

Response to:

Female Genital Surgeries: The Known, the Unknown and the Unknowable

By Carla Makhlouf Obermeyer

Amidst the highly charged discourses on the ethics and morality of the practice of Female Genital Cutting (FGC), this paper, that reviews literature and surveys to scientifically quantify the prevalence and dangers of the practice, is refreshing and much needed. One of the foremost concerns in accepting or rejecting this practice, is to gain clarity on exactly, how harmful is the practice. In this paper, Obermeyer reviews the extensive literature that exists on this matter to understand the truth to the claims of medical harms. The literature spans different fields such as, literature, humanities, social sciences, law, ethics and medical sciences as well advocacy groups. However, she points out that majority are general articles, descriptive policies, personal experiences or opinion but much lesser published medical and demographic sources. Additionally, even the published studies have shortcomings such as “lack of information about where the data came from and how they were collected, high percentages of non-response to questionnaires, inconsistencies in the calculations, and biased estimates of prevalence due to very small sample sizes or to biased sample selection.” (Obermeyer 81).

In addition to the lack of credibility in the sources itself, Obermeyer points to the inherent difficulties in conducting this study. Across the continent of Africa alone, there are many different levels of circumcision and tracking the degree and correlating the prevalence and harm of each is challenging. Additionally, the language used in different groups varies and might creates a bias in how the response is collected, especially since most response is collected through questionnaires.

Furthermore, many sources use hospital data for to characterize the harms of the practice. If hospitalization is needed, it is certainly more severe than the common case, so the question remains if it is a generalizable claim that FGC is dangerous in most cases. From the existing literature, Obermeyer is able to conclude that “the prevalence of these practices is becoming increasingly available, [but] research on their consequences for reproductive health and sexuality is clearly insufficient” (Obermeyer 97).

For me, this was one of the most important papers to help develop a stance on the issue. My first question to even consider FGC as an acceptable practice is: does it actually harm the young girl? If one can conclusive point to the medical harms that female circumcision, my own opinion would certainly sway towards rejecting it. Not because I would think that members of the community were intentionally inflicting harm on young girls but because new knowledge was not available to them. While I understand that not every belief system focuses on body as the supreme and may justify a practice that causes physical pain for the mental and social development, I find it difficult to accept that anyone can have the right to inflict major medical harm to someone else, especially someone who doesn't have the voice to disagree. Even in this paper, the author cautions an outsider to not see the practice through their own views but that, “this requires that one "suspend beliefs" in the face of what appear to be violations of values such as bodily integrity, health, and informed consent, in order to gain an insider's view of those societies that practice such surgeries and obtain insights into the meaning attached to them by the individuals involved” (Obermeyer 89). Knowing that the evidence for the harm is weak, and that educated women like Ahmadu, who have experienced the ritual, can attest to it not being a harmful and oppressive, as defined by her own accepted notion, it makes me take a pluralist stand where I feel no need to judge someone's tradition.

Obermeyer's work is important in highlighting the inadequacy of research on claims on medical harms and even the exact characterization of the prevalence of practice. This certainly brings to attention that everyone, especially advocacy groups and activists must spend more resources on substantiating the claims than mobilizing people against a practice that is not fully understood. One cannot discount the importance of culture and beliefs from which the practice of female circumcision stems and must accept the "unknowable" when it comes to psychological differences. However, if genuine welfare of minors concerns the international community, methodological, unbiased research must be conducted to collect substantial evidence to support any argument.

Reference

Obermeyer, Carla (1999). Female Genital Surgeries: The Known, The Unknown and the Unknowable. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 13: 79-106.