



Pogsara Yia!

(Girls First!)



FINDINGS FROM THE NAVRONGO HEALTH RESEARCH CENTRE
FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION ERADICATION INTERVENTION

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IT'S A WOMAN'S THING

Introduction. Biomedical research has shown that Female Genital Mutilation is harmful to women and threatens the survival of newborn children. Nevertheless, 77 percent of all women of reproductive age in the Kassena-Nankana District report having experienced circumcision. This fourth *Pogsara Yia!* note continues to examine reasons for the widespread practice of FGM and to assess potential sources of opposition to its demise.



How much pressure do these women exert on adolescent girls to succumb to cutting?

What is the role of women?

Panels involving community leaders and young men and women were convened, and focus groups studied the theme of social

supports for FGM practice. Groups examining gender roles in sustaining FGM identified several arenas for and channels of female influence:

Box 1

To be precise it is the mothers who push their daughters to circumcise because if your daughter is not circumcised, the mother would be seen in the village as an irresponsible mother. So if a mother does all that is necessary for a daughter without circumcision, she has failed in bringing up her daughter well.

Gognia woman

- *Maternal duty.* In addition to representing the traditional acquisition of life skills, circumcision has been assigned a normative value in the maturation of girls into women. Consequently, it is a significant component of a mother's responsibility to her daughter. A mother risks the ridicule and insults of women in the community and of her co-wives if her daughter has not been circumcised (Box 1).

Box 2

This practice has been with the human race from the beginning of creation and it is not something that we learn in school. It is something that is within a particular family and you may become one [of the men arranging for the practice] by virtue of the fact that you are a member of that family and when the gods choose you.

Male

It is something that chooses you and if you refuse to take it up you may experience some deaths in your family that you will not understand.

Husband of a circumcised woman

- *Traditional values and religion.* Practicing FGM is considered necessary because it is consistent with traditional religious tenets and rites and prevents the wrath of the ancestors. Focus-group discussants spoke of honoring the gods' wishes, and of the value of preserving tradition – as circumcision had continued for generations of women, many respondents did not see reason for change (Box 2).

- *Women's funeral rites.* It is believed that if a woman dies uncircumcised, she is not a real woman. Therefore, she can neither receive traditional funeral rites nor take her proper place in the after life. Moreover, while a first-born girl is expected to play an important role in her mother's funeral, an uncircumcised girl is forbidden from specific roles in her parents' last rites. This taboo motivates young girls to want to be

circumcised so that they can participate in such important ceremonies and pay their last respects to their parents (Box 3).

- *Social pressure: Peers.* Among the Kassena-Nankana, corporate identity and social interaction, as opposed to individuality, are paramount. Consequently, that a girl is accepted by her peer group is of central importance. Frequently, an uncircumcised girl is mocked or alienated by women within and outside her household. This influence is strongest prior to a girl's marriage, and may at times be framed in terms of sisterly support – warnings that she will be ostracized if she is not circumcised – rather than antagonism.

Box 3

It is believed that when a woman dies uncircumcised, she would be buried like a man.

Nayagnia middle-aged man

Suppose that you are not circumcised, it means that, for example, if your father dies and you are the first daughter, you are supposed to hold the back of the mat because we bury with mats. So while the undertakers are carrying the corpse outside the house, you are supposed to go with them by holding the tip of the back of the mat. If you are not circumcised, you cannot do it.

Female teacher

Box 5

Rivals see their uncircumcised colleagues as not being women and at the least provocation she insults her 'Momte giee' – protruding clitoris...Rivals would also not give you any rest but would always be insulting you. In fact, there are times that a newly married woman cannot go to the backyard garden because there is that belief that when she crosses a cala bash plant it would die or it would not bear fruits just because she is not circumcised.

Gognia middle-aged woman

Box 4

There are differences between circumcised and uncircumcised women. The difference is that, it makes childbirth easy, when one is circumcised. Because when a woman is in labor, the child's head is easily seen, but with the uncircumcised woman, the clitoris covers where the child will pass out, and this makes childbirth hard to bear.

Female excisor

- *Social pressure: Older Women.* Older women, especially wives of compound heads and a girl's mother-in-law, influence whether a girl is ostracized. Further, in the absence of modern health care alternatives, a woman may turn to elderly traditional birth attendants who may spread rumors of her circumcision status, and may maintain unfounded associations between this status and difficulties in the delivery (Box 4).
- *Social pressure: Co-wives.* It is common for women to mock uncircumcised co-wives – especially junior wives – during arguments or social gatherings (Box 5). In the Kassena-Nankana district where approximately one-third of marriages are polygamous, this influence on decisions concerning FGM is considerable; it in fact exceeds that exerted by a girl's parents during her adolescence.

Conclusion. As is apparent from this and the preceding *Pogsara Yia!* note, qualitative study of the FGM beliefs of men and women in the Kassena-Nankana district indicates that men are more open to eliminating the practice of FGM than are women. As men both dominate the village power structure and appear open to change, they may spearhead efforts to shift opinions of FGM. Circumcised women are the primary source of social support for the practice, which they exercise as mothers, as compound elders, and especially through peer pressure on co-wives. Junior wives entering a polygynous marriage are particularly vulnerable to this pressure. While gender stratification and the constrained nature of women's autonomy explain the cultural origins of FGM, women remain its day-to-day proponents and hence the immediate source of sustenance for the practice. Women must therefore be the focus of intervention efforts.

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