FGM, the country can make significant progress towards eliminating this harmful practice and promoting gender equality and women's rights. The role of education in eradicating FGM in Nigeria is crucial. Education can play a significant role in changing attitudes towards FGM, raising awareness about its harmful effects, and empowering girls and women to resist the practice. Educated individuals are more likely to question harmful traditions, access accurate information about FGM, and make informed decisions for themselves and their communities.

Several studies have highlighted the positive impact of education in combating FGM. An investigation conducted by Okonofua (2013) revealed that women who possessed greater levels of education exhibited a decreased propensity to endorse or engage in Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in comparison to their counterparts with lower levels of education. Another study by Abimbola (2018) concluded that education increased awareness about the health risks associated with FGM and contributed to a decrease in the prevalence of the practice. Furthermore, education policies and programs in Nigeria have increasingly emphasized the importance of eliminating FGM through awareness campaigns, advocacy efforts, and community engagement. For instance, the National Policy on Elimination of FGM (2016) outlines strategies for promoting education and awareness about FGM, strengthening legal frameworks and providing support services for survivors.

Despite these efforts, challenges remain in fully eradicating FGM in Nigeria. Deep-rooted cultural beliefs, social pressure and lack of access to quality education continue to perpetuate the practice in some communities. Therefore, sustained investment in education may be necessary to bring about lasting change and end FGM in Nigeria. The eradication of FGM in Nigeria requires a multi-faceted approach that prioritizes education as a key tool for raising awareness, challenging harmful beliefs and empowering girls and women. By promoting education and fostering a culture of respect for human rights, a significant progress could be made towards eliminating FGM and ensuring the well-being and dignity of all its citizens. It is against this background that this study investigated the role of education in eradicating FGM cultural practice in Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

FGM is a culturally entrenched practice that continues to be widespread in numerous civilizations, Nigeria being one of them. FGM encompasses the partial or complete excision of external female genitalia, typically for non-medical motives, and is frequently performed for cultural, social, and religious objectives. Despite efforts to eliminate this harmful practice, it continues to persist due to a multitude of factors, including cultural beliefs, societal pressure, and lack of awareness. Although laws have been enacted to criminalize FGM in the country, the enforcement of these laws remains a challenge. The persistence of FGM could be closely linked to the lack of education and awareness about the harmful effects of the practice. The problem of the study is to find out how education can play a pivotal role in changing societal perceptions, attitudes and behaviours towards FGM, ultimately leading to its eradication.

Objective of the Study

The objective of the study was to investigate the role of education in eradicating FGM cultural practice in Nigeria. specifically, the study sought to determine:

1. the prevailing cultural beliefs surrounding FGM in Nigeria;
2. the current status of FGM prevalence in Nigeria;
3. how education influences awareness towards FGM;
4. challenges for incorporating FGM education into formal school curricula in Nigeria;
5. the strategies that can be implemented through educational initiatives to effectively combat FGM in Nigeria.

Research Questions

The study was guided by five research questions:

1. What are the prevailing cultural beliefs surrounding FGM in Nigeria?
2. What is the current status of FGM prevalence in Nigeria?
3. How does education influence awareness towards FGM?
4. What are the challenges for incorporating FGM education into formal school curricula in Nigeria?
5. What strategies can be implemented through educational initiatives to effectively combat FGM in Nigeria?

Research Method

The study adopted descriptive survey design. This is because it sought to describe the role of education in eradicating FGM in Nigeria. It sought to describe the prevailing cultural beliefs and practices surrounding FGM, current state of FGM prevalence, how education influences awareness towards FGM, the challenges for incorporating FGM education into formal school curricular and the strategies that can be implemented through educational initiatives to effectively combat FGM in Nigeria. The choice of descriptive survey design is predicated on the fact that the researcher used a questionnaire to gather data from a representative sample from the study population. A descriptive survey method places emphasis on systematic discovering and description of events taking place from information generated from students through the use of questionnaire. In support of this design, Osuji (2017) stated that any study where questionnaire is used to collect data from

a sample of population of interest, the design for such study is described as descriptive survey. The study was conducted in multiple regions of Nigeria, targeting communities where FGM is prevalent. A representative sample of health workers were selected for the study. The estimated population of health workers in Nigeria is two hundred and ninety-eight thousand, seven hundred (298,700) (World Bank, 2021). A sample of twenty-nine thousand, eight hundred and seventy (29,870) constituting 10% of the entire population was used for this study.

An instrument titled “The Role of Education in Eradicating Female Genital Mutilation Cultural Practices, TREEFGMCP” was used for data collection. The instrument was made up of six sections, A to F. Section A sought information on respondents’ bio-data such as region, name of health centre, educational qualification, sex, age among others. Section B sought information on the prevailing cultural beliefs surrounding FGM, section C sought information on the current state of FGM prevalence, section D sought information on how education influence awareness towards FGM, section E sought information on the challenges for incorporating FGM education into formal school curricula, and section F sought information on the strategies that can be implemented through educational initiatives to effectively combat FGM in Nigeria. Six research assistants aided the researcher in the collection of data. The validity of the instrument was established by three experts in Delta State University, Abraka. The reliability of the instrument was established using Cronbach Alpha since the items in the instrument are polytomous. The instrument was administered to 30 health workers who are outside the sampled health workers for this study. The responses of the 30 health workers were scored and subjected to Cronbach Alpha. On analysis through SPSS version 23, a reliability coefficient of 0.77 was obtained. The six research assistants were from the six geo-political zones/regions in Nigeria (i.e., one research assistant per geo-political zone). The collected data were evaluated using a weighted mean with a criterion mean of 2.50. This was done since the items in the questionnaire were framed on a four-point scale ranging from Strongly Agree (SA = 4), Agree (A = 3), Disagree (D = 2) to Strongly Disagree (SD = 1). For items with a mean response score of 2.50 or higher, indicated agreement, whereas items with a mean response score below 2.50 indicated disagreement.

Results

- ✓ What are the prevailing cultural beliefs surrounding FGM in Nigeria?

Table 1

Mean Responses on the Prevailing Cultural Beliefs Surrounding FGM in Nigeria

S/n	Items	Mean	Decision
1	FGM is a necessary practice in Nigeria	3.52	SA
2	FGM is an important tradition that should be preserved in Nigeria	2.47	D
3	Women who have not undergone FGM are considered inferior in our society.	3.73	SA
4	The practice of FGM enhances a woman’s purity and chastity.	3.81	SA
5	Women who oppose FGM are ostracized in our community.	3.55	SA
Grand mean		3.42	A

Table 1 shows a grand mean score of 3.42 which is greater than the criterion mean score of 2.50. This implies that the respondents agreed that items 1 to 5, except item 2, are the prevailing cultural beliefs surrounding FGM in Nigeria. The respondents disagreed that FGM is an important tradition that should be preserved in Nigeria. Hence it can be concluded that the prevailing cultural beliefs surrounding FGM in Nigeria are: the practice of FGM enhances a woman’s purity and chastity, women who have undergone FGM are considered superior in the society, women who oppose FGM are ostracized in some community and FGM is a necessary practice in Nigeria.

✓ What is the current status of FGM prevalence in Nigeria?

Table 2

Mean Responses on the Current Status of FGM Prevalence in Nigeria

S/n	Items	Mean	Decision
1	FGM is still a common practice in Nigeria.	3.69	SA
2	The prevalence of FGM has not decreased in recent years	2.35	D
3	FGM is widely accepted and supported by communities in Nigeria.	3.86	SA
4	Efforts to end FGM in has remain ineffective.	2.47	D
5	There is lack of awareness about harmful effects of FGM in some part of Nigeria,	3.72	SA
6	Traditional beliefs and practices continue to perpetuate FGM in Nigeria.	3.79	SA
7	Communities in Nigeria are becoming more resistant towards ending the practice of FGM	2.10	D
	Grand mean	2.60	A

Table 2 shows a grand mean of score 2.60 which is greater than the criterion mean score of 2.50. As indicated in Table 2, the respondents strongly agreed that FGM is widely accepted and supported by communities in Nigeria, traditional beliefs and practices continue to perpetuate FGM, there is lack of awareness about the harmful effects of FGM in some part of Nigeria and FGM is a common practice in Nigeria. The respondents, however, disagreed that the prevalence of FGM has not decreased in recent years and communities in Nigeria are becoming more resistant towards ending the practice of FGM. This implies that the prevalence of FGM has decreased in recent years and communities in Nigeria are becoming more resistant towards ending the practice. Hence, it can be concluded that FGM is widely accepted and supported by communities in Nigeria, traditional beliefs and practices continue to perpetuate FGM, there is lack of awareness about the harmful effects of FGM in some part of Nigeria and FGM is a common practice in Nigeria. Nevertheless, the prevalence of FGM has decreased in recent years and communities in Nigeria are becoming more resistant towards ending the practice. Further analysis of the responses of the respondents from different regions in the country showed that FGM prevalence is highest in South Eastern part of the country, followed by South Western and North Eastern part of the country. However, the prevalence of FGM is lowest in North West and South South regions of the country.

✓ How does education influence awareness towards FGM?

Table 3

Mean Responses on how Education Influence Awareness Towards FGM

S/n	Items	Mean	Decision
1	Education has increased my understanding of the harmful effects of FGM.	3.61	SA
2	I am more likely to oppose FGM because of my education.	3.73	SA
3	Education has helped me recognize the importance of women’s rights in relation to FGM.	3.77	SA
4	My education has influenced my ability to spread awareness about the dangers of FGM.	3.72	SA
5	Education has made me more likely to support policies and laws against FGM.	3.65	SA
6	I feel more empowered to speak out against FGM because of my education.	3.77	SA
7	My education has helped me understand the cultural and societal factors that contribute to FGM.	3.52	SA
8	Education has enabled me to have informed discussions about FGM with others.	3.61	SA
9	I am more sensitive to issues of gender inequality and violence against women due to my education.	3.74	SA
10	Education has broadened my perspective on the cultural traditions and beliefs surrounding FGM.	3.61	SA
11	Education has enabled me to understand the psychological and physical consequences of FGM.	3.80	SA
	Grand mean	3.68	SA

Table 3 shows a grand mean score of 3.68 that is greater than the criterion mean score of 2.50. This implies that the respondents agreed that education positively influences awareness towards FGM. In addition, all the items had a mean score greater than 2.50. This implies that the respondents are of agreement that item 1-11 are how education influences awareness towards FGM. Hence, it can be concluded that education influences awareness towards FGM by: enabling understanding of the psychological and physical consequences of FGM, increasing understanding of the harmful effects of FGM, recognizing the importance of women’s rights in relation to FGM, influencing ability to spread awareness about the dangers of FGM among others.

✓ What are the challenges for incorporating FGM education into formal school curricula in Nigeria?

Table 4
Mean Responses on the Challenges for Incorporating FGM Education into Formal School Curricula in Nigeria

S/n	Items	Mean	Decision
The following are some of the challenges for incorporating FGM education into formal curricula in Nigeria:			
1	Inadequate government support for integrating FGM education into the formal school curriculum.	3.81	SA
2	Lack of standardized guidelines or frameworks for educators to follow when teaching about FGM.	3.76	SA
3	Cultural taboos and stigma surrounding discussions about FGM in schools.	3.72	SA
4	Lack of adequate teacher training on how to address sensitive topics like FGM in schools.	3.55	SA
5	Limited resources and materials available to teach students about the harmful effects of FGM.	3.59	SA
6	Resistance from community and religious leaders who support the practice of FGM.	3.51	SA
7	Fear of backlash or negative reactions from students or their families when discussing FGM in the classroom.	3.50	SA
8	Insufficient time allocated in the curriculum to cover comprehensive information on FGM.	3.53	SA
9	Inadequate monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of FGM education programs in schools.	3.57	SA
10	Challenges in reaching remote or underserved communities with FGM education initiatives.	3.62	SA
11.	Insufficient funding for schools to implement FGM education programs effectively.	3.80	SA
Grand mean		3.31	A

Table 4 shows a grand mean score of 3.31 that is greater than the criterion mean score of 2.50. As indicated in Table 4, all the items had a mean score that is greater than the criterion mean of 2.50. This implies that the respondents agreed that items 1 to 11 are the challenges for incorporating FGM education into formal school curricula in Nigeria. These challenges ranges from inadequate government support and funding to fear of backlash or negative reactions from students and resistance from community and religious leaders who support the practice of FGM. Hence, it can be concluded that inadequate government support, insufficient funding, lack of standardized guidelines or frameworks for educators, fear of backlash or negative reactions from students, resistance from community and religious leaders who support the practice of FGM among others are the challenges for incorporating FGM education into formal curricula in Nigeria.

- ✓ What strategies can be implemented through educational initiatives to effectively combat FGM in Nigeria?

Table 5

Mean Responses on the Strategies that can be Implemented Through Educational Initiatives to Effectively Combat FGM in Nigeria

S/n	Items	Mean	Decision
The strategies that can be implemented through educational initiatives to effectively combat FGM in Nigeria include:			
1	Awareness campaigns.	3.71	SA
2	Community outreach programmes.	3.68	SA
3	Educational workshops for parents.	3.72	SA
4	Training of healthcare providers.	3.60	SA
5	Enlightenment of religious and traditional leaders.	3.84	SA
6	Implementation of legal framework.	3.78	SA
7	Incorporating FGM education into school curriculum.	3.86	SA
8	Providing counselling to victims of FGM.	3.75	SA
9	Supporting community-based organizations addressing FGM.	3.78	SA
10	Conducting research on the impact of FGM.	3.79	SA
11	Encouraging dialogue and open communication on FGM within families.	3.65	SA
Grand mean		3.74	SA

Table 4 shows a grand mean score of 3.74 that is greater than the criterion mean score of 2.50. As indicated in Table 4, all the items had a mean score that is greater than the criterion mean of 2.50. This implies that the respondents agreed that items 1 to 11 are the strategies that can be implemented through educational initiatives to effectively combat FGM in Nigeria. These strategies ranges from incorporating FGM education into school curriculum, enlightenment of religious and traditional leaders, supporting community-based organizations addressing FGM to organizing educational workshops to parent, awareness campaigns and community outreach programmes. Hence, it can be concluded that incorporating FGM education into school curriculum, enlightenment of religious and traditional leaders, supporting community-based organizations addressing FGM, organizing educational workshops to parent, awareness campaigns and community outreach programmes among others are the strategies that can be implemented through educational initiatives to effectively combat FGM in Nigeria.

Discussion

The study revealed that the prevailing cultural beliefs surrounding FGM in Nigeria are: the practice of FGM enhances a woman’s purity and chastity, women who have undergone FGM are considered superior in the society, women who oppose FGM are ostracized in some community and FGM is a necessary practice in Nigeria. This finding supports that of Babatunde et al, (2021) who reported

that tradition, religion, ethnicity, region and place of residence to be among the principal factors accounting for cohort disparity in the practice of FGM in Nigeria.

The study also revealed that the current state of FGM prevalence in Nigeria is high. FGM is widely accepted and supported by communities in Nigeria, traditional beliefs and practices continue to perpetuate FGM, there is lack of awareness about the harmful effects of FGM in some part of Nigeria and FGM is a common practice in Nigeria. Nevertheless, the prevalence of FGM has decreased in recent years and communities in Nigeria are becoming more resistant towards ending the practice. This finding supports that the views of Okeke et al. (2012) who revealed that the prevalence of FGM is declining. The ongoing drive to eradicate FGM by World Health Organization, United Nations International Children Emergency Fund, Federation of International Obstetrics and Gynecology (FIGO), African Union, The Economic Commission for Africa, and many women organizations is yielding positive results. Further analysis of the responses of the respondents from different regions in the country showed that FGM prevalence is highest in South Eastern part of the country, followed by South Western and North Eastern part of the country. However, the prevalence of FGM is lowest in North West and South South regions of the country. The study again revealed that education influences awareness towards FGM by: enabling understanding of the psychological and physical consequences of FGM, increasing understanding of the harmful effects of FGM, recognizing the importance of women's rights in relation to FGM, influencing ability to spread awareness about the dangers of FGM among others. This finding corroborates that of Adeniran et al. (2015) and Abdulah et al. (2019). According to these authors, a plausible pathway linking maternal education to a daughter's circumcision is through attitudes toward FGM/C. Ideally, education influences attitudes and it is expected that higher educational levels result in support for FGM/C discontinuation and consequently, reduced probability of circumcision among daughters.

The challenges for incorporating FGM education into formal curricula in Nigeria are inadequate government support, insufficient funding, lack of standardized guidelines or frameworks for educators, fear of backlash or negative reactions from students, resistance from community and religious leaders who support the practice of FGM. The strategies that can be implemented through educational initiatives to effectively combat FGM in Nigeria are: incorporating FGM education into school curriculum, enlightenment of religious and traditional leaders, supporting community-based organizations addressing FGM, organizing educational workshops to parent, awareness campaigns and community outreach programmes.

Conclusion

The practice of FGM (FGM) is a deeply entrenched cultural tradition in Nigeria that poses serious health risks and violation of human rights to women and girls. From the findings of this study, it was concluded that education plays a crucial role in combating and eradicating FGM by raising awareness, changing societal norms and empowering individuals to make informed choices. However, despite efforts to eliminate FGM through education, progress has been slow in some regions in Nigeria especially in South East, South West and North East, regions due to persistent cultural beliefs and lack of comprehensive strategies.

Recommendations

The following are recommended based on the findings of this study:

1. Government should integrate education on the harmful effects of FGM into the school curriculum to raise awareness and empower young people to make informed decisions about their bodies.
2. Government should work with influential leaders in communities to advocate against FGM, challenge harmful cultural norms and provide alternative rites of passage that do not involve genital cutting.
3. Government should ensure that survivors of FGM have access to medical and psychological support services to address physical and emotional consequences of the practice.
4. Government should strengthen enforcement of laws criminalizing FGM in Nigeria, and ensure that perpetrators are held accountable for their actions.
5. Government should provide funding and resources to grassroots organizations and women's groups that are actively working to end FGM in Nigeria, and amplify their voices in the fight against this harmful practice.

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