

# Attitudes to female genital mutilation/cutting among male adolescents in Ilorin, Nigeria

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**Background.** The central role of males in female reproductive health issues in patriarchal societies makes them an important group in the eradication of female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C).

**Objectives.** To determine knowledge about and attitudes to FGM/C among male adolescents, and their preparedness to protect their future daughters from it.

**Methods.** A cross-sectional survey among male adolescent students in Ilorin, Nigeria. Participants completed a self-administered questionnaire after consent had been obtained from them or their parents. Statistical analysis was with SPSS version 20.0 (IBM, USA). A *p*-value of <0.05 was taken as significant.

**Results.** Of 1 536 male adolescents (mean age 15.09 (standard deviation 1.84) years, range 14 - 19), 1 184 (77.1%) were aware of FGM/C, 514 (33.5%) supported female circumcision, 362 (23.6%) would circumcise their future daughters, 420 (27.3%) were of the opinion that FGM/C had benefits, mostly as a necessity for womanhood (109, 7.1%), and 627 (40.8%) perceived it as wickedness against females; 546 (35.5%) were aware of efforts to eradicate FGM/C, and 42.2% recommended education as the most important intervention to achieve this.

**Conclusion.** Education and involvement in advocacy may transform male adolescents into agents for eradication of FGM/C.

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Female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) or female circumcision has received attention because of its health complications and the recognition that it represents human rights abuse and violence against females. However, it remains endemic in some countries in Africa, the Middle East and Asia,<sup>[1,2]</sup> with reports of new cases.<sup>[3]</sup> Decisions regarding FGM/C involve multiple stakeholders, including males (fathers, uncles or community leaders).<sup>[1]</sup> Women who are unwilling to circumcise their daughters often lose against in-laws who support FGM/C if the husband is indifferent or not on the mother's side.<sup>[1,3]</sup> Focusing on male adolescents, who are tomorrow's fathers, will indicate what interventions are necessary to transform them into advocates of eradication of FGM/C.

## Objective

To evaluate knowledge about and attitudes to FGM/C among male adolescents, and their preparedness to protect their future daughters from it.

## Methods

A cross-sectional survey was done among male senior secondary school students aged 14 - 19 years in 18 secondary schools in Ilorin, Nigeria, between October and November 2014. Participating schools and individuals were selected by multistaged sampling, informed consent was obtained from the students or their parents, and each participant completed a self-administered questionnaire. The inclusion criteria were male gender, current enrolment in the senior secondary school class, age 14 - 19 years, and informed consent.

## Sample size determination

The sample size was calculated using an appropriate formula<sup>[4]</sup> and a 25% prevalence of FGM/C in Nigeria.<sup>[5]</sup> The information collected included demographic parameters and level of knowledge about, perceptions and views of and attitudes to FGM/C.

## Statistical analysis

Statistical analysis was performed with SPSS version 20.0 (IBM, USA). A *p*-value of <0.05 was taken as significant.

## Ethical considerations

The ethical committee of the University of Ilorin Teaching Hospital (NHREC/02/05/2010) and the State Ministry of Education and Human Capital Development (MOEHCD/CD/PLAN/RS/2/1/17) approved the study.

## Results

Of 1 536 participants (mean age 15.09 (standard deviation 1.84) years, range 11 - 19), 1 184 (77.1%) were aware of FGM/C. The major sources of information were parents (mothers 29.8%, fathers 24.3%), teachers (39.6%) and friends (24.4%). Five hundred and fourteen (33.5%) supported FGM/C, 420 (27.3%) thought it had benefits, mostly as a necessity for womanhood (109, 7.1%), and 292 (19.0%) had the perception that FGM/C makes a female a 'real woman'. Conversely, 532 (34.6%) opposed FGM/C, 1 174 (76.4%) would not circumcise their future daughters, and 627 (40.8%) perceived FGM/C as wickedness against females. On seeing a girl who was about to be circumcised, 489 (31.8%) would report this to the police and 470 (30.6%) would appeal to the parents not to continue with the act; 648 (42.2%) viewed education as the best approach to stop the practice (Table 1).

Significant positive predictors of the attitude of the male adolescents in the study to the discontinuation of FGM/C included seeing a victim of the act (odds ratio (OR) 0.540, 95% confidence interval (CI) 0.424 - 0.687; *p*<0.001), attitude to circumcision of a future daughter (OR 0.442, 95% CI 0.321 - 0.608; *p*<0.001) and awareness of government policy on FGM/C (OR 1.656, 95% CI 1.306 - 2.099; *p*<0.001).

**Table 1. Experience and perceptions of male adolescents regarding FGM/C and its eradication**

Variables	n (%)
Have you heard about FGM/C before?	
Yes	1 184 (77.1)
No	352 (22.9)
Source of information about FGM/C	
Teachers	608 (39.6)
Mother	457 (29.8)
Friends	375 (24.4)
Father	373 (24.3)
Book	293 (19.1)
Radio	207 (13.5)
Religious leader	184 (12.0)
Television	184 (12.0)
Grandparents/elders	114 (7.4)
Posters	24 (1.6)
Should females be circumcised?	
Yes	514 (33.5)
No	532 (34.6)
I don't know	490 (31.9)
Will you circumcise your future daughters?	
Yes	362 (23.6)
No	1 174 (76.4)
Who performs female circumcision?	
Health personnel	723 (47.1)
Religious leaders	112 (7.3)
Older women	241 (15.7)
Traditional healer/herbalist	460 (29.9)
Does circumcision have any benefit to females?	
Yes	420 (27.3)
No	1 116 (72.7)
Perceived benefits of FGM/C	
Prevents sexual promiscuity	32 (2.1)
Religious rite	21 (1.4)
Necessary for womanhood	109 (7.1)
Controls sexual pleasure	1 (0.1)
Perception of FGM/C	
Wickedness against females	627 (40.8)
Old-fashioned culture	367 (23.9)
Good for girls	250 (16.3)
Makes a female a real woman	292 (19.0)
What can be done to stop FGM/C?	
Education of the populace	648 (42.2)
Appeal to parents/adults to stop it	321 (20.9)
Announcement on mass media	258 (16.8)
Enact laws to punish parents who encourage it	205 (13.3)
Arrest the circumcisers	104 (6.8)

## Discussion

Knowledge of FGM/C among male adolescents in this study was higher than the national average of 68% for males in Nigeria.<sup>[5]</sup> This may be because participants were senior secondary school students with access to education materials, social networks and information.<sup>[6]</sup>

Some participants were of the opinion that FGM/C is good for girls, with perceived benefits, and wished to circumcise their future daughters. This emphasises the role of men in perpetuating FGM/C. It is perceived by some men as a method of controlling female sexuality, guaranteeing female virginity until marriage and heightening male sexual satisfaction and fertility during coitus through the narrow vaginal opening created.<sup>[7-9]</sup> Some perceive it as a social custom enhancing marriage prospects for circumcised females.<sup>[10]</sup> Some men prefer to marry mutilated women,<sup>[8,9]</sup> believing that they are not sexually overactive and are likely to be faithful in marriage.<sup>[11]</sup> Conversely, a study in Sudan among men with one infibulated and one uncircumcised wife reported that 89% preferred uncircumcised or mildly infibulated women sexually.<sup>[12]</sup> In a study among schoolteachers, men as fathers were proponents of FGM/C in their daughters (40.9%).<sup>[13]</sup>

Male adolescents who opposed FGM/C in this study considered it an old-fashioned cultural act of wickedness against females. In a report, 72.9% of men supported abolition of FGM/C because of its negative consequences with regard to the woman's health.<sup>[1]</sup> Much of the collaboration for abolition of FGM/C has stemmed from the recognition that it represents human rights abuse, with potential for health complications in its victims.<sup>[6]</sup> However, only women with life-threatening acute complications usually present to hospital, others seeking medical attention in later life when the woman's health is significantly affected.<sup>[3]</sup>

Participants in this study suggested education and advocacy as principal interventions to encourage the discontinuation of FGM/C, while legislation ranked low. There have been suggestions that legislation to eradicate FGM/C should be accompanied by other measures to influence the cultural and social norms.<sup>[6,13]</sup>

## Conclusion

Education and advocacy among male adolescents about FGM/C through formal and informal forums are central in correcting the misconceptions about the act. Available opportunities include enlightenment about harmful traditional practices in schools, and encouraging anti-FGM/C clubs among adolescents in schools, communities and religious settings. Expressions in the performing arts may also be useful.

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