

**FEMALE CIRCUMCISION AND ITS EFFECT ON THE GIRL CHILD: A CASE  
STUDY OF BENIN WOMEN IN THE 21ST CENTURY**

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**FEBRUARY, 2025**

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**A PROJECT SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND  
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BENIN CITY**

**FEBRUARY, 2025**

## **CERTIFICATION**

This is to certify that this project was carried out by Favour Egberanmwen Eboigbe with matriculation number ART2004606 in the Department of International studies and Diplomacy, University of Benin, under my supervision.

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**Project Supervisor**

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**Date**

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**Date**

**DEDICATION**

I dedicate this project to God Almighty who has been my help all through my academic period in University of Benin.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

#### Introduction

The act of changing or harming a woman's genitalia for non-medical purposes is known as female genital mutilation. An estimated 230 million women and girls worldwide have experienced female genital mutilation, which is acknowledged internationally as a violation of human rights. The number of girls who undergo female genital mutilation will continue to rise if the practice persists at current levels, even though it is decreasing in the majority of the countries where it is common.<sup>1</sup> This is because most of these countries are also seeing rapid population growth. According to UNFPA<sup>2</sup> predictions, between 2015 and 2030, 68 million girls could be at danger of having the procedure. It will take a strong effort to end this dangerous, frequently fatal practice in order to protect females. To put an end to female genital mutilation, systematic and coordinated measures are required. This entails involving entire communities and emphasizing gender equality and human rights. Furthermore, immediate attention must be paid to the sexual and reproductive health requirements of women and girls who are exposed to the practice and its aftereffects.

Female genital mutilation is still a serious public health issue that has to be looked at more thoroughly and eradicated through cooperation. Fundamental human rights are violated by this practice, including the rights to equality, dignity, and life as well as the

prohibitions against torture, cruel treatment, and discrimination based on gender.<sup>3</sup> Importantly, the consent of the child is never obtained before subjecting them to this harmful procedure. Despite being considered an act of violence, female circumcision is still prevalent in certain countries and communities.

Female genital mutilation is predominantly practiced within certain ethnic groups in Africa, particularly Edo Communities. The highest concentration of this practice is found in Sub-Saharan African countries, where it thrives due to strong sociocultural forces, limited resources, and widespread illiteracy, which enable the secretive perpetration of the act and underreporting. Despite its regional concentration, female circumcision has also become more globally distributed due to factors like migration and refugee movements<sup>4</sup>

Female genital mutilation also inflicts adverse psychological effects on affected individuals, leading to feelings of fear, depression, and anxiety. Moreover, the removal of sexually sensitive tissue, such as the clitoris, impairs sexual function, affecting arousal, lubrication, orgasm, satisfaction, and overall sexual function score. Female genital mutilation imposes substantial financial costs on healthcare systems due to the treatment of complications arising from the practice, including hemorrhage, infection, and obstetric issues.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, female circumcision has wide-ranging effects on mental health, education, and employment opportunities for affected women, ultimately impacting their

economic productivity and the overall economic development of their communities and countries.

The consequences of female circumcision extend far beyond the immediate physical harm, highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive efforts to eradicate this harmful practice and support the well-being of affected individuals and communities. Female circumcision, also known as female genital mutilation (Female Circumcision), refers to various procedures that involve the partial or total removal of the external female genitalia. Despite global efforts to eradicate the practice, it remains prevalent in many cultures.

The impact of female circumcision on the girl child is profound, affecting her health, education, and overall well-being.<sup>6</sup> As we move further into the 21st century girl child, it is imperative to continue advocating for the rights of girls and women, working towards a future free from the harmful practice of female circumcision. Collaborative efforts from governments, NGOs, and communities are essential to ensure lasting change and promote the health and rights of all girls. This paper examines the effects of female circumcision on the girl child, particularly in the context of the 21st century girl child.

### **Aim and Objectives of the Study**

The main aim and objective of this study is to examine the effects of female circumcision on the girl child, particularly in the context of the 21st century girl child, more specifically the objectives are to:

- 1) Evaluate the overview and origin of female circumcision in the 21st century among Benin Women, Edo State;
- 2) Discuss the factors responsible for female circumcision in the 21st century girl child;
- 3) Examine women's rights and female genital mutilation (FGM) in the 21st century girl child;
- 4) Analyse the current situation of female circumcision in Nigeria; and
- 5) Explore the effect of female circumcision on the girl child in the 21st century girl child.

### **Scope of the Study**

This study focuses on the effects of female circumcision on the girl child, particularly in the case of the 21st century girl child. This study will be limited to reviews on issues surrounding historical status and analysis of the factors responsible for female circumcision in the 21st century girl child, as well as women's rights and female genital mutilation (FGM) in the 21st century girl child. The study will examine the effect of female circumcision on the girl child in the 21st century girl child.

### **Methodology**

The research method employed in this study is based on historical ideas pertaining to female circumcision in the twenty-first century in order to achieve the study's main goal. The study will undergo a comprehensive examination based on primary and secondary sources.

## **Primary Sources**

Primary sources, such as archive materials and oral information from interviews, will serve as the foundation for the study's facts and discussions. Data from in-person interviews and discussions with specific members of the community will be used.

## **Secondary Sources**

The secondary materials will include text books, articles in journal, seminary papers, and media reports, magazines, and newspapers.

## **Literature Review**

Extensive research has been conducted on the practice of female circumcision, with a wide array of studies documenting its adverse effects. The practice is often carried out for cultural, religious, or traditional reasons, with claims of promoting cleanliness, controlling women's sexuality, ensuring marriageability, and maintaining social status. However, global health organizations have underscored the harmful impact of FGM, particularly on the physical and psychological health of women and girls. The WHO has identified female circumcision as a violation of human rights, particularly as it denies women bodily autonomy and can lead to lifelong physical and emotional consequences.

Alhagie Manka, UN Envoy on Youth, pointed that "Female Genital Mutilation is 'Not Acceptable' in the 21st century girl child,"<sup>7</sup> Speaking one day before the International Day of Zero Tolerance to Female Genital Mutilation, the United Nations youth envoys emphasized that the horrifying practice prevents millions of individuals from reaching

their full potential and is an affront to their human rights. This is unacceptable and this is done in the name of tradition, culture, religion, or in the name of ensuring that women are to take on subservient roles to the men they will eventually marry. Consequently, history has shown us that human civilizations are capable of developing abhorrent social practices that are rationalized under false pretenses in order to uphold the status quo for particular social groups or to reinforce existing power structures.

The book by J.S. Mbiti, on *African Religions and Philosophy*,<sup>8</sup> some viewpoints regarding female circumcision, the authors concurred that female circumcision is an old tradition, and it is unknown how many different versions of it are still practiced today. Even if there are a number of competing ideas that attempt to explain it, female circumcision can only be traced back to antiquity, possibly to the dawn of humanity. Circumcision is thought to have taken the role of human sacrifices as a means of appeasing evil spirits and forces at some early stage of human history. Origin asserts, for example, that the Jewish custom served as a defense against certain angels who were antagonistic to that race. However, there is a lot of conjecture that the practice originated from early man's ambition to become superior to the enigma surrounding female sexual function.

Giogis,<sup>9</sup> *Attributes The Origin of Female Circumcision to the Development of a Patriarchal Family System*, which dictated that a woman could only have one husband while a man could have multiple spouses. A strong patriarchal system restricted women's

sexuality in order to preserve male ancestry. It is believed that by removing the clitoris, women's sexual function could be curbed and that women were transformed from common to private property, i.e., the property of their husband alone. Although reports from ancient Egypt indicate that the practice was limited to rulers, priests, and their families, Talbot maintains that the system of female circumcision was performed on virgins, widows, divorcees, and women whose husbands were away on journeys. Without this procedure, girls in ancient Egypt were not allowed to marry, inherit property, or enter places of worship.

S.T. Oyeniran, K.A. Sahid and V.T. Adegboye, in a journal, “Female Genital Mutilation in the 21st century girl child:<sup>10</sup> The Effectiveness of Communication in the Campaign Against It”, The study's conclusions demonstrated that, among other things, the majority of respondents were aware of the campaign against female genital mutilation and that the most common communication tactics used at health centers to combat this practice are counseling and one-on-one interactions. Additionally, the majority of responders supports the campaign and did not circumcise their daughters because they heard negative effects from various communication techniques. As a result, the campaign against female genital mutilation in Iwo effectively uses communication. Since social media is a thriving technology for communication, the researcher suggested that the government develop more awareness-raising programs to reach the grassroots,

particularly those who are illiterate, and use other communication tactics to fight this practice.

The journal by E. Ogunmodede titled, “End this Mutilation”<sup>11</sup> has shown that the customary management of female circumcision and educational attainment are directly correlated. In this instance, she is less likely to engage in the customary practice of female circumcision the more educated she is. For example, analysis showed that 94% of the 31 (24.8%) illiterate women who took part in the survey felt that traditional practice is a required rite, compared to only 35 (45%) of the 70 (56%) educated NCE (OND) subjects who concurred. Similarly, 0% of educated people and 65% of uneducated persons favor disregarding the practice. These results ran counter to those of Ogunmodede, who noted in her research that young, educated mothers in Sudan and Africa in general are pressured to adopt the custom of circumcision.

E.J. Oyira, U.D. Emon, N.C. Essien, E.O. Affiong, M.E. Egbai and P. A. Mbum, in journal titled, “Changing the Opinions, Beliefs and Attitudes of the Efiks, Quas and Efuts of Calabar Municipality Towards the Practice of Female Circumcision”,<sup>12</sup> the removal of the entire clitoris or a portion of it is known as clitoridectomy, and it is practiced by Calabar tribes. The practice of female circumcision carries serious health hazards. Other health problems include shock, significant bleeding that can often be fatal, and infections like tetanus if the treatment is performed in an unsanitary manner, in addition to the intense aches induced by the tissue cutting. To the author some women

have uncontrollable tears during delivery as a result of scarring. Others may, however, suffer from delayed menarche, dyspareunia or pain during sexual activity, or develop cysts in the colloids and desmoids. In Nigeria and throughout Africa, female circumcision is a popular practice despite the health risks. A number of Calabar Municipal Council regions have a long-standing tradition of female circumcision. In actuality, it has existed since antiquity. However, due to its negative effects on people's health, it has been strongly condemned as a ritual in many regions. The severe short-term and long-term side effects of this medication, which can occasionally lead to life-threatening health concerns, have increased opposition to it in recent years. Nevertheless, Calabar urban dwellers still perform female circumcision in spite of the health hazards involved and official awareness of its negative consequences. Given this, the aim of this research is to investigate attitudes, beliefs, and viewpoints and how they impact practice.

A.I. Obi and O.L. Igbinalolor, in a journal titled, "Prevalence of Female Genital Mutilation and Its Determinants among Pregnant Women in Benin City, Nigeria",<sup>13</sup> explained that female genital mutilation (FGM) is a harmful cultural practice perpetuating gender inequality and violence against women and the girl child. This study assessed prevalence and determinants of FGM among pregnant women in Benin City, Edo State with a view to mitigating the practice. Female genital mutilation was common among respondents studied with significant association identified between the FGM status of respondents with that of their daughters and intention to circumcise future

daughters. There is need to channel appropriate FGM preventive interventions involving critical stakeholders including pregnant women to curb this harmful socio-cultural practice.

In their journal "Tradition and Health: The Predicament of Female Adolescents among the Igbo," C.O. Odimegwu, O. Modupeola, and C.N. Okemgbo<sup>14</sup> made the case that a number of traditional practices, such as female genital mutilation, son-preference, food inhibition, and the denial of girl-child rights, have an impact on girls. These problems are thoroughly examined using an empirical methodology. The author suggested that creating community-based initiatives that combat harmful and unfair customs that target girls in the Abakaliki region. The overview of their research on reproductive health is a critical focus on the state of the girl child. The study also identifies the concern over the miserable situation of the female child which is being voiced all over the world, presumably because issues related to her survival and well-being have been purposefully or in some other way pushed to the side.

N. C. Uwannah, A.O. Adeoye, A. Adeoye, H.I. Obioma-Agharanya, B.A. Filade and P.N. Starris-Onyema, in a journal titled "Female Genital Mutilation and Sexual Quality of Life Among Igbo Women in Aba Metropolis".<sup>15</sup> However, given the complexity of city life, it's possible that parents made sure their girls were circumcised to curb their lust and prevent promiscuity, which is occasionally more prevalent in urban areas than in rural ones. A closer look reveals that 52% of respondents thought negatively

of women's genital perceptions. Given that majority are circumcised, this may be related to the unfavorable experiences and outcomes of female genital mutilation. Women who had undergone female genital mutilation were happy for their children to experience the same thing because they believed it would provide benefits, such as societal approval. The procedure is still carried out because of custom and the need to preserve societal norms and traditions. Although the present study did not investigate the direction of this outcome, the results of earlier studies support the current study's findings, which showed that women in Aba city agreed that a woman's decision to have her daughter circumcised was influenced by her position as a circumcised person.

Women's mental health may also be impacted by female genital mutilation. The psychological effects of female genital mutilation on women in the Izzi Community in Southeast Nigeria are less well-established, however Omigbodun et al.,<sup>16</sup> found that respondents think there are both advantages and disadvantages. There are benefits, such as contentment since you won't be shunned or shunned, but drawbacks, such as hopelessness, melancholy, and rage, particularly when sexual pleasure and delight are at risk. The author remarks such as "it is harmful," "it is not healthy," and "a pain to my soul" allude to the psychological and emotional damage experienced by the maimed women under study. In the majority of situations, these women's spouses are also impacted.

This taxonomy, which has been adopted by a vast majority of local and international organizations, has attracted criticisms from several quarters, especially third-world scholars with an intimate knowledge of the procedures. Writing in opposition to a bill that would outlaw FGR in Nigeria, Nowa Omoigui,<sup>17</sup> a Nigerian-born cardiologist practicing in the United States, questioned the wisdom of mischaracterizing circumcision as mutilation, and, as a result, lumping together all forms of FGR under the pejorative umbrella called female circumcision. There is a huge difference between circumcision and mutilation, Omoigui argues. To group all forms of age old religious circumcision into one large category under the guise of medical enlightenment and civilization' is very unfortunate.

Omoigui attacks the idea that every genital ritual connotes the same horror or has the same consequences as clitoridectomy, excision, or infibulation.<sup>18</sup> Referring to Edo women in Nigeria, for whom circumcision is limited to the removal of the prepuce (preputium clitoridis) threefold of skin that covers the clitoris and which has no sexual or reproductive value Omoigui notes that, for these women, circumcision involves the mutilation of neither the clitoris nor any other part of the genitalia. In fact, in many cases the removal 'is symbolic and part of a traditional marriage ceremony. A similar argument has been advanced regarding the Ibos, one of the most populous ethnic groups in Nigeria, for whose people circumcision often involves the removal of only the prepuce.

Though the procedure Omoigui describes does not involve mutilation as the word is ordinarily understood, the WHO type I classification nonetheless holds otherwise, characterizing as mutilation any removal of the prepuce, even if the clitoris is left untouched.<sup>19</sup> The operative words in the WHO classification are: partial or total removal of the clitoris and/or the prepuce. This mischaracterization is widespread. For instance, although in her book, *Sex and Social Justice*, Martha Nussbaum, professor of philosophy at the University of Chicago, claimed that her discussion is confined to cases that involve substantial removal of tissue and/or functional impairment, her subsequent discussion deviates from her self-imposed limited focus in favor of the popular paradigm. The author makes no attempt to draw distinctions between procedures that are truly mutilatory and those that are not. Instead, she uses the term amputation to describe an act that destroys nothing other than prepuce, a tissue that serves no useful function: The male equivalent of the clitoridectomy would be the amputation of most of the penis. According to the author the removal of limbs or other appendages can be accurately described as amputation, but not insignificant tissues such as prepuce or toenails. For instance, because clipping a toenail involves removing the outgrowth nail only, it is a simple process that is associated with nothing as gory as amputation. Thus, it would be silly to describe it as such. Moreover, using terms that convey extremely exaggerated meanings serve no purpose other than to obfuscate the issues. And that, for better or worse, has

been the contribution of the terms amputation and mutilation to the debate regarding the legitimacy of FGR as a cultural practice.

The journal by Abdulmumini A Oba, titled, “Female Circumcision as Female Genital Mutilation: Human Rights or Cultural Imperialism”,<sup>20</sup> pointed that the definition of female genital mutilation (FGM) by the World Health Organization (WHO) is questioned as being partial and amounting to cultural profiling. The author interrogated the case against female circumcision and reviews anti-female circumcision treaties and legislations at international and domestic levels across the world. A case of cultural imperialism against the West is argued by questioning the non-inclusion by WHO of some western practices such as ‘female genital surgeries’ or ‘female genital cuttings’ in its definition of FGM. Other female bodily mutilations such as breast augmentation should be indicted too. Again, the failed Seattle compromise emphatically illustrates the cultural imperialism inherent in the campaign against female circumcision. The campaign against female circumcision is diverting focus from third world's pressing social and economic travails which arise from the exploitation and manipulation of its economy by the West. Criminalization of female circumcision is counter-productive - the fight against FGM must be based on credible facts and enlightenment.

Consequently, V.O. Awusi, in a journal titled, “Tradition Versus Female Circumcision: A Study of Female Circumcision among the Isoko Tribe of Delta State of Nigeria”,<sup>21</sup> discusses how female circumcision has a negative impact on women's fertility,

sexuality, and health and is a culturally accepted procedure in many Isoko clans. According to the authors' findings, a considerable percentage of women were circumcised, with married women having a greater proportion. The majority of circumcisions took place during marriage. Tradition was one of the main justifications for circumcision. Immediately following the circumcision, several young ladies under the age of sixteen experienced some kind of problem. The introduction of sexuality education into the educational system and an enlightenment campaign targeted primarily at cultural value custodians, including women in diverse settings, were proposed by the author as ways to combat the female circumcision.

## **Chapter Outline**

### **Chapter One: Background to the Study**

As an introduction to the primary goal of the research, this chapter provides an explanation of the fundamental concept of the investigation and is separated into several sections, including the study's goals and objectives, scope, methodology, literature review, and chapterization.

### **Chapter Two: Brief History of the Benin People and Female Circumcision in Precolonial Period.**

This chapter entails the overview and origin of female circumcision, as well as women's rights and female genital mutilation (FGM). The chapter also discusses current situation of FGM in Benin

### **Chapter Three: Female Circumcision in Colonial and Post-colonial Benin**

This chapter is an evaluation of the practice of female circumcision in colonial Benin

### **CHAPTER FOUR: Effect Of Female Circumcision on the Girl Child in the 21st Century among Benin women**

This chapter will explain detailed issues on effect of female circumcision on the girl child in the 21st century.

### **Chapter Five: Conclusion**

This chapter integrates the various issues raised from chapter one to four on Female Circumcision and its Effect on the Girl Child: A Case Study of Benin women in the 21st century.

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## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **BRIEF HISTORY OF THE BENIN PEOPLE AND FEMALE CIRCUMCISION IN PRECOLONIAL PERIOD**

The history of the Benin people is rich and complex, with a long-standing culture that predates colonialism. The Benin Kingdom, often referred to as the Edo Kingdom, was one of the most powerful and advanced societies in precolonial West Africa. This kingdom was located in what is now southern Nigeria, and its people, the Edo, developed a sophisticated political structure, art, and culture. They are best known for their highly advanced metalwork, intricate royal regalia, and the famous Benin Bronzes.<sup>1</sup>

The Benin Kingdom is believed to have been founded around the 11th century, though some historians argue for earlier origins. The kingdom was established by the Edo people and reached its height between the 14th and 17th centuries under the leadership of powerful Obas (kings). The kingdom had a centralized government, with the Oba being both the political and spiritual leader. The Benin monarchy was considered divine, and the Oba's power was absolute. The kingdom also had a well-organized system of officials and military units that helped maintain control over the territory.

Benin is famous for its sophisticated bronze and brass casting techniques, which were used to create intricate plaques, sculptures, and altars. These works often depicted scenes of court life, military triumphs, and royal regalia. The Benin Bronzes are perhaps the most famous artifacts from this period, though many were looted during the British

Punitive Expedition of 1897. The Benin Kingdom had contact with Europeans starting in the 15th century, particularly with the Portuguese. The kingdom engaged in trade, especially in slaves, ivory, and palm oil. European trade routes also facilitated the spread of Christianity, which eventually became a significant influence after the kingdom's fall in the late 19th century.

The Benin Kingdom faced increasing tension with the British colonial forces during the 19th century. In 1897, the British launched a punitive expedition, sacking the city of Benin and exiling the Oba. The British subsequently took control of the area, incorporating it into the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria.<sup>2</sup> Female circumcision, or female genital mutilation (FGM), refers to various traditional practices involving the partial or total removal of the external female genitalia for non-medical reasons. It is important to note that the practice of FGM varies widely across regions and cultures in Africa, and not all African societies practice it. In the case of the Benin people, there is evidence suggesting that female circumcision, or some form of genital modification, may have been practiced, but the details of the practice and its significance are not as well-documented in historical texts as other cultural practices. Much of what is known about FGM in African societies is drawn from oral histories and anthropological studies conducted during the colonial and postcolonial periods.

## **Origins of Female Circumcision in Benin Culture**

Female circumcision among the Benin people, like many other African ethnic groups, has deep roots in the cultural and religious traditions of the community. The practice of female circumcision is traditionally linked to beliefs about purity, fertility, and social status. For the Benin people, circumcision was often viewed as a rite of passage that marked a girl's transition into womanhood. The practice was seen as necessary for ensuring the girl's eligibility for marriage, preserving her virginity, and even controlling her sexuality.<sup>3</sup>

In traditional Benin society, female circumcision was also believed to help reduce a woman's sexual desire, making her more "disciplined" and "respectable" in a society that placed high importance on sexual modesty, especially for women. Women who underwent circumcision were seen as more desirable for marriage, as the practice was believed to ensure fertility, proper childbearing, and a smooth marital life. In some interpretations, it was believed that circumcision protected the girl from promiscuity and made her fit for social and community acceptance. This view was supported by elders and traditional leaders, who held significant influence in shaping social and cultural norms

Female circumcision, also referred to as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), is a cultural practice involving the partial or total removal of the female genitalia. While FGM is recognized internationally as a harmful practice, it is still prevalent in many parts

of the world, including sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and parts of Asia. In Nigeria, female circumcision remains a practice in several ethnic groups, including the Benin people of Edo State. In the 21st century, despite increasing global awareness and legislative frameworks condemning FGM, the practice continues in certain communities, including among the Benin women in Edo State. Female circumcision is often associated with traditional beliefs about purity, marriageability, and societal norms. In these communities, the practice is seen as a rite of passage for girls, marking their transition into.<sup>4</sup>

### **Historical Culture of Benin People and Women Circumcision in Edo State**

The Benin people are one of the minor ethnic groups in Nigeria, primarily residing in Edo State, with their cultural capital in Benin City. The Benin Kingdom has a rich historical heritage that dates back to several centuries, with a well-established monarchy, a sophisticated system of governance, and a rich tradition of art, rituals, and religious beliefs. The Benin people are known for their strong cultural values and adherence to customs passed down through generations. Their society is traditionally patriarchal, where gender roles have been clearly defined, and women's roles were historically linked to marriage, procreation, and maintaining family and community honor.<sup>5</sup> The culture of the Benin people is deeply tied to rituals, especially those related to birth, marriage, and death. These rites of passage are essential for defining an individual's role in society. The Benin people have a strong belief in preserving tradition

and adhering to societal norms, and this is reflected in the practice of female circumcision among certain segments of the population.

The Benin people, originally from the ancient Benin Kingdom, have a rich and vibrant cultural heritage that predates colonial rule in Nigeria. Located in the southern part of present-day Edo State, the Benin Kingdom was one of the most advanced and well-organized kingdoms in precolonial West Africa. The Benin Kingdom, which flourished from the 11th century until its conquest by the British in 1897, had a highly structured political system, a revered monarchy, a complex religious and spiritual belief system, and intricate social customs. The kingdom was famous for its art, particularly the Benin bronzes, and for its elaborate palace and city planning.<sup>6</sup>

The Benin people were and continue to be deeply rooted in a culture that values community, tradition, and respect for ancestral customs. Their society was built around hierarchical structures, where elders and chiefs held great influence in the governance and religious practices of the community. Within this framework, women played vital roles, particularly in the maintenance of family life, procreation, and ensuring cultural continuity. One of the key aspects of precolonial Benin culture was the emphasis placed on rites of passage, especially those that marked significant transitions in an individual's life.<sup>7</sup> These rites were deeply intertwined with the spiritual beliefs and cultural values of the people. For instance, birth, initiation, marriage, and death were all marked by specific ceremonies and practices that reinforced the community's cultural identity.

## **Female Circumcision in Precolonial Benin**

Female circumcision, also referred to as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), was a significant ritual practice in precolonial Benin society. This practice, like many other traditional rites of passage, was rooted in the community's cultural and religious beliefs and was considered a key part of a girl's transition into womanhood. In the precolonial Benin Kingdom, female circumcision was traditionally carried out as a rite of passage for young girls, typically before puberty. The procedure was considered necessary for ensuring the girl's physical and social readiness for marriage. It was believed that circumcision purified the girl, prepared her for adult responsibilities, and ensured her fertility.<sup>8</sup>

## **Cultural and Religious Significance of Female Circumcision**

Female circumcision, also referred to as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), is a cultural and traditional practice that involves the partial or total removal of the external female genitalia. This practice has been historically observed in several African countries, including Nigeria, and is sometimes seen as a rite of passage, a cultural norm, or an essential part of a community's identity. In Benin City, Edo State, female circumcision has cultural and religious connotations that are deeply rooted in local traditions, but these practices are also increasingly viewed in the context of human rights and gender equality debates.<sup>9</sup>

## **Social Acceptance of Female Circumcision in Benin, Edo State**

Female circumcision (also known as Female Genital Mutilation or FGM) is a practice that involves the partial or total removal of the female genitalia for non-medical reasons, and it is often rooted in cultural, social, and religious beliefs. In the context of Edo State, which is located in southern Nigeria, this practice has historically been tied to traditional beliefs and customs, particularly among certain ethnic groups. The practice of female circumcision in Benin, Edo State, may vary depending on specific communities and their adherence to traditional customs. While female circumcision is not universal across all ethnic groups in Edo State, certain communities still uphold the practice due to the following reasons: In some Benin speaking traditional societies, female circumcision is believed to be necessary for preserving a girl's purity, modesty, or social status. It is often viewed as a rite of passage into womanhood and marriage.<sup>10</sup> Benin girls and women undergo circumcision because of social pressure and the desire to conform to the expectations of their families and communities. In some cases, women may fear social ostracization if they do not adhere to the practice. In certain communities, circumcision is seen as a prerequisite for a girl to be considered marriageable. This view is deeply ingrained in the social fabric, and a woman who is not circumcised may be viewed as unclean or unsuitable for marriage.

For some people, female circumcision is closely linked to preserving their cultural heritage. It is often practiced by older generations who believe that the tradition is vital

for maintaining the identity of their ethnic group. In patriarchal societies, practices like female circumcision are often perpetuated to control women's sexuality and maintain gender norms. Circumcision is seen as a way to ensure women's submission to male authority and to reduce perceived sexual promiscuity.<sup>11</sup>

### **Honour and Respect for Female Circumcision in Edo State**

The sense of honor associated with female circumcision is complex and tied to both individual and collective identities. In some communities, women who have undergone circumcision may be viewed with respect or honor because they are perceived to have adhered to cultural traditions. They are often seen as more "authentic" or "pure" in their adherence to cultural practices. However, it is important to note that attitudes toward female circumcision are evolving. Increasing education, advocacy, and legal reforms are gradually shifting public perceptions and reducing the practice in many parts of Edo State and Nigeria as a whole. Nigeria has made strides in addressing female circumcision through legislation. The Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act 2015 and the Child Rights Act, 2003 explicitly prohibit female genital mutilation. However, enforcement of these laws can be challenging, especially in rural areas where traditional practices are deeply entrenched.<sup>12</sup>

Awareness of the health risks associated with female circumcision such as complications during childbirth, infection, and psychological trauma has led to growing opposition to the practice. As women and men in these communities learn about the

negative consequences, some are abandoning the practice in favor of more progressive views on gender and sexuality. NGOs, human rights groups, and local leaders in Edo State are working to raise awareness and advocate against the harmful practice. Women's groups and local activists have played a significant role in challenging the notion of honor associated with female circumcision, instead promoting the idea that women's dignity should not be tied to harmful rituals. Younger generations in Edo State are more likely to question or reject the practice of female circumcision, especially as they become more exposed to global conversations on gender equality and human rights.<sup>13</sup> This shift in attitudes may signal the eventual decline of the practice in certain communities.

While female circumcision remains socially accepted and even honored in some parts of Edo State, attitudes are slowly changing. With the rise of education, legal frameworks, and advocacy, there is hope that this harmful practice will eventually be eradicated. As younger generations and communities become more aware of the associated health risks and the violation of human rights, social acceptance of female circumcision is likely to diminish over time.

### **Rite of Passage:**

In some parts of Edo State, female circumcision is considered an important initiation into womanhood. The procedure marks a transition from childhood to adulthood and is often performed on young girls. It is typically linked to the idea of preparing them for marriage and their roles as wives and mothers.<sup>14</sup> Female circumcision

in precolonial Benin served as an important initiation rite for girls. It marked the transition from childhood to adulthood, signifying that the girl was now ready for the roles and responsibilities expected of adult women, particularly marriage and motherhood. This process was seen as essential for a girl's full integration into the adult community, and undergoing circumcision was often a precondition for social acceptance.

The Rite of Passage of female circumcision among Benin women, as well as in other parts of West Africa, refers to a traditional cultural practice that has deep-rooted significance. Female circumcision, also known as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), involves partial or total removal of the female genitalia and is sometimes performed as part of a larger initiation ritual marking the transition from girlhood to womanhood.<sup>15</sup> In Benin, as in many parts of the African continent, the practice has historically been linked to cultural beliefs surrounding femininity, purity, and social acceptance. It is considered a rite of passage for young girls and is sometimes done with the belief that it preserves virginity, ensures marriageability, or prepares the girl for womanhood. Additionally, in certain communities, it may be viewed as a way to preserve cultural heritage or to conform to societal expectations.

However, it is important to note that female circumcision is a highly controversial practice that has been widely criticized by health professionals, human rights organizations, and governments. Female genital mutilation is recognized by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a harmful practice with no health benefits. It can lead to

severe physical, psychological, and emotional consequences, including infections, pain, complications during childbirth, and long-term trauma. In Benin, the practice has been outlawed by the government, and efforts have been made to raise awareness and promote alternative rites of passage that do not involve mutilation. These efforts are part of a broader movement across Africa and globally to eliminate FGM and protect the rights and well-being of girls and women.<sup>16</sup> While some communities have gradually abandoned the practice due to legal and social pressure, others may still continue it clandestinely, often out of tradition or fear of ostracism. Consequently, the struggle to eradicate female circumcision in Benin and other countries continues to be an ongoing challenge involving education, legislation, and advocacy.

### **Social and Marital Expectations**

Marriage was a central part of life in precolonial Benin, and the practice of circumcision was thought to make girls more marriageable. Women who had undergone circumcision were perceived as “pure” and “chaste,” as it was believed to reduce sexual desire and ensure sexual discipline. This notion was tied to the importance of controlling women’s sexuality, ensuring that they were prepared for the roles of wife and mother in a patriarchal society. For certain communities in Benin City and other parts of Edo State, female circumcision is a long-standing cultural tradition passed down through generations.<sup>17</sup> It is seen as an essential part of preserving cultural identity and heritage.

Families that practice it often view the act as a way of maintaining their ancestral customs.

In the 21st century, the practice of female circumcision (or Female Genital Mutilation, FGM) among Benin women is increasingly being questioned due to the growing recognition of its harmful physical and psychological effects. Despite this, the practice still carries significant social and marital expectations in certain communities, largely because of deeply entrenched cultural beliefs, although these expectations are gradually shifting. In some communities in Benin, female circumcision is considered an essential part of cultural identity. It is believed to symbolize a girl's transition into womanhood and is tied to community rituals. Women who undergo circumcision may be seen as upholding traditional values, and there may be social pressure to conform to these practices in order to be accepted by the community. In certain rural or traditional communities, young girls may undergo circumcision as a means of aligning with peer and family expectations.<sup>18</sup>

Girls who resist or refuse circumcision may face social stigma, discrimination, or be perceived as rebellious or disrespectful to family and cultural norms. A girl who has undergone circumcision may gain social recognition or status, as it is sometimes associated with purity, modesty, and respectability in the eyes of the community. Conversely, girls who have not been circumcised may be viewed as incomplete or not fully "initiated" into womanhood, which could impact their social standing. One of the

most significant marital expectations tied to female circumcision is the belief that it enhances a woman's chances of getting married. In some communities, it is seen as a prerequisite for marriage, as circumcision is thought to maintain sexual "purity" and prevent promiscuity. This belief stems from the idea that circumcision curbs sexual desire, which is linked to the notion of preserving a woman's chastity for her future husband.<sup>19</sup> Some men in certain communities may expect their future wives to have undergone circumcision, considering it an indication of a woman's readiness for marriage. A woman who has not undergone circumcision might be seen as less desirable or even unsuitable for marriage, with the idea that she is "unclean" or unable to fulfill her marital role appropriately. Parents, particularly mothers, may feel pressure to ensure that their daughters undergo circumcision to increase their prospects of marriage. In many cases, this is linked to family honor or ensuring that the daughter is accepted by her in-laws. Family members may view circumcision as a necessary step to securing the girl's future.<sup>20</sup>

While social and marital expectations related to female circumcision still hold sway in some areas of Benin, there is a clear and growing shift in the 21st century, driven by legal measures, health education, and changing societal views. The harmful effects of the practice are leading many to challenge traditional beliefs, and efforts to abandon FGM and replace it with culturally sensitive, non-harmful rites of passage are becoming more widespread. The practice is increasingly viewed as incompatible with modern

understandings of human rights, gender equality, and women's health. However, it will take time for these attitudes to be fully embraced across all communities, especially in more remote or traditional areas where the practice remains entrenched.

### **Fertility and Purity Female Circumcision among Benin Women, Edo State**

Female circumcision was also linked to beliefs around fertility and the purification of the female body. It was thought that circumcision played a role in ensuring that a woman would have healthy children. In some cases, the procedure was associated with the preservation of virginity before marriage, with the belief that it would prevent promiscuity and illicit sexual behavior. Women who underwent circumcision were seen as more “clean” or “proper” for marriage, while those who had not undergone the procedure might face stigmatization.<sup>21</sup>

In Edo State, located in southern Nigeria, female circumcision also known as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)—has historically been connected to beliefs surrounding fertility, purity, and social acceptance. The practice is part of a broader cultural tradition, but it is increasingly being challenged as awareness grows about its harmful effects. Below, we explore how fertility and purity are central themes in the practice of female circumcision among Benin women in Edo State. In some communities in Edo State, female circumcision has been associated with fertility. The belief is that the practice prepares women for marriage and childbirth by maintaining their physical and moral "purity," which is thought to enhance their ability to bear children. For instance, it

has been believed that circumcision preserves the woman's sexual health and her ability to conceive, even though there is no scientific evidence supporting such claims. Some cultures in Edo State may also associate female circumcision with ensuring that a woman will have a smooth delivery, by making childbirth "easier" or less painful.<sup>22</sup>

A core idea in many communities that practice female circumcision is that the act of circumcision purifies the woman's body. It is thought to remove any physical or moral impurities that could prevent the woman from fulfilling her "proper" role in society, which includes marriage and reproduction. The clitoris, in particular, is sometimes viewed as a symbol of excess sexual desire, and its removal is believed to ensure that a woman will be more docile, "chaste," and therefore more suitable for marriage. These ideas are linked to the perceived necessity of controlling a woman's sexuality in the context of fertility and family life. Among Benin women in Edo State, a central aspect of female circumcision is the notion of purity. It is believed that a woman's sexual purity must be safeguarded, and circumcision is considered a rite of passage to protect that purity. This "purity" is often seen as essential for maintaining a woman's reputation, family honor, and prospects for marriage. In many parts of Edo State, marriageability is closely tied to a woman's perceived purity, and circumcision is thought to make her "fit" for marriage in the eyes of the community.<sup>23</sup>

The practice of female circumcision is also often linked to broader cultural norms about women's behavior, modesty, and morality. In these communities, women are

expected to be submissive and sexually modest, and circumcision is believed to instill these qualities. Purity, in this sense, is not only seen in terms of a woman's body but also her behavior. This cultural framework often enforces the expectation that women must demonstrate their purity, both physically and morally, to be seen as valuable within society. A woman who has not undergone circumcision may be viewed with suspicion or as less suitable for marriage.

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## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **FEMALE CIRCUMCISION IN COLONIAL AND POST-COLONIAL BENIN**

In pre-colonial and post-colonial Benin, the practice of female circumcision (often called "female genital cutting") was deeply rooted in traditional beliefs. It was widely considered an essential rite of passage, especially for girls in various ethnic groups, including the Edo people. Female circumcision was believed to mark the transition from childhood to adulthood, symbolizing readiness for marriage and fertility.<sup>1</sup> It was also sometimes linked to maintaining chastity and controlling female sexuality, in alignment with cultural norms surrounding femininity, modesty, and social order.

#### **Colonial Influence**

During the colonial period, which lasted from the late 19th century until Nigeria's independence in 1960, European powers, particularly the British, imposed new laws and Western ideas on African societies. The colonial administrators, largely Christian, often viewed traditional African practices, including FGM, as barbaric, and this led to campaigns aimed at "civilizing" the local population. These colonial attitudes toward indigenous cultural practices were part of a larger effort to reshape African societies, often disregarding or even attempting to erase traditional customs.<sup>2</sup>

In Benin, the British colonial authorities were involved in efforts to outlaw practices they deemed harmful, which included FGM. However, these efforts often clashed with local customs, and enforcement was difficult. The local communities had their own deep-seated beliefs and practices, and many resisted the change imposed by colonial rulers. In some cases, the colonial government's legal frameworks clashed with religious and social structures, which viewed the practice as an integral part of cultural identity.

Despite the colonial efforts to curtail or outlaw the practice of female circumcision, it continued in some parts of Benin and other areas of Nigeria, often in rural or traditional communities where indigenous customs were strongly upheld. The post-colonial governments in Nigeria, beginning with independence in 1960, continued to wrestle with the complexities of indigenous practices in the face of modernization, globalization, and human rights debates.<sup>3</sup>

In the years following independence, female circumcision became an important topic in the context of women's rights and health. Nigeria, like many African countries, eventually adopted laws against female genital mutilation in the 21st century. However, like many other nations, enforcement of these laws has been challenging, especially in regions where traditional practices remain strong.

Today, the practice of female circumcision (FGM) is widely condemned by global human rights organizations and health professionals due to its harmful physical and

psychological effects. In Benin, efforts to eradicate the practice have been ongoing, with education, advocacy, and legal measures gradually taking hold. However, it remains a deeply ingrained issue in some communities, where it is still viewed as an important cultural rite. The conversation about female circumcision in Benin and Nigeria must acknowledge the tension between preserving cultural heritage and protecting the health and rights of women and girls. This issue highlights the broader challenges of cultural preservation, human rights, and legal reform in post-colonial African societies. According Aigbe, Osarenmwun Orumwense civil servant in Benin City:

Explained that the process of female circumcision on the girl child was carried out with a butter knife, native soap, clean engine oil and snail oil, she stated that the local expert carrying out the process would have to pray to the gods first before starting the process and then proceed to cut the upper female genital, after which they apply the engine oil and native soap and which the snail oil is applied to reduce the pain and also to enable the cut area heal on time. She stated that one major reason for the practice is that it is believed to reduce promiscuity, she further stated that in some parts of Benin, when it was discovered that a woman was not circumcised the husband's family proceeds to circumcise her because they believe it would facilitate ease during her child delivery process. This according to her was among the reasons for female circumcision in colonial Benin<sup>4</sup>

## **Post-Colonial Benin**

The Benin Kingdom, with its historical roots in the city of Benin, remains central to the identity of the people, certain traditional practices, including female circumcision (also known as female genital mutilation, or FGM), have been sources of both cultural pride and deep debate. Female circumcision, a practice involving the partial or total removal of the external female genitalia, has been controversial, especially in the face of modernization and international human rights advocacy.<sup>5</sup>

After Nigeria gained independence from Britain in 1960, the country, including the Benin people, experienced a period of intense social, political, and cultural transformation. The introduction of Western education, healthcare, legal reforms, and the influence of religious institutions (particularly Christianity and Islam) significantly reshaped the social fabric of Nigerian communities, including those in the Benin region. These shifts led to changes in the perception and practice of many indigenous traditions, including female circumcision.

During the colonial era, Western colonial authorities imposed European values and systems of governance, law, and education. Although British colonial rulers did not explicitly outlaw female circumcision, the colonial period led to the introduction of formal legal systems and educational systems that discouraged many traditional practices. After independence, these Western values continued to influence post-colonial policies, with greater emphasis on human rights, health, and gender equality. The Nigerian

government, influenced by international bodies like the United Nations, began to take a stronger stance against practices like female circumcision, which were seen as harmful to women's health and dignity.<sup>6</sup>

One of the most significant factors in reducing the practice of female circumcision in post-colonial Benin was the rise of education. As more Benin women gained access to formal education, they began to challenge and reject practices like FGM that were seen as harmful to their health. With the spread of education and awareness, the younger generation became more conscious of the dangers associated with the practice, particularly the long-term health complications such as childbirth complications, infections, and psychological trauma.<sup>7</sup>

Female Circumcision in Benin Culture: For many years, female circumcision in Benin society was linked to cultural beliefs about cleanliness, fertility, and social status. The practice was often viewed as an initiation rite or a rite of passage into womanhood. It was believed to control women's sexuality and preserve chastity. Within this cultural framework, circumcision was often seen as an essential aspect of a girl's identity and future marriage prospects.<sup>8</sup>

However, the practice was not uniform across all segments of Benin society. There were variations in the procedure depending on the region, family, or even socio-economic status. Some families practiced a mild form of circumcision, while others

engaged in more severe forms that involved the complete removal of the clitoris and other parts of the genitalia. According to Victoria Osarenkhoe:

*In precolonial Benin, the role of elders, particularly the older women in the community, was crucial in carrying out the circumcision practice. These women, often referred to as “cutters” or traditional birth attendants, were highly respected figures within the society. They were responsible for the initiation ceremonies and were tasked with performing the circumcision in a manner that was consistent with cultural norms. The process was typically carried out in secrecy or privacy, with elders or other female members of the community overseeing the procedure.<sup>9</sup>*

These women were seen as guardians of tradition, imparting knowledge and wisdom to younger generations through such rituals. While their role was essential in maintaining cultural continuity, it was also rooted in the patriarchal structure of the society, where women’s roles were often confined to the domestic sphere and focused on family life, child-rearing, and maintaining cultural traditions.

In the 21st century, the practice of female circumcision in Edo State, including Benin City, has faced significant resistance due to evolving views on women’s rights, health, and sexuality. Global movements for gender equality and human rights, along with local advocacy campaigns and legal reforms, have led to growing awareness about the health risks and psychological trauma associated with the practice. Female circumcision can result in severe physical complications such as hemorrhaging,

infections, infertility, and complications during childbirth, as well as long-term psychological effects like depression and anxiety.<sup>10</sup>

In 1999, Nigeria passed a law criminalizing the practice of female genital mutilation, yet it remains prevalent in some traditional communities. Efforts to end the practice have included public education campaigns, legal enforcement, and community-based initiatives involving traditional leaders, healthcare professionals, and women's rights organizations. In Benin City, especially, there has been a shift in attitudes, particularly among younger generations, who are more likely to reject the practice in favor of modern medical and cultural practices that promote the health, autonomy, and rights of women and girls. According to Oboh, Anthony Edeghunghun:

*Explained that despite these efforts, female circumcision persists due to deeply ingrained cultural beliefs and social pressures. Traditional practices are often resistant to change, especially in rural or less-educated areas. In some cases, communities still view the abandonment of circumcision as a threat to their cultural identity and tradition, and some believe that legal interventions or external pressure do not respect their cultural autonomy.<sup>11</sup>*

Female circumcision in Benin, Edo State, is rooted in historical cultural practices that are intertwined with beliefs about purity, femininity, and marriageability. While the practice has been a significant part of Benin cultural identity for centuries, it is increasingly being questioned in the modern era due to awareness of its harmful consequences and the global push for gender equality. The challenge remains for advocates and policymakers to balance respect for cultural traditions with the need to

protect the health, well-being, and human rights of women and girls. Efforts to eradicate the practice will require a combination of education, legal enforcement, and community engagement, as well as a deeper understanding of the complex cultural, social, and religious factors that sustain it.

### **Changes and Continuity of Female Circumcision among Benin Women**

The practice of female circumcision, often referred to as female genital mutilation (FGM), has a long-standing history among Benin women, deeply rooted in cultural, social, and traditional beliefs. However, the practice has undergone significant changes and encountered resistance over time due to modernization, advocacy efforts, and increased awareness of its health and human rights implications. Among the Benin people, female circumcision has historically been associated with rites of passage, signifying a woman's transition to adulthood. It is often linked to cultural ideals of purity, modesty, and preparation for marriage, with communities believing it controls a woman's sexual behaviour.<sup>12</sup> In some Benin communities, societal norms and expectations sustain the practice, as women who are not circumcised may face stigmatization or exclusion. Elders, particularly women, often play a role in perpetuating the practice, viewing it as a critical aspect of their cultural identity. FGM is sometimes seen as a way to preserve Benin cultural heritage and maintain a sense of ethnic and communal belonging.

The Edo government has enacted laws to criminalize FGM, including the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act of 2015, which prohibits the practice. Advocacy campaigns have led to increased enforcement and deterrence in some regions,

including Edo State.<sup>13</sup> Health campaigns highlighting the medical risks of FGM such as infection, childbirth complications, and long-term psychological harm have reduced its prevalence. Increased awareness of women's rights and gender equality has led to resistance against the practice, particularly among younger generations. Urbanization has exposed many communities to alternative perspectives, reducing the influence of traditional norms. Younger Benin women, especially those in urban areas, are increasingly rejecting FGM due to education and exposure to global human rights discourse.<sup>14</sup>

The practice of female circumcision, often referred to as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), has deep roots in various cultures, including among some communities in Benin. In these communities, the practice has historically been viewed as a rite of passage, a cultural or religious obligation, or a means of ensuring a woman's marital eligibility. However, as global attention to the detrimental health, psychological, and human rights implications of FGM has grown, the practice is increasingly under scrutiny, especially in the face of legal, medical, and educational interventions.

In response to growing opposition, particularly from international organizations, governments, and health professionals, some communities where FGM persists have begun to modify the practice. Rather than abandon the tradition entirely, these communities are opting for less invasive forms of circumcision. For example, the cutting may now be less severe, with the procedure focusing on symbolic rather than physical

alteration. In some places, "symbolic circumcision" has emerged, where instead of the actual excision of genital tissue, the ritual may involve only a ceremony that mimics the practice, such as the use of a blade to lightly graze the skin without penetration. This approach allows communities to maintain their cultural identity while attempting to reduce the associated health risks, such as infections, hemorrhaging, or complications during childbirth.

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## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **EFFECT OF FEMALE CIRCUMCISION ON THE GIRL CHILD IN THE 21ST CENTURY AMONG BENIN WOMEN**

Female circumcision, often referred to as female genital mutilation (FGM), encompasses a range of procedures involving the partial or complete removal of the external female genitalia. Despite being internationally condemned, FGM persists in various cultures, profoundly impacting the lives of girls and women. This overview explores the implications of female circumcision on the girl child.

#### **Cultural Significance**

In many communities, FGM is seen as a rite of passage or a cultural tradition associated with concepts of purity, modesty, and marriageability. The practice is often upheld by societal norms, making it challenging for families to resist. This cultural significance places immense pressure on girls and their families, often leading to the continuation of harmful practices.<sup>1</sup> Female circumcision is a deeply rooted cultural practice that has been observed in parts of Edo State, Nigeria, particularly among some Benin communities. While the practice is widely condemned for its health risks and human rights implications, it remains significant in certain cultural contexts. Below are some key points on its cultural significance among Benin women in Edo State:

FGM is often seen as a rite of passage that marks the transition from girlhood to womanhood among Benin traditional women. In many communities, it symbolizes

maturity, purity, and readiness for marriage. For families, ensuring that their daughters undergo FGM is seen as a way of upholding tradition and ensuring social acceptance. Some Benin communities, female circumcision is linked to marriageability. Women who have undergone female circumcision may be considered "clean" or "pure" and therefore more desirable as brides. This practice is often seen as a prerequisite for marriage, and parents may feel compelled to have their daughters circumcised to maintain the family's honor and status within the community. One of the cultural justifications for female circumcision is to control female sexuality. The belief is that the removal of certain parts of the genitalia reduces a woman's sexual desire, thereby promoting chastity and preventing promiscuity before and during marriage.<sup>2</sup> This aspect is rooted in patriarchal notions of controlling women's bodies and behaviors. According to Aigbe, Osarenmwun Orumwense:

*Explained that some Benin communities, female circumcision is viewed as a way of "cleansing" women, making them pure and modest. It is believed that circumcised women are more respectful, obedient, and morally upright. This perception often ties into broader ideas of religious and cultural "purification." In certain traditional belief systems, it is thought that a woman's uncircumcised genitalia can bring misfortune, sickness, or calamity to the family or community. As a result, circumcision is seen as a form of protection against evil spirits or bad luck. This belief is often passed down through generations, making it difficult to challenge or abandon the practice. Female circumcision is sustained by the idea of cultural continuity and respect for ancestral customs. For many elders and community leaders, the practice represents a connection to their forebears. Elders*

*may resist change, seeing efforts to abandon FGM as a threat to their cultural identity. This generational attachment to tradition makes it difficult to abandon the practice, even in the face of modern opposition.*<sup>3</sup>

In some cases, female circumcision is tied to economic and social incentives. The circumcisers (who are often older women or traditional birth attendants) may receive payment or gifts for performing the procedure, making it a source of livelihood for them. Additionally, families may face social pressure from peers, relatives, and community members to conform to the practice. Non-compliance can lead to social exclusion or ridicule. In recent years, FGM has faced strong opposition from international human rights organizations, Nigerian governmental agencies, and local NGOs. Campaigns have highlighted its negative health effects (like complications during childbirth, infections, and trauma) and its violation of women's rights. Edo State government has laws that criminalize female circumcision, and advocacy efforts are aimed at raising awareness, promoting alternative rites of passage, and encouraging community dialogue to shift mindsets.

However, female circumcision, or female genital mutilation (FGM), poses significant physical health risks. These risks can affect both the short-term and long-term well-being of girls and women. The procedure is often performed without anesthesia, leading to intense pain during and after the operation. FGM can result in significant blood loss, which may require medical intervention. The use of unsterile instruments can lead to

infections, including tetanus and other bacterial infections. Swelling and scarring may cause difficulties in urination, leading to painful urination or urinary retention.<sup>4</sup>

There could be long term consequences as many women experience ongoing pain in the genital area, which can be debilitating. FGM may lead to painful intercourse, decreased sexual pleasure, and long-term sexual health issues. Women who have undergone FGM are at higher risk of complications during labor, including:

- Prolonged labor
- Higher rates of cesarean sections
- Increased risk of postpartum hemorrhage
- Higher likelihood of infant mortality

The pain and violation associated with FGM can lead to long-term psychological effects, including anxiety, depression, and PTSD. Scar tissue can lead to the formation of cysts or abscesses, which may require surgical intervention. Some women experience irregular menstrual cycles or severe menstrual pain as a result of FGM. The cumulative effects of these physical health risks can hinder a woman's overall quality of life. Chronic health issues may limit participation in daily activities, education, and employment, further exacerbating gender inequality and health disparities. The physical health risks associated with female circumcision are profound and multifaceted, impacting not only the immediate well-being of girls and women but also their long-term health and quality

of life. Addressing these risks through education, healthcare access, and legal measures is crucial in combating the practice and protecting the rights of women and girls.

### **Psychological Effects of Female Circumcision on the Girl Child**

Female circumcision, often referred to as female genital mutilation (FGM), can have profound psychological effects on girls who undergo the procedure. These effects can vary based on individual experiences, cultural contexts, and the circumstances surrounding the practice. The procedure can be traumatic, leading to long-lasting anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The anticipation of pain and the experience itself can create significant emotional distress. Many girls may feel shame or stigma associated with FGM, particularly if they are aware of its controversial nature or if they experience complications. This can lead to feelings of isolation and low self-esteem. FGM can affect how a girl perceives her body and her identity. Some may struggle with their self-image or feel a disconnect between their bodies and their sense of self.

Female circumcision, or female genital mutilation (FGM), can have profound psychological effects on the girl child, impacting her emotional well-being, self-esteem, and overall mental health. The experience of undergoing FGM is often traumatic. Many girls endure significant pain and fear during the procedure, which can lead to acute stress reactions. The trauma can manifest as long-lasting psychological issues, including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Girls who undergo FGM may develop a heightened fear of medical procedures, leading to anxiety about health

care. Psychological scars can make it difficult for women to engage in intimate relationships, leading to anxiety surrounding sexual activity.<sup>5</sup>

Many girls internalize cultural messages that equate FGM with purity and desirability, leading to confusion and distress about their bodies. The physical and emotional consequences of FGM can contribute to feelings of inadequacy and reduced self-worth. Girls who undergo FGM may face social stigma, leading to feelings of isolation and exclusion from peers. Difficulties in forming healthy relationships can arise, affecting social support systems and overall emotional health.

Pain during intercourse and other sexual dysfunctions can lead to further psychological distress, contributing to anxiety about sexual performance and intimacy. Concerns about complications during childbirth can lead to anxiety and fear regarding motherhood. Some girls may develop unhealthy coping mechanisms, such as withdrawal from social interactions, substance abuse, or self-harm. Others may find solace in supportive networks, but the ability to seek help can be hampered by cultural stigma surrounding FGM.<sup>6</sup> The psychological effects of female circumcision on the girl child are profound and multifaceted. Addressing these issues requires comprehensive support systems, including mental health services, community education, and advocacy for the rights of girls and women. By understanding and addressing the psychological impact of FGM, we can better support affected individuals and work toward the eradication of this harmful practice.

## **Sexual Health Issues and Female Circumcision**

Female circumcision, also known as female genital mutilation (FGM), can lead to a variety of significant sexual health issues for those who undergo the procedure. These issues can affect both physical and psychological aspects of sexual health. Many women experience pain during sexual intercourse due to physical alterations from FGM, including scar tissue and nerve damage. Some women may develop vaginismus, a condition where vaginal muscles involuntarily tighten, causing pain and discomfort during penetration.

The removal or alteration of parts of the clitoris and other genital tissues can significantly decrease sexual sensation and pleasure. Psychological effects, such as anxiety and trauma from the experience of FGM, can further diminish sexual enjoyment and intimacy. Many women report difficulties in reaching orgasm due to changes in their anatomy and psychological barriers related to FGM. Sexual dysfunction can strain intimate relationships, leading to decreased intimacy and potential relational conflicts.<sup>7</sup> Women who have undergone FGM may face higher risks during childbirth, such as prolonged labor, tearing, and the need for cesarean sections. Fear of complications can create anxiety about pregnancy and childbirth, affecting overall sexual health and emotional well-being. The procedures associated with FGM can lead to increased susceptibility to infections, including sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and pelvic

inflammatory disease (PID). Some women experience menstrual pain or irregularities, which can impact their overall reproductive health.

There is the problem of anxiety and fear of pain or complications can lead to anxiety about sexual activity, impacting a woman's willingness to engage in sexual relationships. Psychological trauma from FGM may hinder the ability to establish trust and intimacy with partners, further complicating sexual relationships. The sexual health issues associated with female circumcision are complex and multifaceted, affecting both physical health and emotional well-being. Addressing these issues requires comprehensive healthcare services, education, and support systems for affected women. By raising awareness and promoting understanding, we can work towards mitigating the harmful effects of FGM and supporting the sexual health and rights of women and girls.<sup>8</sup>

**Community Education and Awareness:** NGOs and community organizations conduct campaigns to educate communities about the health risks and human rights violations associated with FGM. Involving local leaders, religious figures, and influential community members helps shift cultural attitudes and norms regarding FGM.

Community education and awareness on Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is essential for combating this harmful practice. Organize community workshops to educate people about the health risks and human rights violations associated with FGM. Include testimonials from survivors.<sup>9</sup> Partner with local leaders, religious figures, and influential community members to speak against FGM, as their voices can carry significant weight.

Implement educational programs in schools to teach children about body autonomy, respect for oneself, and the dangers of FGM. Utilize local radio, television, and social media to spread awareness. Share stories, facts, and information about support resources. Create support networks for survivors and those at risk. Provide safe spaces for discussions and counseling. Educate communities about the laws against FGM and the consequences for those who perpetuate the practice. Approach the topic with cultural respect, acknowledging traditions while emphasizing the need for change.<sup>10</sup> Work with healthcare providers to inform communities about the medical risks of FGM and the importance of seeking appropriate care. Launch advocacy campaigns that highlight the importance of ending FGM, focusing on the collective benefits to families and communities. Assess the effectiveness of educational programs and adapt strategies based on community feedback and changing needs. By fostering open dialogue and providing accurate information, communities can move towards abandoning FGM and promoting health and rights for women and girls.<sup>11</sup>

**Healthcare Interventions:** Providing training for healthcare providers on the health risks of FGM and how to support affected women and girls is vital. Offering medical and psychological support for women and girls who have undergone FGM can help them recover and empower them to advocate against the practice.

**Global Cooperation and Support:** Agencies like the World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations (UN), and various NGOs work globally to share resources, data,

and best practices for eradicating FGM. Supporting research on the prevalence and impact of FGM can inform better strategies and attract funding for anti-FGM initiatives. Efforts to eradicate female genital mutilation require a comprehensive and collaborative approach involving governments, communities, healthcare providers, and international organizations. By combining legal, educational, and support initiatives, we can create a society that values the health and rights of women and girls, ultimately leading to the elimination of FGM. Continuous advocacy and community engagement are essential to ensure lasting change and protection for future generations. According to Agbontaen, Cyril Etin-Osa:

*Argued that female circumcision remains a critical issue impacting the health, education, and rights of the girl child. Addressing this practice requires a multifaceted approach that includes education, legal action, and community involvement. By working collaboratively, we can strive for a future where all girls are free from the harmful effects of FGM and can thrive in an environment that supports their rights and well-being.<sup>12</sup>*

Post-colonial Benin has witnessed significant changes in its cultural practices, particularly regarding female circumcision. While the practice remains entrenched in some communities, there has been considerable progress in raising awareness about the health risks and human rights violations associated with FGM. Education, government legislation, and advocacy efforts have led to a decline in the practice, particularly in urban areas. However, continued efforts are necessary to combat deep-rooted cultural

traditions and ensure that future generations of Benin women are free from harmful practices like female circumcision

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## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSION

This study is an assessment on the Female Circumcision and its Effect on the Girl Child: A Case Study of Benin women in the 21st century. Female circumcision, often referred to as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), remains a critical issue affecting millions of girls and women worldwide. Despite global movements advocating for the abandonment of this practice, it persists, particularly in certain cultures and regions.<sup>1</sup> Understanding its effects on the girl child in the 21st century, crucial for informing advocacy and intervention efforts. Female circumcision is deeply rooted in cultural beliefs and practices, often associated with notions of purity, family honor, and marriageability. In many communities, it is seen as a rite of passage. This cultural significance complicates efforts to eradicate the practice, as it involves challenging long-standing traditions. FGM can lead to severe complications, including excessive bleeding, infections, and complications in childbirth. Long-term effects may include chronic pain, urinary problems, and reproductive health issues.<sup>2</sup>

Many survivors of female circumcision report trauma, anxiety, and depression. The emotional scars can affect self-esteem and relationships, leading to long-lasting psychological issues. Female circumcision can alter sexual function and satisfaction, often leading to difficulties in sexual relationships. Many women experience pain during intercourse, impacting their sexual health and relationships. Girls who undergo female

circumcision may face barriers to education. The associated health complications can result in absenteeism or dropouts, particularly during critical developmental stages.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, societal stigmas can discourage girls from pursuing education, limiting their opportunities for empowerment and economic independence. Female circumcision is recognized as a violation of human rights, including the rights to health, security, and freedom from torture. Many countries have enacted laws against FGM, yet enforcement remains a challenge. Advocacy efforts focus on strengthening legal frameworks and ensuring that communities understand their rights.

The 21st century girl child interventions raising awareness about the harmful effects of female circumcision is essential. Engaging community leaders and influencers can facilitate dialogue and promote abandonment of the practice. Establishing support networks for survivors is crucial. This includes access to healthcare, counseling, and legal aid. Empowering young people to advocate against female circumcision can be transformative. Educational programs that promote gender equality and bodily autonomy are vital.<sup>4</sup> International organizations, governments, and NGOs must work together to share resources, knowledge, and strategies for effectively combating female circumcision. The fight against female circumcision in the 21st century girl child requires a multifaceted approach that respects cultural sensitivities while promoting the health, rights, and education of the girl child. By fostering community dialogue and collaboration,

we can work towards a future where girls are free from the harms of female circumcision and empowered to thrive.<sup>5</sup>

Internationally, female circumcision is acknowledged as a violation of women's and girls' human rights. It is a severe kind of discrimination against women and girls and reflects ingrained gender inequality. It violates children's rights and is almost always performed on minors by traditional practitioners. Additionally, the practice violates a person's right to physical integrity, health, and security; their right to be free from torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment; and, in cases where the procedure results in death, their right to life. Evidence suggests that health care providers are more likely to perform female circumcision in a number of settings because they believe the procedure is safer when medicalized. WHO has created a global strategy and specialized resources to support healthcare providers in their efforts to resist medicalization, and it strongly advises them against performing female circumcision.<sup>6</sup>

Female circumcision, also known as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), remains a significant cultural, social, and health issue in Edo State, Nigeria. Despite global and national efforts to eradicate FGM, some communities, including the Benin ethnic group, still practice it due to deep-rooted traditional beliefs. Addressing this issue requires a comprehensive approach that combines advocacy, legal enforcement, education, and community engagement.<sup>7</sup>

One of the most effective ways to eliminate FGM among Benin women in the 21 century is to raise awareness about its negative health, psychological, and social impacts. Community education should target local leaders, parents, traditional birth attendants, and women themselves. Organize town hall meetings, community forums, and radio/TV campaigns to educate the public on the dangers of FGM. Work with community elders, chiefs, and religious leaders to change cultural perceptions of FGM. Share real-life testimonies from FGM survivors to highlight its physical, emotional, and mental health consequences. Include FGM education in school curricula to inform young people about its risks. Nigeria has outlawed FGM under the violence against persons prohibition Act (VAPP) of 2015, but implementation remains weak in Edo State. To end the practice, the state government must enforce these laws at the community level. Train police, community leaders, and social welfare officers on how to identify, report, and prosecute FGM cases.<sup>8</sup>

Set up anonymous reporting channels (hotlines, online portals) where people can report FGM cases. Impose legal penalties (fines, jail time) on parents, guardians, and traditional birth attendants who engage in FGM. Run media campaigns to inform the public that FGM is illegal and that violators will face severe penalties. FGM is often perpetuated by cultural beliefs tied to social acceptance, marriageability, and purity. Engaging traditional rulers and cultural institutions in Edo State is critical to changing these social norms. Secure the support of the Oba of Benin and other local chiefs to

denounce the practice of FGM publicly. Organize cultural festivals, events, and dialogues to promote alternatives to FGM rites. Promote alternative rites of passage for girls that celebrate maturity without circumcision. The practice of women circumcision (FGM) among Benin women in Edo State is a deep-rooted cultural tradition that requires a multi-faceted approach to eliminate. To achieve this, government authorities, NGOs, traditional leaders, and civil society must work together to address the digital divide, provide alternative livelihoods for FGM practitioners, enforce anti-FGM laws, and provide health services for survivors. By prioritizing education, legal enforcement, and advocacy, Edo State can eliminate this harmful practice and safeguard the health, dignity, and human rights of its women and girls.

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Chukwuemeka, Chioma Chinonye	35	Nurse	Uwasota Road, Benin City	17/11/2024
Imhanzuaria, Christiana Eseosa	59	Civil Servant	Benin City	13/10/2024
Oboh, Anthony Edeghunghun	55	Farmer	Ekosodin Community	13/10/2024
Victoria Osarenkhoe	67	Trader	Oba Market. Road, Benin City	22/11/2024

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