

# Female Circumcision Practices: Perception on Methods used to Disseminate Anti-Fc Messages

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## **Abstract**

*This paper looks at the Gogo's perception of methods used to disseminate anti-female circumcision messages in the Gogo community during campaigns to eradicate female circumcision. The paper was impelled by the fact that efforts to eliminate female circumcision (FC) practices among the Gogo community have not been very successful. The paper uses the Social Constructionist Theory to unveil what happens when anti-female circumcision intervention methods encounter the lived experience of the Gogo in terms of uptake of intervention messages. The paper is based on data generated during a PhD research which was done in Mpwapwa District using a qualitative design in 2014. The paper argues that the uptake of anti-FC campaigns is low because the methods used to campaign against female circumcision take little, if any, account of the local knowledge context in which female circumcision occurs. The paper underscores that the inclusion of the local discourse in crafting the anti-FC intervention methods is very important if the uptake is to be improved. The paper recommends that for anti-FC messages to have the desired impact, the designing of the methods to disseminate anti-FC messages need to take into account the local knowledge which guides the Gogo life.*

## **Introduction**

In recent years, the need to eliminate female circumcision (FC) has aroused a poignant agenda (Bingi, 2014), and has increasingly come under intense scrutiny from the media, feminists, human rights activists, health organizations and legislators. International organizations began to speak out against the practice in the late 1970s and their opposition to FC was rooted in negative health justifications (Boyle et al, 2001), and some of the propagated negative health consequences include reproductive tract infection, infertility, HIV infection, delivery complications, and obstetric fistula to mention but a few (WHO, 2008).

In Tanzania, efforts to curb FC date back to colonial time with the British colonial government and the Catholic Church at the forefront (Mwaipopo, 2004) and later on increased following release of 1996 report by the Tanzania Demographic and Health Survey which showed that more than 18 per cent of women in Tanzania undergo FC every year (URT, 1996). As a reaction to the TDHS report of 1996, the parliament of Tanzania enacted The Sexual Offences Special Provision Act Number 4 (SOSPA), which among other things, outlawed the FC practice (Mwaipopo, 2004). Since then, a variety of anti-FC activists;

The Tanzania Media Women Association (TAMWA), The Equality Now, Legal and Human Rights Centre (LHRC), Tanzania Gender Networking Programme (TGNP), the Women Wake

Up Paralegal Unit (WOWAP) and the Feminist Activists Coalition (FEMAC) to mention but a few have been at the forefront to heavily campaign against FC (Mwaipopo, 2004). Despite all these campaigns, the practice still persists in some communities including the Gogo of Dodoma region, Tanzania. This begs question ‘why does the practice still persist despite copious efforts to eradicate it?’

The existing knowledge on FC reflects significant theoretical gaps in the failure to account for persistence of female circumcision practices. While explanations given on female circumcision are mostly based on bio-medical and human rights, local sense meaning making which is socially and culturally determined is significantly missing.

The quest to examine how the Gogo perceive intervention methods used to disseminate anti-FC intervention messages is of importance. Intervention methods against FC are not necessarily determined by their strength and details, rather, by the extent to which they reflect socio-cultural contexts. Thus, Social Constructionist Theory by Berger and Luckmann (1967) is important in this argument to examine the on-going anti-FC intervention methods.

In principal, the Social Construction Theory is against the traditional definition of communication as advanced by the modernization school of thought (Nyoni, 2008), which conceptualizes communication as a linear process, based on stimulus-response and persuasion models (Waisbord, 2001) which in that case gives too little attention to the receiver of information, neglecting contextual factors and imposing a linear model which distorts and oversimplifies the communication process (Nyoni, 2008).

In addition, Social Construction Theory criticizes some Sociological Theories such as Social Cognitive Theory by Bandura (1977) which contends that the mind is an active force that constructs one's reality on its own actions and forgets what has been constructed outside the human mind. For Social Constructionists, this fails to comprehend the fact that individuals do not live in a vacuity, rather, in a socio-cultural constructed world. It is within this constructed world that beliefs, values, attitudes and perceptions are constructed (and inform practice) and become reality of everyday lives (Bingi, 2014).

This study adopted a qualitative research approach to suit the theoretical underpinning of the social constructivism paradigm, whereby one of its major arguments is that human beings generate meanings about the world as they interact with the world (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Key in-depth interview and focus group discussion for data collection methods were used to fit the methodology it goes beneath the surface of superficial responses to obtain deeper meanings that individuals assign to events and complexities of their attitudes, behaviour as well as experiences (Bowling, 2002).

Based on the aforementioned, the motive behind this study was to examine the perceptions given to anti-FC intervention methods against the socio-culturally constructed world of the Gogo. That is, did the methods make sense in the Gogo cultural setting in which case they would be positively perceived and hence, have a significant impact? Otherwise, if they were

not admissible as sensible in the local cultural settings, they would have an insignificant impact if any.

### **Village Meetings/Gatherings**

The Gogo prefer communal gathering to discuss issues related to their communities. According to elderly informants during in-depth interviews, gathering of people is facilitated by the village chairpersons who are approached in advance by anti-FC officials mostly from Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). People who attend such meetings include elders, parents, youths and children.

*Our Village Chairpersons usually called these meetings after being consulted by people from NGOs or from the government. We were told in advance about what was going to be discussed.*

The use of village meetings/gatherings is, however, perceived by the Gogo as inappropriate for disseminating anti-FC messages. According to the elderly informants during in-depth interview, although the Gogo preferred to gather to discuss their community matters, they were concerned on the way anti-FC meetings were organized. Elderly informants insisted that it is immoral for the Gogo irrespective of their ages and sex to gather and listen to matters regarding sexuality. For the Gogo, matters that pertain to socio-cultural traditions and customs (for example, circumcision rituals) are discussed in elders' forums.

In due regard, it can be argued that the use of village meetings was an inappropriate method in terms of communicating with the Gogo about female circumcision practices. Although the Gogo preferred to gather to discuss their community matters, they were concerned on the way anti-FC meetings were organized. Accordingly, the Gogo did not take seriously this method which mixed youths and elders in public meetings. In due regard, nothing meaningful could be delivered in such a manner.

Within the domain of Social Construction Theory, every institution has a body of knowledge that provides appropriate rules of conduct to govern that particular society, and individuals are capable of interpreting meaning in a subjective manner comprehended among themselves within the exposed context specific. The contention is that, where intervention methods overlook this important fact, the success of the same becomes minimal if not impossible. Minimum uptake of the intervention method has led to very insignificant changes as far as eradicating FC is concerned.

### **Seminars to Village Chairpersons**

Anti-FC activists spent too much time offering seminars to village chairpersons about the need to unite and fight FC practices. According to the young informants during focus group discussions, the assumption was that village chairpersons could steer the campaign against female circumcision;

*My husband is a Village Chairman. He always attends various seminars organized by people from government or sometimes people from NGOs. When he comes back he tells me how the government is serious in making sure that female circumcision comes to an end*

However, this method was seen to be ineffective in fighting FC practices among the Gogo. According to the elderly informants during in-depth interviews, most of the village chairpersons were from the same tradition, younger and hence junior in the hierarchy of the Gogo culture;

*Fine, they call our village chairpersons to seminars in Mpwapwa and even in the villages; an aspect they forget is that the same village chairpersons are from this culture. Now, how could that method work out?*

I can argue that, the manner in which this method was introduced did not take into account the sociocultural aspects which embody the customs and norms of the Gogo. Within the domain of Social Construction Theory, the roles played by elders in the Gogo community referred to as institutional order that made it possible for the institution to exist as a real experience of living individuals as well as helping to maintain social integration and control of society members' conduct.

This is a context that plays a crucial role in determining perceptions and attitudes which have significant influence of uptake of interventions from outside. The conventional way should have been for the knowledge communication to go from the elders who are custodians of culturally accepted practices and hence, custodians of cultures that include traditional knowledge to the younger generation. In due regard, it is difficult, if not impossible, for the Gogo (elders) to accept dictates from outside their hierarchy of knowledge production and dissemination.

### **Clinic Sessions**

It was found during focus group discussions that, some people who conducted seminars during ante-natal and post-natal came from within the Gogo ethnic group while others were from other ethnic groups. They assembled women and started to educate them about the need to protect their health as women and resist any attempts made to convince or force them to undergo female circumcision. The meetings alluded to the clinic method did not impress the Gogo. It was hard for the Gogo women to implement what they were taught in seminars because for them and their daughters to stay uncircumcised was like excommunicating oneself from the community.

*They spend much time educating women about risks one might face if she undergoes female circumcision. But they forget that the taught women have no right to go against the community's set norms and customs*

Despite the facts that, social reality can change across time and space or around the context of here and now, clinic sessions have produced insignificant result in disseminating anti-FC

messages to the Gogo. Within the domain of Social Construction Theory, human individuals have dogmas and doctrines embedded “in there” owing subjective interpretation of what is embedded in the structure. Women from the Gogo ethnic group believed that going against socially constructed reality is to disintegrate societal order and integrity which have been holding society from time immemorial.

On the other hand, it was found during in-depth interview with an elderly woman that most anti-FC campaigners who visited women during clinic sessions did not belong to the Gogo ethnic group. As far as campaigners did not belong to the Gogo traditions and customs, how could they have authority to condemn FC while they knew nothing about the practice? In due regard, the Gogo questioned the validity of the messages disseminated to them. Along similar lines, it is important to remember that ethnicity can have important effects on uptake of health services (Rull, 2011). It was easier to negotiate with someone who knew the culture of the Gogo than one who did not. It could be aptly concluded that low uptake of this method contributed to non-implementation of the teachings among Gogo women.

### **Mobile Cinemas/Videos**

According to the informants during in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, people from NGOs thought that by using this method, it would make them succeed in disseminating anti-FC messages not only through verbal campaigns, but also through visual campaigns for the purpose of inculcating a negative impression against cultures that are said to subjugate and oppress women;

*They show us cinemas in our villages ...Eeeh...we see women and children  
...some crying others speaking painfully about the experiences they  
underwent when they were being circumcised.*

However, effectiveness of the method failed to induce the Gogo to do away with female circumcision. According to the elderly informants during in-depth interviews, showing pictures of girls undergoing female circumcision to both men and elderly men was considered a disrespectful act. This implies that in use of video/cinema shows was ineffective as it was deemed inappropriate. Within the domain of Social Construction Theory, reality confirmation, maintenance and modification involve interrelationships, not only with a particular natural environment, but also with a social situation.

It is important to note that the social construction of FC among the Gogo is heavily influenced by their perception. I argue that, it might be reasonably appropriate for the campaigners to use cinemas and videos, especially to capture the minds of men who are not physically present when girls undergo circumcision, Nevertheless, the method is seriously faulty when it confronted with the norms and customs that hold the Gogo community together. It was such norms and customs that guide the Gogo’s day-to-day lives in a set of defined manners of ‘dos and don’ts’ socially constructed from time immemorial.

### **Awareness Rising in Schools**

According to informants, this method aims at educating the children while at school to reject any attempt to make them undergo female circumcision. However, this method was dismissed and perceived ineffective in the fight against FC. During in-depth interviews, the elderly informants held that it is the role of parents to educate their children about traditional values, norms and customs of their ethnic group. Besides, while at school the children's role is to learn issues that are less to do with their culture (like being taught to read and write).

*They teach our children to hate the practice of female circumcision. Fine, but we always ask our children, both boys and girls, where are they going to show their faces when found uncircumcised or married to uncircumcised when grown up?*

What emerges from the foregoing is that children were brought up within a socially constructed reality, which includes FC and its significance. It was cultural teachings given to children by society that override formal teachings from schools. Within the domain of Social Construction Theory, every individual is born into an objective social structure within which he/she encounters the significant others who are in charge of his/her socialization. This happens to be the situation, regardless of the fact that an individual has the option of skipping significant others' reality and turn to his or her own reality, or a different reality from that of the significant others after developing his or her "psycho-analyst" or critical thinking. However, for this to happen, a different socio-cultural context that can empower children needs to be instituted, and such aspect cannot be effected through simple campaigns. Children spend more time with their families, which is an institution that is the cornerstone of socially constructed realities.

### **Use of Fliers**

It was revealed in both male and female FGDs that fliers with messages against FC were distributed during village meetings, mobile and video shows, and in various seminars. Such an approach was meant to ensure that what was being communicated against FC permanently remained in the mind of the Gogo. For the Gogo, this method was based on the assumptions that the majority of people can read and also that people would find time to sit and read the fliers. Whereas, in reality, most people could not read and write hence use of fliers was not the most appropriate form of communication.

Young men in focus group discussions added that the fliers were for those who went to school.

*The fliers were brought to us to help us pack things especially in markets. Why should I bother to spend time to read?*

Although the campaigners had good intentions of ensuring that messages embedded in fliers remained permanently in the Gogo s' mind, the method did not trigger the same cord among the Gogo. Within the domain of Social Construction Theory, it is important to understand that when communicating with people, one should acknowledge that intended messages fall upon a

set of previously existing beliefs about the world (Nyoni, 2008). Thus, accepting the fliers did not necessarily mean that the same will be read. The fliers can be accepted but messages may remain undelivered. As such, the flier method left a lot to be desired.

### **Conclusion**

Within the domain of Social Construction Theory, I draw a clear theoretical and methodological conclusion that the perception of the Gogo on the methods used to disseminate anti-FC intervention messages was influenced by the tendency of anti-FC activists to ignore the local knowledge emanating from the Gogo's beliefs and experiences. Ignoring the local knowledge, in both content and context specifics, led to low uptake of the anti-FC intervention methods among the Gogo. It is recommended that methods used to disseminate anti-FC intervention messages should to develop a better understanding of the subject by constructing a detailed account of FC from the perspective of the locally constructed knowledge.

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