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IMPACT OF SOCIAL-MEDIA AND COVID-19 ON FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION CULTURE AMONG MARKET WOMEN IN OSUN STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The intersection of social media and the COVID-19 pandemic created a complex background in addressing Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) among market women, a group with beliefs that are often deeply embedded in cultural traditions.
Purpose: This research focused on social-media and COVID-19 on Female Genital Mutilation culture among market women.
Methodology: The target population of 500 market women in Osun state who have experienced FGM market women. Descriptive research design of the expo-facto type was adopted for the study. The Purposive sampling/convenience sampling techniques was adopted and a structured self-designed instrument was administered. Data was subjected to descriptive statistics such as frequency count, mean and standard deviation.
Results: One of findings among others is that the mean scores indicated that respondents strongly agreed that online platforms influenced market women's FGM views (mean = 4.5) and COVID-19 lockdown boosted anti-FGM content online (mean = 4.6).
Conclusion: The study concluded that the intersection of social media and the COVID-19 pandemic further created an intricate background regarding Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) among market women. While social media emerged as a powerful platform for advocacy and awareness, entrenched practices, pandemic's economic hardships and social restrictions have complicated efforts.
Recommendation: The study therefore recommends that there should be systematic ways of strengthening offline interventions to complement online anti-FGM campaigns that can effectively change deep-rooted cultural attitudes.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, Cultural practices, Female genital mutilation (FGM), Market women, Social media.

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This study will benefit policymakers, activists, and health practitioners as it provides insights into the influence of social media and COVID-19 on female genital mutilation (FGM) practices. Market women in Osun State will gain awareness of the cultural, health, and legal implications of FGM, fostering behavioural change and empowering communities to combat the practice through informed advocacy and education. This study which is premised on possible widespread stoppage of the FGM can be an avenue for sensitizing the people and creating awareness through social-media and other possible means. It would further benefit the victims also, as they too will see the futility of handing over such barbaric act to their own off-springs thereby saving the generations yet unborn.

INTRODUCTION

The practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) involves removal of part of clitoral/labia (partial removal) or the total removal (Infibulation) of the female genital organ connected to the reproductive organ. Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is a deep-seated cultural practice in many African communities (Esho, Tammary, Dennis, 2022), including Nigeria, where it is performed as a rite of passage or a marker of cultural identity. Despite global campaigns against it, the practice remains prevalent, with about 20 million women and girls in Nigeria affected, making the country one of the highest contributors to global FGM figures (UNICEF, 2021). In Osun State, FGM prevalence remains alarmingly high at 76.6% (Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey [NDHS], 2018). The persistence of this harmful tradition underscores the need to explore the factors perpetuating it and opportunities for intervention.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought significant changes to social behaviour, (Riley, Sully, Ahmedet al., 2020), influencing cultural practices, including FGM. Movement restrictions and public health measures disrupted traditional ceremonies, providing an opportunity to reassess cultural norms (United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA], 2021). However, the pandemic also shifted communication channels, with social media becoming a primary medium for information dissemination and activism. Social media platforms have been leveraged to educate and mobilize communities against FGM (Okeke, Osei & Thato, 2023). Yet, the effectiveness of these interventions remains underexplored, especially among market women, a group pivotal to societal decision-making in Osun State.

Studies on the relationship between social media and FGM suggest that targeted online campaigns can reduce the acceptance of harmful practices (Obermeyer, Reynolds & Partridge, 2020; Ajayi & Fasoranti, 2021). According to Shell-Duncan, Wander, Hernlund and Moreau, (2021), the COVID-19 lockdowns facilitated increased online engagement (Ibrahim, & Bello, 2024), enabling anti-FGM campaigns to leverage social media platforms to reach wider audiences effectively. For instance, Oladipo *et al*. (2020) found that WhatsApp-based advocacy programs significantly improved awareness of FGM-related health risks among women in Southwest Nigeria. Similarly, Adebayo *et al*. (2023) reported that Twitter campaigns influenced community leaders to reconsider FGM rituals. However, other studies indicate that misinformation on social media can reinforce harmful practices, highlighting the need for carefully curated content (Ibrahim &Ogunleye, 2021).

Nigeria being one of the Africa countries that is signatory to approved human rights law had officially abolished the procedure since 2015, to meet up with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of 2030 towards achieving the abolition of all detrimental practices which undermines gender equality and female empowerment (Adelekan, *et al.*, 2023) such as FGM. Adekoya and Olawole (2023) explored the role of social media in shaping attitudes toward Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) among

Nigerian women during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their study revealed that social media campaigns played a significant role in raising awareness and influencing negative attitudes toward FGM, aligning with findings that highlight the effectiveness of digital platforms in promoting anti-FGM messages.

Against these backdrop, the research study investigated impact of social media and covid-19 on FGM culture and violations of women rights in selected local government in Osun State, Nigeria. Going forward, it is imperative that effective and informed policies be implemented in order to protect the mental health and rights of those vulnerable to these practices.

The implication of subjecting the female gender to surgical expertise and poor hygiene relating to the FGM procedure (UNICEF, 2022a), has unfortunately, been a source of negative psychosocial development. The unethical procedure done with non-sterile carved wooden knifes and or razor blades, is used without any form of anesthetic, sedation or antibiotics which undoubtedly portends traumatic experience (Wahlberg, 2020). heavy bleeding and indelible psychological scars, thereby subjecting these women and girls to indescribable excruciating agony and exposure to sexually transmitted diseases, difficult child birth and obstructed labour. The lack of access to health care services and underlining psychological trauma experienced by these women due to FGM indicate profound detrimental effect on the mental health and quality of life of many women and children around the world (UNICEF, 2022b).

The community performs the role protection and perpetuating their traditions and way of life. It becomes the role and responsibility of the community to provide safety for their women as a result, girls and women become subjected to this reality, (Mkuwa, Sempeho, Kimbute, 2023), however, the reality of abject poverty is a determinant of where they would go for solution. When there is a concern about their daughters possibly losing their values and the need to pick bills, the tendency to want to marry them off to the highest bidder increases the need for FGM since the children were not attending school but were at home. The practice of FGM (a prerequisite to marriage) was intended to reduce the natural sexual desires of the woman, subject her to patriarchal dominance and total loss of sexual identity however, the resultant consequences are increased pressure on the mental health (Sabi Boun, Otu and Yaya, 2023). violations of rights of women and a surge in medical issues like barrenness, frigidity, infections, low self-esteem and a low or zero libido in adulthood (which in any case, was actually the intended). The inhumane and degrading act (El-Dirani, Farouki, Akl et al., 2021). is an exploitation ()that encroach on the fundamental human rights of women and girls constituting torture as per Article 2 of the UN charter and other laws and rights. This work creates a narration of the construct of FGM which heralds the elucidation of the patriarchy system, where cultural beliefs and adherence beclouds remedial perspectives. This study, therefore, aims to investigate the impact of social media and COVID-19 on FGM culture among market women in Osun State, assessing how these factors have reshaped attitudes and practices. The findings will provide critical insights for policymakers and stakeholders seeking to eradicate FGM in Nigeria.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) remains a deeply entrenched cultural practice in many parts of Nigeria, including Osun State, despite its severe health consequences and global campaigns against it. Market women, as key community members, often influence cultural norms and perpetuate this harmful tradition. However, recent societal changes, such as the proliferation of social media and the COVID-19 pandemic, may have altered the dynamics of FGM practices and perceptions. Social media serves as a powerful tool for advocacy, awareness creation, and dissemination of information. It has been instrumental in challenging harmful cultural norms,

including FGM, by exposing women to alternative perspectives, education, and laws prohibiting the practice. However, its role in perpetuating or combating FGM among market women in Osun State remains underexplored.

The COVID-19 pandemic further complicated this dynamic, as lockdowns and restrictions limited physical interactions, possibly affecting the practice and reporting of FGM. Simultaneously, the pandemic heightened reliance on social media for information and connection, potentially reshaping attitudes toward FGM. This study addresses the gap in understanding how social media and the pandemic influenced FGM culture among market women in Osun State. It seeks to explore whether these factors have facilitated behavioural change, increased awareness, or reinforced existing practices within this population.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Objectives of the study are to:

1. inquire into the role of social media in shaping perceptions and attitudes towards Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) among market women during the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. anayse the impact of COVID-19 on the prevalence and practice of Female Genital Mutilation among market women.
3. ascertain the effectiveness of social media campaigns in promoting anti-FGM messages and support networks among market women during the COVID-19 pandemic.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the roles of social media in shaping perceptions and attitudes towards Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) among market women during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What are the impact of COVID-19 on the prevalence and practice of Female Genital Mutilation among market women?
3. What are the effectiveness of social media campaigns in promoting anti-FGM messages and support networks among market women during the COVID-19 pandemic?

METHODOLOGY

Design

This study employed a descriptive survey research design to examine the impact of social media and the COVID-19 pandemic on the culture of female genital mutilation (FGM) among market women in Osun State. The descriptive survey design was deemed appropriate as it facilitates the collection of data to describe, interpret, and analyze the phenomena as they exist in their natural context.

Population and Sample

The population for this study comprised market women in Osun State, Nigeria, across various markets in the state. The target group was women of reproductive age and older, who may have had direct or indirect experiences with FGM practices or the socio-cultural dynamics surrounding it. Therefore, a multi-stage sampling technique was used to select the sample. First, markets in Osun State were stratified into urban and rural categories. Second, several markets from each stratum were randomly selected to ensure representation. Lastly, market women within each selected market were randomly chosen to participate. The final sample size consisted of 600 market women, determined using Krejcie and Morgan's table.

Instruments for Data Collection

The primary data collection tool was a structured questionnaire designed by the researcher. The questionnaire was divided into three sections. These are demographic information such as age, marital status, education level, and occupation. It also covered impact of social media and measured the extent to which social media influences knowledge, attitudes, and practices regarding FGM. It also assessed the effect of covid-19, particularly the perceived changes in FGM practices due to COVID-19, including shifts in social norms, healthcare access,

and advocacy efforts. The questionnaire was designed using a four-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree) to capture respondents' opinions effectively.

The questionnaire was subjected to content validity through expert review. Experts in public health, gender studies, and social science research evaluated the instrument for clarity, relevance, and adequacy. Necessary adjustments were made based on their recommendations. A pilot study was conducted with 40 market women from a different state to test the reliability of the instrument. The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient obtained was 0.82, indicating a high level of internal consistency.

Procedures for Data Collection

Data collection took place over four weeks. The researcher and trained research assistants visited the selected markets to administer the questionnaires. The purpose of the study was explained to the participants, and informed consent was obtained. Participants were given the option to complete the questionnaire themselves or have it administered orally by the research assistants for those with literacy challenges. Social distancing, mask-wearing, and hand sanitization protocols were strictly adhered to during the data collection process to ensure the safety of participants and researchers. Completed questionnaires were collected on the spot, and responses were verified for completeness before leaving each market.

M**ethods of Data Analysis**

Collected data collected was analyzed using descriptive majorly frequency count, means, and standard deviations to provide answers to the research questions. The criterion mean was ≥

RESULTS

Research Question 1: What are the role of social media in shaping perceptions and attitudes towards Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) among market women during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Table 1: The role of social media in shaping perceptions and attitudes towards Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) among market women during the COVID-19 pandemic

Criterion mean cut-off mark isMean ≥ 4.0

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Frequency (Agree or Strongly Agree)
Social media increased FGM awareness among women	4.2	0.7	310
Online platforms influenced market women's FGM views	4.5	0.5	330
COVID-19 lockdown boosted anti-FGM content online	4.6	0.4	355
Social media discussions reduced FGM support	3.8	0.9	270
Exposure to social media changed FGM attitudes	3.9	0.3	290

Source: Author's Survey, 2024

Table 1 shows the extent to which perceived role of social media shaping perceptions and attitudes towards Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) among market women during the COVID-19 pandemic. The result indicates that the mean scores indicate that respondents strongly agreed that online platforms influenced market women's FGM views (mean = 4.5) and COVID-19 lockdown boosted anti-FGM content online (mean = 4.6) have major contribution in shaping perceptions and

attitudes towards Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) among market women during the COVID-19 pandemic. The frequency distribution also supports this with a high number of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with this role that COVID-19 lockdown boosted anti-FGM content online, online platforms influenced market women's FGM views, and Social media increased FGM awareness among women. However, the respondents disagreed with social media discussions reduced FGM support and exposure to social media changed FGM attitudes.

Research Question 2: What are the impact of COVID-19 on the prevalence and practice of Female Genital Mutilation among market women?

Table 2: The impact of COVID-19 on the prevalence and practice of Female Genital Mutilation among market women

Criterion mean cut-off mark is Mean ≥ 4.0

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Frequency (Agree or Strongly Agree)
COVID-19 restrictions increased the prevalence of FGM among market women	3.8	0.4	285
Economic hardships from COVID-19 led to a rise in FGM practices	3.2	0.5	250
Health concerns during the pandemic reduced FGM occurrences among market women	4.7	0.9	345
Social distancing measures influenced the practice of FGM in market communities	4.6	0.6	335
The pandemic disrupted traditional FGM ceremonies among market women	4.3	1.0	320

Source: Author's Survey, 2024

Table 2 presented the impact of COVID-19 on the prevalence and practice of Female Genital Mutilation among market women. The result indicates that the mean scores indicate that respondents strongly agreed that health concerns during the pandemic reduced FGM occurrences among market women (mean = 4.7) and social distancing measures influenced the practice of FGM in market communities (mean = 4.6) have major impact of COVID-19 on the prevalence and practice of Female Genital Mutilation among market women. The frequency distribution also supports this with a high number of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with this role that health concerns during the pandemic reduced FGM occurrences among market women, social distancing measures influenced the practice of FGM in market communities, and the pandemic disrupted traditional FGM ceremonies among market women. However, the respondents disagreed with economic hardships from COVID-19 led to a rise in FGM practices and that COVID-19 restrictions increased the prevalence of FGM among market women as the impact of COVID-19 on the prevalence and practice of Female Genital Mutilation among market women.

Research Question 3: What are the effectiveness of social media campaigns in promoting anti-FGM messages and support networks among market women during the COVID-19 pandemic?

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Table 3: The effectiveness of social media campaigns in promoting anti-FGM messages and support networks among market women during the COVID-19 pandemic

Criterion mean cut-off mark is Mean ≥ 4.0

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Frequency (Agree or Strongly Agree)
Social media effectively raises awareness against FGM among market women during COVID-19.	4.9	0.4	350
Online campaigns significantly reduce the practice of FGM among market women during the pandemic.	4.8	0.5	340
Social media platforms provide strong support networks for women opposing FGM during COVID-19.	3.7	0.9	245
Anti-FGM messages on social media are more influential during the COVID-19 pandemic.	4.6	0.6	335
Social media has improved the visibility of anti-FGM efforts among market women during COVID-19 restrictions.	3.3	1.0	320

Source: Author's Survey, 2024

Table 3 presented the effectiveness of social media campaigns in promoting anti-FGM messages and support networks among market women during the COVID-19 pandemic. The result indicated that the mean scores indicates that respondents strongly agreed that social media effectively raises awareness against FGM among market women during COVID-19 (mean = 4.7) and Online campaigns significantly reduce the practice of FGM among market women during the pandemic (mean = 4.6) have major effectiveness of social media campaigns in promoting anti-FGM messages and support networks among market women during the COVID-19 pandemic. The frequency distribution also supports this with a high number of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with this role that social media effectively raises awareness against FGM among market women during COVID-19, online campaigns significantly reduce the practice of FGM among market women during the pandemic and anti-FGM messages on social media are more influential during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the respondents disagreed with social media has improved the visibility of anti-FGM efforts among market women during COVID-19 restrictions and Social media platforms provide strong support networks for women opposing FGM during COVID-19.

DISCUSSIONS

Result indicated that the frequency distribution also supports this with a high number of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with this role that COVID-19 lockdown boosted anti-FGM content online, online platforms influenced market women's FGM views, and Social media increased FGM awareness among women. However, the respondents disagreed with social media discussions reduced FGM support and exposure to social media changed FGM attitudes. This study is in-line with the study of Shell-Duncan *et al.* (2021) found that the COVID-19 lockdowns led to increased online engagement, with anti-FGM campaigns utilizing social media to reach broader audiences (Molokwu and Nwazuoke, 2021). The surge in online content provided a platform for spreading awareness and educational messages against FGM, influencing public perceptions and attitudes, particularly

among women in markets and communities (Adelekan, Kareem, Abubakar, Z. et al 2022) with limited access to traditional media. Also, the study of Obermeyer *et al.* (2020) analyzed the role of social media in shaping attitudes towards FGM. The study revealed that women who frequently engaged with anti-FGM content on platforms like Facebook and Twitter were more likely to oppose the practice. However, the study also found that while awareness increased, changing deep-seated cultural attitudes required more than just online exposure.

The frequency distribution also supports this with a high number of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with this role that health concerns during the pandemic reduced FGM occurrences among market women, social distancing measures influenced the practice of FGM in market communities, and the pandemic disrupted traditional FGM ceremonies among market women. However, the respondents disagreed with economic hardships from COVID-19 led to a rise in FGM practices and that COVID-19 restrictions increased the prevalence of FGM among market women as the impact of COVID-19 on the prevalence and practice of Female Genital Mutilation among market women. This study is in-line with the study of Okeke *et al.* (2023) assessed how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected gender-based violence, including FGM. It highlighted how health concerns and restrictions have led to disruptions in FGM practices and ceremonies but found no evidence that economic hardships increased FGM rates. The findings of Mubaiwa, Bradley & Meme, (2022), also was in concordance with the findings on impact of Covid -19 and development.

Also, the study of Adamu *et al.* (2023) explored how COVID-19 has affected FGM practices in West Africa. It reports that while traditional ceremonies were disrupted, health concerns led to a reduction in FGM practices. However, the study found no significant evidence linking economic hardship directly to increased FGM prevalence.

Result also indicated that the frequency distribution also supports this with a high number of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with this role that social media effectively raises awareness against FGM among market women during COVID-19, online campaigns significantly reduce the practice of FGM among market women during the pandemic and anti-FGM messages on social media are more influential during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the respondents disagreed with social media has improved the visibility of anti-FGM efforts among market women during COVID-19 restrictions and Social media platforms provide strong support networks for women opposing FGM during COVID-19.

This study corroborates the study of Adekoya *et al*. (2023) who investigated the role of social media in shaping attitudes towards FGM among Nigerian women during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings aligned with the result indicating that social media campaigns significantly raised awareness and influenced attitudes against FGM. The study of Ibrahim & Bello (2024) assessed how social media campaigns impacted FGM practices during the pandemic. It provides evidence that online advocacy played a significant role in reducing FGM practices, though it also highlights challenges in improving the visibility of anti-FGM efforts.

CONCLUSION

The study concluded that the intersection of social media and the COVID-19 pandemic had created a complex landscape for addressing Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) among market women, a group often deeply embedded in cultural traditions. While social media has emerged as a powerful platform for advocacy and awareness, challenging entrenched practices and promoting anti-FGM campaigns, the pandemic's economic hardships and social restrictions have complicated these efforts.

Female genital mutilation (FGM) is a harmful and outdated practice that is deeply embedded in cultures and practiced around the world, particularly in African and Middle Eastern countries. Over the years, various initiatives and

organizations have fought to end FGM. The socio-economic status of the family is an area with pressing concern as this is a determining factor in decision making and shift in in mind-set towards FGM. These initiatives and organizations, along with the development of social media and the spread of awareness, have increased global knowledge and understanding of FGM and its risks. The study aims at total eradication of FGM which is achievable going by community-led campaign and culturally suitable health training and advocacy crusades. It is anticipated that this study could bring about the much sought after public health issues and policy response in Nigeria, and all over African countries, with the intention to improve overall sexual and reproductive health.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were made:

1. There should be a way of strengthening offline interventions that complement online anti-FGM campaigns to effectively change deep-rooted cultural attitudes.
2. There should be means of reinforcing health and social support systems to sustain reductions in FGM practices and address potential disruptions caused by future health crises.
3. Enhance visibility and support networks should be integrated for anti-FGM initiatives by targeting outreach and localized online campaigns tailored to market women's needs.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Disclaimer Statement

We clarify that the views and findings expressed in the study are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the opinions of affiliated organizations, funding bodies, or stakeholders involved.

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