

## FEMALE CIRCUMCISION

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Female genital cutting (FGC), also known as female circumcision in Nigeria, is a common practice in many societies in the northern half of sub-Saharan Africa. Nearly universal in a few countries, it is practiced by various groups in at least 25 African countries, in Yemen, and in immigrant African populations in Europe and North America. In a few societies, the procedure is routinely carried out when a girl is a few weeks or a few months old (e.g. Eritrea, Yemen), while in most others, it occurs later in childhood or adolescence. In the case of the latter, FGC is typically part of a ritual initiation into womanhood that includes a period of seclusion and education about the rights and duties of a wife.

The 2003 Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey (2003 NDHS) collected data on the practice of female circumcision in Nigeria from all women age 15-49. The 1999 NDHS collected data on female circumcision only from currently married women. In this chapter, topics discussed include knowledge, prevalence, and type; age at circumcision; person who performed the circumcision; and attitudes towards the practice.

### 13.1 KNOWLEDGE AND PREVALENCE OF FEMALE CIRCUMCISION

Table 13.1 presents data on women's knowledge of female circumcision. About half (53 percent) of Nigerian women age 15-49 have heard of the practice. There are marked variations in knowledge of female circumcision by residence, region, education, and ethnicity. About two-thirds of urban respondents have heard of female circumcision, compared with less than half of women in rural areas (69 versus 45 percent). In general, women in the south are more than twice as likely as women in the north to have heard of the practice. These variations by region and residence are a reflection of ethnic differentials. The Igbo and Yoruba, who are primarily resident in the South East and South West, respectively, have greater knowledge of female circumcision than the ethnic groups primarily resident in the north.

Table 13.1 also shows the prevalence of female circumcision by background characteristics, which follows the same patterns as knowledge of circumcision. The proportion of women who were circumcised at the time of the survey was greatest in the southern regions, among the Yoruba and Igbo, and among urban residents. The high prevalence of female circumcision among the Yoruba (61 percent) and Igbo (45 percent) helps to explain regional and urban-rural differentials, since the Yoruba and Igbo traditionally reside in the South West and South East, which are more urban than the north. More than twice as many of the oldest women as the youngest women are circumcised (28 versus 13 percent), suggesting that there has been a decline in the practice. Caldwell et al. (2000) have reported a decline in the prevalence of female circumcision among the Yoruba.

### 13.2 FLESH REMOVAL AND INFIBULATION

Questions directed at determining the type of female circumcision were asked of women who reported they had been circumcised. Table 13.1 indicates that the type of circumcision could not be determined for half of the women. However, among those women who could identify the type of procedure, circumcision that involved cutting and removal of flesh is most commonly reported (44 percent). Four percent of women reported that their vagina was sewn closed (infibulation) during their circumcision, which is the most radical procedure. It is worth noting that among the Yoruba, who have the largest proportion of women circumcised, less than 1 percent of women are infibulated. Infibulation is most prevalent in the South South region (8 percent).

Table 13.1 Knowledge and prevalence of female circumcision

Percentage of women who have heard of female circumcision, percentage of women circumcised, and the percent distribution of circumcised women by type of circumcision, according to background characteristics, Nigeria 2003

Background characteristic	Percentage of women who heard of female circumcision	Percentage of women circumcised	Number of women	Type of circumcision				Total	Number of women
				Cut, no flesh removed	Cut, flesh removed	Sewn closed	Not determined		
<b>Age</b>									
15-19	43.1	12.9	1,716	2.2	37.8	5.1	55.0	100.0	221
20-24	52.8	17.0	1,494	1.8	43.1	2.9	52.2	100.0	253
25-29	57.5	20.8	1,382	1.8	40.2	2.2	55.8	100.0	288
30-34	55.0	19.4	941	1.1	43.6	7.6	47.7	100.0	183
35-39	60.8	22.2	816	2.4	44.3	4.9	48.4	100.0	181
40-44	53.6	22.2	688	1.2	49.0	1.9	47.9	100.0	153
45-49	59.6	28.4	583	3.9	51.0	3.6	41.6	100.0	165
<b>Residence</b>									
Urban	68.7	28.3	2,629	1.5	37.6	4.0	56.9	100.0	744
Rural	45.0	14.0	4,991	2.5	49.6	3.9	44.0	100.0	701
<b>Region</b>									
North Central	36.0	9.6	1,121	1.2	64.6	2.5	31.7	100.0	107
North East	40.1	1.3	1,368	*	*	*	*	*	18
North West	25.1	0.4	2,095	*	*	*	*	*	9
South East	87.7	40.8	737	0.3	12.2	2.7	84.8	100.0	300
South South	82.5	34.7	1,342	3.0	66.0	7.5	23.5	100.0	466
South West	85.7	56.9	958	2.2	36.3	1.3	60.3	100.0	545
<b>Ethnic group</b>									
Fulani	19.4	0.6	463	*	*	*	*	*	3
Hausa	28.5	0.4	2,055	*	*	*	*	*	8
Igbo	86.5	45.1	1,037	1.3	28.3	3.1	67.3	100.0	467
Kanuri	58.5	0.5	232	*	*	*	*	*	1
Tiv	27.9	0.9	170	*	*	*	*	*	1
Yoruba	88.2	60.7	865	2.1	38.3	0.9	58.7	100.0	525
Other	54.8	15.7	2,797	2.5	66.1	7.8	23.6	100.0	439
Total	53.2	19.0	7,620	2.0	43.5	3.9	50.6	100.0	1,445

Note: Total includes 1 case with data missing on circumcision. An asterisk indicates that a figure is based on fewer than 25 un-weighted cases and has been suppressed.

### 13.3 AGE AT CIRCUMCISION

The percent distribution of women by age at circumcision is presented in Table 13.2. Female circumcision in Nigeria occurs mostly in infancy (i.e., before the first birthday). Three-quarters of the women who underwent circumcision were circumcised by age one. Twenty-one percent, however, were circumcised at age five or older. There are marked variations in the proportions of women circumcised in infancy by residence and ethnicity. For instance, almost nine in ten Igbo and Yoruba were circumcised during infancy compared with less than half of those in other ethnic groups (45 percent).

Infibulation, the most severe form of circumcision, is more likely to be carried out on women circumcised at a later age than on the very young. The table shows that 37 percent of those cut before the age of one had been infibulated, while 49 percent of those circumcised after the age of four were infibulated. It should be noted that the total number of respondents infibulated was 57.

Table 13.2 Age at circumcision

Percent distribution of circumcised women by age at circumcision, according to background characteristics, Nigeria 2003

Background characteristic	Age at circumcision in years				Total	Number of women
	<1	1-4	5+	Don't know/missing		
<b>Age</b>						
15-19	78.4	1.7	14.2	5.7	100.0	221
20-24	77.2	1.1	18.7	3.1	100.0	253
25-29	79.5	0.2	17.7	2.5	100.0	288
30-34	64.3	0.3	27.4	8.1	100.0	183
35-39	71.6	3.3	24.4	0.7	100.0	181
40-44	72.4	1.5	24.3	1.8	100.0	153
45-49	73.5	0.6	21.1	4.8	100.0	165
<b>Residence</b>						
Urban	79.2	0.9	16.8	3.1	100.0	744
Rural	69.6	1.5	24.4	4.5	100.0	701
<b>Region</b>						
North Central	51.6	1.7	42.1	4.6	100.0	107
North East	*	*	*	*	*	18
North West	*	*	*	*	*	9
South East	94.1	0.1	4.9	0.9	100.0	300
South South	55.2	2.1	38.0	4.7	100.0	466
South West	86.4	0.7	9.1	3.8	100.0	545
<b>Ethnic group</b>						
Igbo	88.9	0.3	9.4	1.4	100.0	467
Yoruba	87.4	1.2	7.1	4.4	100.0	525
Other	45.0	2.0	47.4	5.5	100.0	453
<b>Type of circumcision</b>						
Cut, no flesh removed	(69.7)	(0.0)	(30.3)	(0.0)	(100.0)	29
Cut, flesh removed	60.6	1.9	35.2	2.3	100.0	628
Sewn closed	37.4	5.0	49.2	8.4	100.0	57
Not determined	89.6	0.3	5.2	4.8	100.0	732
Total	74.6	1.2	20.5	3.8	100.0	1,445

Note: Figures in parentheses are based on 25-49 unweighted cases. An asterisk indicates that a figure is based on fewer than 25 unweighted cases and has been suppressed.

## 13.4 CIRCUMCISION OF DAUGHTERS

Women interviewed in the 2003 NDHS who had living daughters were asked if any of their daughters had been circumcised, and if not, whether they intended to have a daughter circumcised. Table 13.3 shows that, of women who have at least one daughter, 10 percent had circumcised a daughter, and an additional 3 percent intend to have a daughter circumcised. The proportion of women who have at least one circumcised daughter increases with age. Prevalence varies by residence and ethnicity, with women residing in urban areas, those in the south, and Yorubas and Igbos being the most likely to have circumcised daughters or intend to have their daughters circumcised.

Table 13.3 shows the percent distribution of most recently circumcised daughters by type of circumcision. The results show that circumcision involving the cutting and removal of flesh is the most common in Nigeria, accounting for two-thirds of all circumcisions. Five percent of circumcised daughters had no flesh removed, and 4 percent were infibulated.

Table 13.3 Daughter's circumcision experience and type of circumcision

Among women with at least one living daughter, percentage with at least one circumcised daughter, percentage who intend to have their daughter circumcised, and percent distribution by type of circumcision among most recently circumcised daughters, according to background characteristics, Nigeria 2003

Background characteristic	Percentage of women with at least one daughter circumcised	Percentage of women who intend to have daughter circumcised	Number of women with at least one daughter	Among circumcised daughters, type of circumcision				Total	Number of women
				Cut, no flesh removed	Cut, flesh removed	Sewn closed	Not determined		
<b>Age</b>									
15-19	0.5	5.0	183	*	*	*	*	*	1
20-24	4.4	3.9	538	(1.5)	(63.7)	(2.5)	(32.3)	(100.0)	23
25-29	6.9	2.3	898	12.6	54.1	5.4	27.9	100.0	62
30-34	6.4	4.4	715	4.1	71.5	2.0	22.5	100.0	45
35-39	11.3	3.5	707	3.7	69.1	4.0	23.2	100.0	80
40-44	12.9	2.7	582	2.4	77.0	3.7	16.9	100.0	75
45-49	23.8	1.4	506	4.3	64.6	3.1	28.0	100.0	120
<b>Residence</b>									
Urban	15.0	3.1	1,294	2.9	68.0	3.4	25.7	100.0	194
Rural	7.5	3.2	2,834	6.7	65.9	3.7	23.7	100.0	213
<b>Region</b>									
North Central	6.6	3.3	606	1.1	59.8	0.0	39.1	100.0	40
North East	0.2	0.4	856	*	*	*	*	*	2
North West	0.9	0.9	1,320	*	*	*	*	*	12
South East	25.7	4.9	324	7.3	42.1	9.5	41.1	100.0	83
South South	17.2	10.6	621	1.7	81.0	6.1	11.2	100.0	107
South West	40.8	3.0	401	5.2	73.0	0.0	21.9	100.0	164
<b>Education</b>									
No education	5.6	1.6	2,158	7.4	58.1	3.9	30.6	100.0	121
Primary	14.8	4.2	1,000	0.6	73.7	3.2	22.6	100.0	148
Secondary	14.9	5.7	786	8.6	65.1	4.3	22.0	100.0	117
Higher	11.8	4.4	185	(0.0)	(79.8)	(0.0)	(20.2)	(100.0)	22
<b>Ethnic group</b>									
Igbo	25.8	4.5	447	5.3	52.5	9.5	32.7	100.0	115
Yoruba	46.3	2.6	371	4.9	70.6	0.0	24.5	100.0	172
Other	3.6	3.0	3,311	4.5	75.5	2.9	17.1	100.0	120
<b>Wealth quintile</b>									
Lowest	6.8	3.1	903	6.7	71.5	3.1	18.7	100.0	61
Second	6.2	2.6	874	1.9	72.0	3.4	22.7	100.0	54
Middle	8.2	1.9	822	5.1	64.9	7.7	22.2	100.0	67
Fourth	11.1	4.0	770	6.1	68.9	3.0	22.0	100.0	85
Highest	18.4	4.2	759	4.4	62.7	2.1	30.8	100.0	140
Total	9.9	3.1	4,129	4.9	66.9	3.6	24.6	100.0	407

Note: Figures in parentheses are based on 26-49 unweighted cases. An asterisk indicates that a figure is based on fewer than 25 unweighted cases and has been suppressed.

Table 13.4 indicates that almost all of the most recently circumcised daughters (85 percent) were circumcised before their first birthday, and 4 percent were circumcised between ages 1-4 years. Traditional circumcisers carried out 61 percent of the circumcisions. Circumcision is also commonly performed by nurses and midwives (24 percent) and traditional birth attendants (10 percent).

<u>Table 13.4 Aspects of daughter's circumcision</u>	
Percent distribution of most recently circumcised daughter by the age of the daughter at the time she was circumcised, and the person performing the circumcision, Nigeria 2003	
Aspects	Percent
<b>Age of daughter when she was circumcised (in years)</b>	
0	85.0
1-4	4.1
5-6	1.8
7-8	2.0
9-10	0.5
11-12	0.9
13+	3.9
Don't know/missing	1.8
<b>Person who performed the circumcision</b>	
Traditional circumciser	60.6
Traditional birth attendant	10.0
Other traditional	1.0
Doctor	2.0
Nurse/midwife	24.3
Other health professional	0.4
Don't know/missing	1.8
Total	100.0
Number	407

### 13.5 ATTITUDES TOWARD FEMALE CIRCUMCISION

Women and men who had heard of female circumcision were asked if they thought the practice should be continued or discontinued. Table 13.5.1 indicates that among the Nigerian women who had heard of female circumcision, two-thirds believe that the practice should be discontinued, while 21 percent believe the practice should be continued. Approximately one in ten of this group of women expressed conditional approval or was unsure of her opinion. Continuation of female circumcision finds greater support among southerners than northerners and among those who are circumcised than those un-circumcised. Even so, less than half of circumcised women want the practice to be continued. Women were also asked about their perception of men's attitudes toward female circumcision. Half of women believe that men want the practice discontinued. Nonetheless, one-fifth believe that men want female circumcision to continue.

Table 13.5.1 Attitudes toward female circumcision: women

Percent distribution of all women who have heard of female circumcision by opinion on whether female circumcision should be continued and by opinion on whether men think female circumcision should be continued, according to background characteristics, Nigeria 2003

Background characteristic	Attitude toward female circumcision					Believes men think that female circumcision should be:					Number of women
	Should be continued	Should be discontinued	Depends/don't know	Missing	Total	Continued	Discontinued	Depends/don't know	Missing	Total	
<b>Age</b>											
15-19	23.4	60.0	15.2	1.4	100.0	20.8	42.7	35.5	1.0	100.0	739
20-24	21.3	66.2	10.6	1.9	100.0	19.9	49.1	29.0	2.0	100.0	789
25-29	17.0	70.1	12.2	0.7	100.0	14.9	51.5	32.8	0.7	100.0	794
30-34	15.8	73.7	9.9	0.5	100.0	15.8	53.1	30.6	0.5	100.0	518
35-39	24.9	66.7	8.4	0.0	100.0	21.1	51.2	27.7	0.0	100.0	496
40-44	20.0	64.9	14.8	0.4	100.0	18.6	51.5	29.6	0.3	100.0	369
45-49	24.9	62.9	11.2	1.0	100.0	19.5	49.4	30.1	1.0	100.0	347
<b>Residence</b>											
Urban	22.5	64.7	11.9	0.9	100.0	18.7	49.4	31.0	0.9	100.0	1,805
Rural	19.4	67.9	11.8	1.0	100.0	18.5	49.4	31.2	0.9	100.0	2,248
<b>Region</b>											
North Central	13.2	64.2	19.1	3.6	100.0	12.1	42.0	42.3	3.6	100.0	403
North East	7.3	78.6	13.5	0.6	100.0	5.9	55.5	37.9	0.7	100.0	548
North West	13.5	70.5	13.1	2.9	100.0	11.5	55.7	30.7	2.1	100.0	527
South East	23.9	67.4	8.6	0.0	100.0	20.4	56.8	22.8	0.0	100.0	646
South South	18.9	73.7	7.2	0.2	100.0	20.0	52.6	26.9	0.5	100.0	1,107
South West	38.3	46.3	15.1	0.3	100.0	31.3	34.9	33.6	0.3	100.0	821
<b>Education</b>											
No education	19.1	64.7	14.7	1.6	100.0	15.5	47.8	35.2	1.5	100.0	1,023
Primary	23.1	64.5	11.6	0.9	100.0	18.9	47.8	32.2	1.0	100.0	949
Secondary	23.2	65.4	10.9	0.6	100.0	22.6	48.9	28.1	0.5	100.0	1,666
Higher	10.4	79.7	9.1	0.8	100.0	9.2	59.3	30.6	0.9	100.0	415
<b>Circumcision status</b>											
Not circumcised	9.3	76.3	12.9	1.4	100.0	8.3	57.1	33.3	1.3	100.0	2,607
Circumcised	41.5	48.6	9.8	0.1	100.0	37.0	35.7	27.1	0.2	100.0	1,445
<b>Total</b>	<b>20.8</b>	<b>66.4</b>	<b>11.8</b>	<b>0.9</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>18.6</b>	<b>49.4</b>	<b>31.1</b>	<b>0.9</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>4,052</b>

Men who had heard of female circumcision were asked the same attitude questions. Table 13.5.2 shows that among men who had heard of the practice, almost two-thirds are against continuation of female circumcision, while about one-fifth favour continuation. Similar to women, men residing in urban areas and those in the south are the most likely to support the continuation of the practice. Once again, differentials by residence are largely due to ethnicity. Almost half of men believe women want the practice discontinued, while only 14 percent believe that women want female circumcision to continue.

Table 13.5.2 Attitudes toward female circumcision: men

Percent distribution of all men who have heard of female circumcision by opinion on whether female circumcision should be continued and by opinion on whether women think female circumcision should be continued, according to background characteristics, Nigeria 2003

Background characteristic	Attitude toward female circumcision					Believes women think that female circumcision should be:					Number of men
	Should be continued	Should be discontinued	Depends/don't know	Missing	Total	Continued	Discontinued	Depends/don't know	Missing	Total	
<b>Age</b>											
15-19	20.2	54.0	25.0	0.8	100.0	17.1	40.2	42.0	0.8	100.0	127
20-24	19.0	62.1	18.4	0.5	100.0	15.8	50.1	33.0	1.0	100.0	223
25-29	22.6	59.9	17.6	0.0	100.0	16.1	46.5	37.4	0.0	100.0	211
30-34	17.0	67.4	15.6	0.0	100.0	8.9	58.9	32.1	0.0	100.0	229
35-39	22.1	61.3	16.6	0.0	100.0	15.4	54.9	29.7	0.0	100.0	163
40-44	10.2	75.8	14.0	0.0	100.0	8.0	55.9	36.1	0.0	100.0	166
45-49	24.8	62.6	12.6	0.0	100.0	15.2	49.2	35.6	0.0	100.0	117
50-54	19.8	57.7	22.5	0.0	100.0	16.7	53.5	29.9	0.0	100.0	103
55-59	21.4	66.3	12.3	0.0	100.0	15.3	45.8	38.9	0.0	100.0	89
<b>Residence</b>											
Urban	23.1	59.8	17.0	0.2	100.0	13.0	49.9	37.0	0.2	100.0	586
Rural	16.7	65.9	17.3	0.1	100.0	14.5	52.2	33.0	0.3	100.0	840
<b>Region</b>											
North Central	17.4	75.6	6.9	0.0	100.0	12.6	68.1	19.3	0.0	100.0	154
North East	8.7	73.7	17.3	0.3	100.0	9.4	50.8	39.1	0.7	100.0	307
North West	14.5	64.3	21.2	0.0	100.0	11.7	53.6	34.7	0.0	100.0	276
South East	28.4	45.5	26.2	0.0	100.0	12.2	42.4	45.4	0.0	100.0	156
South South	24.1	64.1	11.4	0.4	100.0	20.4	51.6	27.6	0.4	100.0	279
South West	27.8	52.7	19.5	0.0	100.0	16.4	44.0	39.6	0.0	100.0	254
<b>Education</b>											
No education	15.2	63.7	21.0	0.0	100.0	15.2	46.5	38.3	0.0	100.0	280
Primary	24.6	57.6	17.8	0.0	100.0	17.4	44.8	37.8	0.0	100.0	362
Secondary	20.1	61.2	18.4	0.4	100.0	12.8	51.4	35.2	0.6	100.0	549
Higher	14.4	77.0	8.6	0.0	100.0	9.7	66.3	24.0	0.0	100.0	235
Total	19.3	63.4	17.1	0.1	100.0	13.9	51.2	34.6	0.2	100.0	1,426

### 13.6 REASONS FOR SUPPORTING FEMALE CIRCUMCISION

In the 2003 NDHS, women and men who said they thought female circumcision should continue were asked about the benefits the girls themselves get if they undergo this procedure. Chastity before marriage is the reason most commonly cited by both women and men in Nigeria. More than one-third of the women (36 percent) and 45 percent of men cited the need to prevent premarital sex as their reason for supporting female circumcision (Table 13.6). Maintaining virginity before marriage has been given as a benefit of female circumcision in other African countries as well, but except for Niger, it has always been the third or fourth most frequently given reason (Yoder et al., 2004).

An additional 35 percent of women and 30 percent of men said that a circumcised female would have better marriage prospects. Whereas almost one-quarter of men cite greater sexual pleasure for men as a perceived benefit, this is the least commonly cited reason among women (5 percent). One-quarter of women and one-fifth of men support female circumcision due to a belief that it aids safe delivery. This misconception will require adequate public education to correct.

Table 13.6 Perceived benefits of undergoing female circumcision

Among women and men who say they think female circumcision should be continued, percentage who cite specific reasons, according to urban-rural residence, Nigeria 2003

Reason	Women			Men		
	Residence			Residence		
	Urban	Rural	Total	Urban	Rural	Total
<b>Reason for supporting female circumcision</b>						
Cleanliness/hygiene	5.1	8.4	6.8	5.5	14.4	10.0
Social acceptance	34.0	21.9	27.7	9.1	22.7	16.0
Better marriage prospects	26.8	42.0	34.6	28.3	31.9	30.1
Preserve virginity/prevent premarital sex	49.0	23.4	35.8	48.3	41.8	45.0
More sexual pleasure for the man	7.1	3.5	5.3	24.7	21.7	23.2
Religious approval	10.4	12.2	11.3	11.2	6.2	8.7
Helps delivery	24.6	25.8	25.2	20.2	20.9	20.5
Other	9.6	21.3	15.7	15.7	5.9	10.7
Number	407	436	843	135	141	276

### 13.7 REASONS FOR NOT SUPPORTING FEMALE CIRCUMCISION

Women and men who said they thought female circumcision should be discontinued were asked about the benefits the girls themselves get if they do not become circumcised. Table 13.7 shows that sexual gratification was cited as a benefit by the majority of the women and men who do not support the continuation of female circumcision. One-third of the women cited more sexual pleasure for the woman and an additional one-fourth cited more sexual pleasure for the man. Among men, however, 48 percent cited more sexual pleasure for the man, and an additional 34 percent cited increased sexual pleasure for the woman. Religion is the reason least frequently cited by both women and men for not supporting female circumcision, suggesting that female circumcision is not perceived as a religious practice. It has been observed that female circumcision is a cultural rather than a religious practice (Toubia, 1995; Caldwell et al., 2000).

Table 13.7 Reasons for not supporting female circumcision

Among women and men who say they think female circumcision should be discontinued, percentage who cite specific reasons, according to urban-rural residence, Nigeria 2003

Reason	Women			Men		
	Residence			Residence		
	Urban	Rural	Total	Urban	Rural	Total
<b>Reason for not supporting female circumcision</b>						
Fewer medical problems	33.0	34.2	33.7	25.8	35.6	31.8
Avoiding pain	18.8	21.7	20.5	27.2	22.3	24.2
More sexual pleasure for her	38.9	32.5	35.3	41.9	28.8	33.9
More sexual pleasure for the man	25.1	24.0	24.5	53.0	45.0	48.1
Follows religion	2.3	3.1	2.8	3.6	5.1	4.5
Number	1,168	1,525	2,693	350	554	904