

TEACHING LESSONS LEARNED BY ENTERING THE WORLD OF FEMALE CIRCUMCISION

Khadija Khaja, Ph.D., Indiana University

In this narrative, the author reflects on how and why she became interested in female circumcision and the valuable cross-cultural teaching lessons learned.

Introduction

This narrative is about my work on female circumcision, a cultural rite of passage primarily practiced in Africa where part or all of the female genitals are removed by midwives or female elders without medical justification. In the late 1990s I became interested in the practice when I was attending a cultural competency training workshop given by a gynecologist in Toronto, Canada. She showed a slide presentation with pictures of what a circumcised woman would look like and referred to the practice as female genital mutilation. The practice was justified as a way to protect a woman's virginity, which helped to ensure the honor of a woman. I was horrified when I saw the pictures of circumcised vaginas and remember that day like it was yesterday. The ages of girls and women that experienced the procedure varied depending on their tribal affiliation.

There are three forms of female genital mutilation. In the first and most frequent type, known as "sunna circumcision," the hood of the clitoris is removed. The second type of circumcision, known as "excision or clitoridectomy," involves the complete amputation of the clitoris with partial or total cutting of the labia majora. The third type is "infibulations/pharonic" circumcision, where all of the internal and external genitalia are sliced off, the vaginal opening sealed shut, leaving only a small opening the width of a pencil for urine and menses secretion. The procedure is often performed without any form of anesthesia. Additionally, in rural areas the tools

used to perform the procedure are usually not sanitized. Crude instruments such as razors, knives, or sharp stones can be used, and it is not unusual to stitch up circumcised genitalia with thorns.

After the slide presentation, I came home and started to read just about everything I could get my hands on that described the practice. I learned that 130 million people around the world have been affected by this practice (Toubia, 1999). Two million females are circumcised each year, with six thousand circumcised each day (Khaja, 2004). Though I was born in Africa, I had no idea that females who experienced circumcision primarily lived there, where it is still practiced in half the countries of the region (African Development Bank, 1998). "Nine out of ten females in Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, Somalia, and northern Sudan undergo the procedure. More than half of the females in Burkino Faso, Kenya, Benin, Chad, Egypt, and Gambia about a quarter of Ghanaians have experienced female circumcision" (Khaja, 2004, p.2). The practice also occurs in Malaysia and Yemen. Civil conflicts in Africa have led to migration of families to North America and Europe from countries that practice female circumcision, which has led to a growing interest and concern about the practice.

I became very vocal against the practice because girls and women were not given informed consent about the possible health consequences. Girls and women have died from the practice, and others have suffered long-term health issues such as hemorrhagic

shock, infection, leaking of urine and feces, urine retention that can last for days, formation of cysts as large as a grapefruit, severe pain and difficulty in sexual intercourse, and life-threatening complications with pregnancy or child birth (Toubia, 1999). I became even more involved with international women's groups, human rights activists, child welfare, and medical groups expressing global outrage about the practice due to its serious physical and sexual consequences. However, one day something profound happened.

Talk With Me, Not At Me

In 1997 I was giving my usual female genital mutilation presentation at the annual Canadian Council of Muslim Women, calling the practice barbaric, uncivilized, a grave atrocity, and a violation against bodily human rights. After my speech, a beautiful African-Somalian woman named Khadiga approached me and tapped me on the arm. I thought she was going to thank me for voicing my concerns about female genital mutilation. Instead she said, "Have you ever bothered or even tried to sit down and talk with a circumcised woman? You are talking at us, about us. When you are ready to actually hear what we have to say call me." She was right. I had never spoken with a circumcised woman.

The Phone Call

Shortly after, I phoned Khadiga and informed her that I wanted to do a doctorate in social work. My dissertation would focus on female circumcision. Within a few days I made a phone call to a university in the United States, and a kind woman picked up the phone. At the time I did not know who she was, but I remember she was compassionate, genuine, and cared deeply about the welfare of women around the world, particularly those from the war-torn continent of Africa. She told me that if I could study circumcised women living in the United States and Canada, that it would be a rich, cultural, learning experience. I would be giving a forum to women from developing countries. She added that I needed to be prepared to enter perhaps the greatest cross-cultural learning experience of my life. She was right! That women's name was Kathy

Briar-Lawson who, at the time, was Associate Dean and Director of the Doctoral Program at the Graduate School of Social Work at the University of Utah. Within six months I quit my job in Canada and there I was, sitting at a desk accepted into the doctoral program of the University of Utah with a full scholarship. My dream was about to start in Utah of all places. I was about to do a study on circumcised women, actually speaking with them and not at them.

Entry

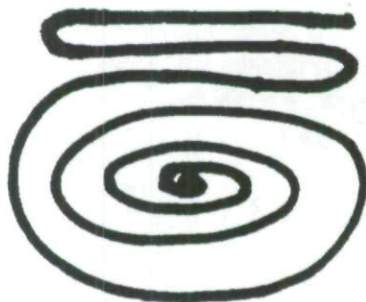
Given that female genital mutilation is a traditional cultural practice, an ethnographic method appeared best suited for my doctoral study. It would allow me to get into the natural setting of circumcised women where I could gain a wide-angle view by mixing and mingling with them. It would give me the opportunity to eventually do semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with open-ended questions on circumcision to get a more holistic perspective of the practice. Ethnographic research methods would also provide me with an alternative discursive format so I could get inside the world of circumcised women, viewing the practice from their perspective and their frame of reference. I targeted a purposive sample of Somali women because 98% of them experience infibulation, the most drastic and severe form of circumcision. With the help of Khadiga in Canada and another Somali woman, Habiba in Utah, I immersed myself into the culture of circumcised Somali women.

Getting to Know Each Other

I attended family gatherings, weddings, and parties that often lasted to the early hours of the morning. I shared in traditional Somali music and dance festivities that often involved chanting. One evening, even I danced till about 4:00 a.m. in the morning, and was so tired that I tripped and lost my voice from chanting. I was even scolded once because I ate with a fork instead of joining other Somali women on the floor. They had expected me to eat with my hand on their large single plate. I realized later that I was probably being tested. Looking back, what I experienced was a privilege and a truly dynamic learning moment. It was also

my rite of passage. My African circumcised sisters were getting to know me. If I expected women to share their experiences of circumcision, the underlying message was that I would need to be with them until they were ready to trust me.

This process went on for three years. At times I had no idea if circumcised women would ever start to share their lives with me. Upon reflection, they were already sharing their lives with me by introducing me to their families, customs, and culture. I remember one special moment when a woman said she would trust me based on my eyes and not on the consent form I had spent weeks developing (Khaja, 2004). Many communities from developing countries have been deceived by documents and treaties; understandably hesitant to believe anything written. Consent forms can often mean little to other cultures while they mean everything to us. Understanding cultures different from our own means that we have to invest spending time with them on their terms. Frankly, word of mouth cannot ever be taken lightly.



Translation and Time Differences

All the women I interviewed were Somali and had experienced a wide variety of circumcisions. Some forms were mild, and other forms were severe. I was not prepared for this, and had erroneously assumed that most of the women I interviewed were missing large parts of their vaginas. This was probably because I had become a victim of the way Western media has sensationalized the more drastic forms of circumcision. I also needed translators who spoke Arabic, Somali, and Italian. Translation was a very difficult,

frustrating, and time consuming process. Even though I taped the interviews, I had to replay the tapes numerous times as it was very difficult to understand the heavy African accents.

Another curve in the research process was that my subjects did not usually stick to interview times. For example, in many cases I would arrive for the interview, and dinner would already be prepared for me. I had to eat so as not to offend anyone. Sometimes women would want me to cook dinner with them, and in one case an interview that was supposed to take place at 7:00 p.m. took place at 3:00 a.m. because of all the dishes we were cooking together. The cooking I did with these women was something I never would have expected. However, looking back it was one thing we shared: we were all women and loved to cook. So we started off on a common ground, which was food. Sometimes the best part of international education is the wonderful food you eat. I still remember the fragrances of saffron, basmati rice, lamb, and spicy tea.

Your Culture is not Superior

One of the participants in my study told me I should not assume that her ancestors were mutilators just because she was circumcised. She told me that my use of the term "female genital mutilation" suggested that I was superior to her because I had all my genital organs, and that she came from a generation of mutilators. I apologized and quickly learned that if you don't use language sensitively you will shut people from other cultures out. From there on I made sure to consult Somali women as to terms I should and should not use. Then I made another mistake. I also assumed that all participants in my study had experienced some type of sexual health consequence because they were all circumcised. Wrong again. I was quickly reminded that most had healthy sex lives.

Agendas

I was lucky that participants in my study were still willing to speak with me given my early field mistakes. While my agenda was to understand the practice of female circumcision, circumcised women also had an agenda. They

wanted me to know that they did not come from an uncivilized culture just because their cultures supported female circumcision. They wanted me to know they were loving mothers who had migrated to North America because of the civil conflicts in Somalia. They all despised war and many lost family members in the civil war in Somalia. Many women told me they spoke with me because they wanted the world to know they were human, not inferior to Western women because they had circumcised vaginas. They wanted to be appreciated and not seen as barbaric. They wanted acknowledgement that their own communities in Somalia had been speaking out against female circumcision since the 1970s and that there were movements supporting milder versions back home. However, they were furious that international women's organizations were not acknowledging that Africans themselves had been lobbying to stop the practice for a long time. Looking back, I realize that the danger of examining other cultures is that inadvertently we can patronize them by not acknowledging the great work they are already doing to ensure social justice and equality.

Teaching From a Diverse Pedagogy

This brief glimpse of my journey into the lives of circumcised women leaves me humble and has ensured that I teach students how important it is to get into the world of other cultures. This is perhaps the best way to understand cultures (Sheets, 2005). Today in my diversity classes I instruct from a diverse pedagogy. I expect students to do more than read diversity textbooks. I share my sacred journey of entering the lives of circumcised women, admitting the mistakes that I made and also the valuable lessons I learned. I do this so that students realize that studying diverse cultures is complex, not easy, and takes a long time. At the beginning of each new semester I ask all my students to write down what practice, group, culture, or foreign country they fear the most or do not understand. They do interviews, attend diverse celebrations, take part in lectures, and learn to cook diverse foods. By going inside a different culture, they learn how to speak sensitively about that

culture. Students have told me that this journey has opened their eyes to their own fears, prejudices, and biases, towards other cultures. They also report that their journeys have led them to realize that they have more commonalities with those they initially considered so different from them. Perhaps that is the ultimate lesson or goal of a diverse teaching pedagogy (Ramirez de Langer, 2006).

Conclusion

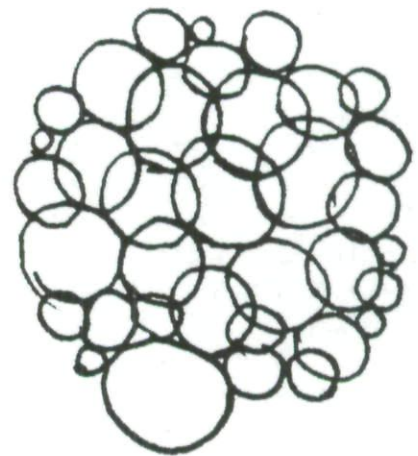
With globalization, many countries around the world are used for their mineral resources, referred to as Third World as though they are third-rate citizens, or sometimes used for research then forgotten about after publications are made. Studies of diverse cultures should not be seen as a "marginal adjunct to regular curriculum" and "personal enrichment opportunity" for faculty or students (Lyons, 1999, p.175). Upon reflection, my own study of circumcised women taught me that studying and getting into the worlds of diverse cultures is only the beginning. Communication and dialogue that allows one to speak more sensitively about traditions we may not agree with (Ramanathan & Link, 1999) leads to greater understanding and respect between cultures.

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Khadija Khaja, Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor at Indiana University School of Social Work. Comments about this article can be addressed to: kkhaja@iupui.edu.



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