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RESEARCH ARTICLE

VIEWS OF NYALA UNIVERSITY STUDENTS ABOUT FEMALE CIRCUMCISION: SHOULD THIS TRADITION CONTINUE?

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ABSTRACT

Background: Female genital mutilation is a commonly applied tradition in the Sub-Saharan Africa. It has three subtypes. Currently, it has been mostly illegal. But tradition still goes on.

Methods: This study included 407 male and 412 female university students who study in Nyala University in the State of South Darfur. Students were questioned for the followings in common: age, faculty of study, reasons for female circumcision, effects of female circumcision on female sexual functions, and their views about the circumcision of the possible future daughter. Mann-Whitney U-test was used for statistical analyses.

Results: The rate of circumcision was 79.6 % in the female university students 73 % of the all male students prefer to marry uncircumcised women. Male students reported that female circumcision should be continued to be performed, and their future daughters should be circumcised (64.7%); female students reported that their future daughters should not be circumcised (77.7%).

Conclusions: This study shows that even educated individuals in Africa demand female circumcision in spite of knowing its harms. It is therefore concluded that educational studies on this subject must be continued.

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INTRODUCTION

Female circumcision refers to all procedures that include cutting, rupturing, sewing, and abolishing the female external genital organ, which mutilates it, or causes limitation of its normal required functions, and it is carried out for non-medical reasons that depend on rigid and improper traditional rules (1, 2). Although it is called female circumcision in the countries in which it is performed, due to its physical and psychological unpleasant consequences, this procedure is defined in the medical literature as mutilation, which is derived from the Latin word 'mutylatio', and which refers to rupturing and disabling (Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting; FGM/C) (2,3).

According current knowledge, more than 125 million women living in the world, concentrated especially in the Middle East and in 29 countries of Africa, have been circumcised. It was also determined in 2001 that 66,000 circumcised women live in England, and in 2004 that 50,000 circumcised women live in France (4, 5). It is not completely known when and for what reason female circumcision (FGM) was initiated. However, according to one view, nuns in the Ancient Egypt demanded this procedure in order to avoid sexual sins (7). In many countries in Africa, virginity is the prerequisite for a marriage. FGM and especially its infibulations type (Type 3) decreases sexual desire in the female, and thus the probability of premarital or extramarital sexual intercourse is also decreased. According to another claim, men in particular insist that the women they will marry should be circumcised, and this fact led to the consolidation of such a tradition in the population

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Table 1. Responses of the students who participated in our questionnaire

Question	Males (n=407)	Females (n=412)
Age (mean (year) (SD)	17-33 (21.8 ±2.69)	16-29 (19.5±1.95)
Department		
Faculty of Medicine (number of students)	33	55
Faculty of Engineering	181	93
Faculty of Education	12	55
Faculty of Veterinarian	118	95
Economics	23	81
Law	40	33
What do you think is the reason for female circumcision?		
Religion	59.6%	8.5%
Traditions	24.8%	65.3%
Social Pressure	14.5%	13.5%
To marry easily	1.1%	9.7%
How does circumcision affect the female sexual life?		
Negatively	87.7 %	81.8
Positively	7.6%	4.6%
Does not affect	3.2%	9.7%
Don't know	1.5%	3.4%
Do you think you'll have your daughter circumcised in the future?		
Yes	64.7%	22.3%
No	35.3%	77.7%
Male students: Do you prefer a circumcised or non-circumcised female?	Non-circumcised=73% Circumcised= 12 % No preference=15%	
Female students: Are you circumcised?		Yes=79.6% No=20.4

over the years. Since university students are accepted to be more educated compared to other parts of the population, the present study was planned to determine the views of university students regarding the female circumcision, and also their approaches to this subject.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study included 407 male and 412 female students that were receiving education in various faculties (medicine, engineering, veterinary, economy, educational sciences, and law) of Nyala University in the State of South Darfur. Students were questioned for the followings in common: age, faculty of study, reasons for female circumcision, effects of female circumcision on female sexual functions, and their views about the circumcision of the possible future daughter. Only the male students were questioned about the following item: preference of a circumcised or uncircumcised female to marry. Only the female students were questioned about the following item: whether they are circumcised; and if circumcised, the age of this procedure. The responses were recorded in writing. Questionnaire forms were prepared in English and in Arabic. Three female medical students questioned the females, and three male medical students questioned the males. Questionnaires were implemented as face-to-face interviews. Data were statistically analyzed using Excel and SPSS software programs, and by applying the Mann-Whitney U-test. Ethics approval was obtained from The University of Nyala local Ethics Committee.

RESULTS

The responses of students are illustrated in Table 1. The perspectives of the groups regarding the reasons for female circumcision were determined to differ. Male students mostly indicated religion as the most important reason (59.6%),

whereas it was reported to be the least important reason by female students (8.5%); female students mostly indicated traditions as the most important reason for female circumcision (65.3%). Male students reported that they prefer to marry uncircumcised women (73%). Both of the groups reported that female circumcision negatively affects female sexual functions (males 87.7%, females 81.8%). However, male students reported that female circumcision should be continued to be performed, and their future daughters should be circumcised (64.7%); female students reported that their future daughters should not be circumcised (77.7%). The rate of circumcision was 79.6% in the female university students; 93% of these female students were circumcised between the age of 5 and 12.

DISCUSSION

Female circumcision is a widely performed procedure in Africa. It is estimated that approximately 3 million girls are circumcised each year. The World Health Organization (WHO), UNICEF, United Nations (UN), and many other organizations against circumcision have been studying the prevention of this procedure for many years, and there are currently ongoing studies. Sudan is the first African country that made laws against FGM/C. Type 3 female circumcision (infibulation) was forbidden in 1946, according to the Sudan laws of punishment. With a law introduced in 1974, FGM/C performers and those who allow circumcision are punished to imprisonment for less than five years in Sudan (10). However, all these efforts and legal arrangements could not stop this procedure, and FGM/C is still widely performed in Sudan. The ratio of female circumcision in married women was reported to be 89% in Sudan in general (5). This ratio is reported to be 65% in the Darfur district, and it is 99% in some northern states (6). In the current study, the female circumcision ratio was determined to be 79.6% in female university students. Male students reported that religion is the main reason for

ongoing female circumcision, whereas traditions are considered to be the most important reason by the female students. However, many of the previous studies indicate that female circumcision is performed in high ratios not only in Islamic countries, but also in populations with different religious beliefs or in African populations that have no religion (11,12). It is also known that the holy book of Islam, the Quran, does not include a written sentence about this subject. However, as understood from the responses of male students, false beliefs are present about this subject. In various studies previously performed on this subject, the following we reclaimed about the main reasons for female circumcision: consideration of female circumcision, especially the infibulation type of it, as an indicator of protecting family honor and also virginity in girls, and additionally, believing that males also prefer circumcised women. However, in the current study, 73% of the male students reported that they prefer uncircumcised women for marriage. Furthermore, only 9.7% of the female students in the current study reported that female circumcision facilitates marriage. In the current study, 87.7% of the male students, and 81.8% of the female students reported that female circumcision negatively affects the female sexual life. However, 64.7% of the male students reported that they would have their daughters circumcised in the future. This is in fact a self-contradictory results, related to male students, and indicates that they wish this procedure to be performed although they know its harms. Some Sudanese think that uncircumcised women are ready at any time and in any place for a sexual intercourse, they have extreme sexual desire, and they can be unfaithful to their husbands at any time when they marry. Uncircumcised women are teased by their friends, and they are called 'ghalfa', which refers to wanton woman (5); therefore, it is considered that women will be faithful if they are circumcised. Although it changes between countries, because it is forbidden, female circumcision is performed secretly under unhygienic conditions, by the aid of non-sterile tools, without anesthesia, and using knives, razor blades, or pieces of broken glass (14,16,17,). The three most important early complications are pain, bleeding, and infection (15). Late complications of especially Type 3 (infibulations) are infertility, menstrual disorders, vulvar abscess, increased frequency of urinary tract infections, chronic pelvic pain, bleeding, episiotomy, and high risks of maternal and infant deaths caused by extremely prolonged labor and delivery due to inadequate vaginal dilation (8,13). Female students have the possibility to experience any one of these complications, or they may have witnessed these problems; therefore, only 23% of the female students participating in this study reported that they would have their daughters circumcised in the future.

Conclusion

Female circumcision is a procedure that negatively affects women's sexual life and complete sexual satisfaction. It is therefore considered by the WHO as a human rights abuse. However, it is still currently performed in quite high ratios, as also determined in this study. It is clear that beliefs and

traditions play a prominent role in this procedure, since even educated individuals demand it to be performed in spite of knowing its harms. It is therefore concluded that educational studies on this subject must be continued.

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