



Global Advanced Research Journal of Social Science (GARJSS) Vol. 2(3) pp. 058-063, March, 2013
Available online <http://garj.org/garjss/index.htm>
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Full Length Research Paper

Female genital cutting (FGC): An investigation into its implications on the attitudes and performance of school girls in Eastern Sierra Leone

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Accepted 07 January, 2013

This paper sets out to investigate the attitudes adolescent school girls hold to FGC which is widely practiced in the Eastern Province of Sierra Leone, which is the study area. It also finds out statistically the link between attitudes to FGC and performance of school girls. Both questionnaires and focused group discussions were used to achieve the aims of the study. The results of the study showed that girls have a positive attitude to this practice; contrary to the views of international organizations that the practice will soon be eradicated. It was also discovered that the age of FGC is getting lower and that it is parents who are making the decisions for these girls. Statistic also inferred that there is a significant relationship between attitude to FGC and performance of school girls. Much more sensitization has to be done if this practice which is against the Child Rights Bill which is based on the Convention of the Rights of the Child is to be eradicated.

Keywords: Female Genital Cutting, girls' education, Sierra Leone

INTRODUCTION

FGC is practiced all over the world on very young girls and women. The practice is widespread and deep rooted in Sierra Leone. It is not exactly known when this practice started in this country but it is practiced by many irrespective of religion or ethnicity. FGC has become so much part of the society that it is taboo to oppose the practice publicly. Kabo (1986) states that the ceremony usually takes place in a secret society bush, which is preserved only for initiated women/ girls members only. Many years back, the society bush was meant for training girls to take up womanhood. Girls were trained for up to six (6) months to inculcate the virtues of womanhood.

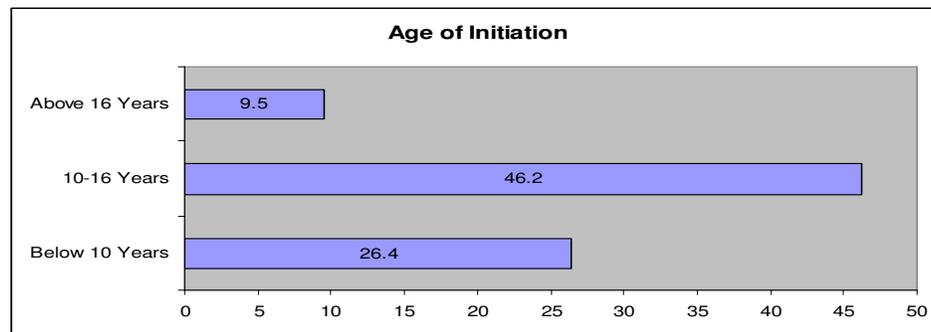
The prevalence of circumcision and the type of procedure vary enormously from country to country. According to WHO (2005) 93% of women in Mali and 98% in Djibouti and Somalia undergo genital cutting, whereas in Uganda and the Congo the number drops to 5%.

UNICEF (2006) asserts that FGC is a violation of universally recognized human rights including the rights of bodily integrity and to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. Complications of this operation commonly include failure to heal, inflammatory diseases and urinary infections. The risk of infection and problematic childbirth are naturally greatly exacerbated by infibulations, and it is estimated that 20% to 25% of sterility cases in the Sudan have resulted from the procedure. The document further states that increased susceptibility to HIV infection is a concern. Toubia (1999)

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Table 1. Initiated Respondents

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	576	82.1	82.1	82.1
	No	126	17.9	17.9	100.0
	Total	702	100.0	100.0	

Figure 1. Age of Initiation of Respondents

states that genital cutting is seen as a way of ensuring that a woman is clean, chaste, and ready for marriage; uncut women are associated with promiscuity and lack of social respectability. Deadening the woman's sexual pleasure is a way of guaranteeing her virginity and fidelity. It is a valued social rite; most girls are willing to succumb to the pain and the subsequent health problems.

A World Health Organization (1995) document estimates it will take a minimum of ten years to reduce the prevalence of genital mutilation, and three generations to eradicate it. It will take time to transform awareness of a firmly entrenched ritual that is valued by the local culture but considered dangerous and demeaning by outsiders. A UNICEF Report (2005) is more optimistic and projects that with the current pace of sensitization, it will soon be eradicated in Africa.

Africare (2000) report some of the problems that have been encountered in eliminating FGC. It states that for the past ten to fifteen years, France has criminally prosecuted immigrant parents who have had their daughters excised, and in October 1996 the U.S. Congress outlawed female genital mutilation in America. The U.N. announced a global campaign in 1997 to eradicate the practice, and a growing number of refugee, women's, and human rights organizations in Africa and around the world have called for its prohibition. But progress has been slow. Western reform movements are sometimes counterproductive, with Africans resisting the dictates of patronizing outsiders. Outlawing the practice had already been attempted by colonial governments in Africa during the first half of the century, provoking only resistance and protests. African governments have also been ineffective. Kenya, Sudan, Burkina Faso, the Ivory

Coast, and Egypt have passed laws limiting the practice, but they are not enforced.

METHODOLOGY

This study was carried out to determine the extent to which adolescent girls' school performance and attitudes are affected by FGC. It was conducted in the three districts of the Eastern Province of Sierra Leone which is the furthest province from the capital Freetown. The region is marked by its ruralness and its concentration on agriculture and mining. A questionnaire was distributed to a sample group of 8% of the final year class of girls at Junior Secondary Schools (JSS 3) in the three districts in the Eastern Province; Kenema, Kailahun and Kono. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the data. A null hypothesis was advanced using the t-test analysis that there is no significant difference in the performance of girls between those who are initiated and the uninitiated.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 displayed information on the number of girls who have undergone FGC in the sample. The numbers of respondents who have been initiated or gone through FGC were 82.1 % and 17.9 % of them have not yet been initiated. The information depicted here showed that advocacy work in eliminating these practices has not succeeded in this region.

The figure above continued to give information on initiation matters. Respondents were asked to state the

Table 2. Persons making Decision for Initiation of Respondents

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	123	17.5	17.5	17.5
Personal	96	13.7	13.7	31.2
Parental	394	56.1	56.1	87.3
Extended Family	76	10.8	10.8	98.1
Community Decision	13	1.9	1.9	100.0
Total	702	100.0	100.0	

Table 3. Respondents' Reasons for Non-Initiation

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	582	82.9	82.9	82.9
Lack of Money	48	6.8	6.8	89.7
Age	64	9.1	9.1	98.9
Lack of Interest	8	1.1	1.1	100.0
Total	702	100.0	100.0	

age bracket when they were initiated. 46.2 % were initiated between the ages of 10-16 years, 26.4 % were initiated before the age of 10 and 9.5 % were initiated after the age of 16 years. The age of initiation is important as culturally, it is the completion of this rite that is supposed to lead to marriage of young girls. Their responses revealed that the age of initiation is getting lower and this could affect their schooling. It is right that efforts be continued to use advocacy to extend the age of initiation so that it will not affect the schooling of the girls.

Initiation was usually decided by the parents as revealed by this table as for 56.1 % of the respondents the decision for initiation was made by the parents. For 13.7 %, the decision was made by the girls themselves; the extended family made the decision for 10.8 % and for 1.9 % the decision was made by the community. The responses continued to be illuminating as the traditional conventions surrounding FGC was that such decisions were made by the parents and not the girls. This seems like a violation of their human rights in today's modern world.

For table 3, only 17.1 % of the original percentage of respondents was used to provide data. 9.1 % gave age as the reason why they have not been initiated; 6.8% stated that it was because of lack of money and only 1.1% proposed lack of interest as a reason why they had not yet been initiated into the secret society. FGC ensures a girl's status and family honour and the responses illuminated the social status that was accorded to this social convention.

Table 4 presented series of perception statements developed to further gain more information on issues related to initiation and FGC and its possible links with

girls' participation in school. A Likert scale was used to quantitatively analyze the responses. In the first statement, 46.4% strongly agreed and 33.8% agreed to the statement that initiation did not interfere with their schooling. On the other hand, 7.7 and 7.4% strongly disagreed and disagreed respectively that it did not interfere with schooling. 4.7% did not have an opinion on the matter. FGC is supported and recognized by almost all the adults in these girls' communities and the responses showed that these girls were reflecting the popular views on this matter.

The second statement in the table focused on the statement that uninitiated girls can better control their sexuality. 50.6% and 39.2% strongly disagreed and disagreed respectively to the statement; 6.8 % had no opinion on the topic whilst 1.7% agreed and strongly agreed respectively to the statement. These responses illustrated that not conforming to the practice stigmatized and isolated girls resulting in their loss of social status.

The third statement in Table 4 requested the respondents to react to the statement that initiation negatively affects child-bearing. 48.6% of the respondents strongly objected to the statement being made; 41.5 percent disagreed; 7.1 percent had no opinion, 2.4% agreed and .4% strongly agreed to the statement. Culturally sensitive sensitization has to be mounted to get communities to stop supporting a tradition that could have health hazards.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child has been adopted as a law in Sierra Leone in 2007. This Convention urges state parties to take all measures to stop traditional practices like FGC. The fourth statement in the table was designed to give information on the girls'

Table 4. Respondents' Perception on Initiation

No	Statements		SD	D	NO	A	SA	TOTAL
1.	No Interference with Schooling	Freq	54	52	33	237	326	702
		%	7.7	7.4	4.7	33.8	46.4	100
2.	Uninitiated Girls can control their Sexuality	Freq	355	275	48	12	12	702
		%	50.6	39.2	6.8	1.7	1.7	100
3.	Initiation Negatively affects Child-bearing	Freq	341	291	50	17	3	702
		%	48.6	41.5	7.1	2.4	.4	100
4.	After Puberty is Initiation	Freq	45	31	59	342	225	702
		%	6.4	4.4	8.4	48.7	32.1	100
5.	Money could be better spent on Girls	Freq	99	61	30	252	260	702
		%	14.1	8.7	4.3	35.9	37.0	100
6.	Should wait after Education of Girls	Freq	241	392	53	11	5	702
		%	34.3	55.8	7.5	1.6	.7	100
7.	Decisions should be made by Girls	Freq	271	279	89	30	15	702
		%	38.6	42.3	12.7	4.3	2.1	100
8.	Laws to stop Forced Initiation	Freq	360	306	21	14	1	702
		%	51.3	43.6	3.0	2.0	.1	100

SD-Strongly Disagree; Disagree; No Opinion; Agree; Strongly Agree

Table 5. Test Statistics

	Initiation	NPSE Scores
Chi-Square	2.885E2 ^a	504.538 ^b
df	1	2
Asymp. Sig.	.000	.000

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 351.0.

b. 0 cells (.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 234.0.

perception as to whether initiation should follow after the onset of puberty. The responses as analyzed depicted that the respondents desired that the link between initiation and puberty should continue. 48.7% agreed and 32.1% strongly agreed to the statement whilst 8.4% had no opinion; 6.4% and 4.4% respectively stated that they strongly disagreed and disagreed with the statement.

The responses as summarized in Statement five continued to elicit information on the attitude of the respondents to initiation. This statement showed a link between initiation and education. For all of the previous statements, the girls had been responding positively to a practice that is being frowned upon. The responses as analyzed showed a reversal of attitude. 37.0% of these girls strongly agreed to the statement that money spent on initiation could be better spent on their education; 35.9% agreed to the statement; 14.1% disagreed; 8.7%

agreed and 4.3% had no opinion on the statement

Statement six continued to probe into the relationship between initiation and education. The majority of the girls 55.8% disagreed and 34.3% strongly disagreed respectively to the statement that initiation should wait until after their education. 7.5% agreed and 1.6% strongly agreed to the statement and .7% had no opinion on the topic under consideration. These responses continued to buttress the fact that these girls were prepared to toe the line on cultural issues. The responses demonstrated that these girls had not developed critical and inquiring minds on the issue of FGC.

From the analyses on Statement seven, 4.2.3% of the respondents disagreed with the statement that decision for initiation should be made by the girls themselves; 38.6% strongly disagreed, 12.7% had no opinion on the topic being investigated whilst 4.3 and 2.1% agreed and

strongly agreed respectively to the statement. These responses continued to portray the social dynamics of a cultural practice that is deemed under attack. The respondents supported aspects of their culture that is deeply entrenched in their lives.

The aim of Statement eight was to find out the respondents reactions to the statement that there must be laws to stop forced initiation. 51.3% strongly disagreed and 43.6% disagreed with the statement. 3.0% had no opinion, 2.0% agreed and .1% strongly agreed with the statement. These responses have consistently proved that stopping this cultural practice is not going to be by the governments but by the communities themselves. The majority of the respondents, 65.2% strongly disagreed and 27.1% disagreed with the statement that initiation causes girls to drop out of school. 3.8% had no opinion; 2.3% strongly agreed and 1.6% agreed with the statement. The responses suggested that these girls are convinced that it does not negatively affect their schooling.

These responses of the girls showed that initiation and FGC were rites that they approved of and they were firmly convinced that FGC did not negatively impact on their lives. Initiation which involves FGC is a global concern. The responses as analyzed illustrated how persistent, pervasive and deep-rooted it is in the lives of people in the Eastern Province of Sierra Leone including children. As a result of the social status attached to this rite, young girls who are the ones who undergo it were its strongest disciples. There is need for more sensitization and advocacy if FGC is to be eradicated through the efforts of the communities themselves.

To further find out the relationship of GGC to the education of girls, a null hypothesis was advanced that there is no significant relationship between initiation and performance in school. The National Primary School Examination (NPSE), an examination which is used to determine access into JSS was used to represent their performance. The table below using the T-test analysis tried to prove the hypothesis advanced that there is a significant relationship between initiation and performance in school.

There is no significant relationship between initiation and performance in school.

The results of the test proved the alternative hypothesis correct and the null hypothesis was rejected.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study showed a higher prevalence of the practice of initiation into secret societies than was revealed by MICS (2005). That report stated that there is an extremely modest trend not to practice FGC among the young generation in Sierra Leone. In the Eastern Province, especially in the rural areas, this practice is firmly entrenched into societal norms. Cultural biases are

a major reason for the continuance of FGC. It was astounding that the majority of them held views such as were revealed in the findings of the research. These included the following: parents should continue to make decisions for them on whether they should be initiated; forced initiation should continue and that initiation should not wait until they finish schooling. These girls believed that this is a practice that is part of their culture and that it did not interfere with their schooling. This finding disproves MacIntyre (1996) statement that education significantly slows down repressive cultural practices.

Statistical analysis in the study inferred that initiation negatively affected girls' participation in school. It was worthy to note that these girls admitted that money spent on their initiation could be better spent on their schooling. Initiation is a time when parents assume public recognition in their communities and is climaxed by celebrations and gifts. These girls recognized that the money that has been spent on this rite could have been better used on their education.

The findings of this study disagreed with the findings of UNICEF (2005) conducted in seven countries that the age of FGC is decreasing. In the Eastern Province of Sierra Leone, the age is getting younger as parents are afraid that if these girls are not initiated early, then the current negative sensitization against the practice may cause girls to reject it if done later in their lives. The findings on the situation of adolescent school girls in the Eastern Province of Sierra Leone confirmed the 'The Situational Analysis of Orphans and other Vulnerable Children in Sierra Leone' (2005) report which stated that most children in Sierra Leone can be classified as vulnerable children or 'at risk children.' Female girls at the JSS level have been shown to be at risk of not enjoying their basic human rights: the rights to education, and health and exposure to exploitation and abuse of all kinds.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is the researcher's opinion that if specific laws are made against the practice, then this could help change the attitude of the community and the girls themselves. Eradicating this practice is not going to be as easy as predicted by World Bank (2000). Traditional chiefs and local government officers have to come on board to pass bye-laws minimize the negative effects of initiation on education which most of the community refuse to see. These authorities have to be made to realize that the link between FGC and the education of girls is negative and the Soweis (excisors) must not be allowed to perform these rites during the school terms. Child Right Activists must become more vocal to ensure that steps should be taken against the compulsory initiation of school girls who are below the age of eighteen years.

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