Circumcised women uncritical of the ritual

Researcher Jon-Håkon Schultz talks in this video about how the study was conducted and some of its results. (Video: Dovepress)

Two different strategies to prepare girls for circumcision have been observed. One gives the girls some preliminary information and the other shrouds the ritual in secrecy.

The two approaches affect the girls disparately, but neither strategy offers sufficient awareness or leads to critical reflection.

These approaches were analysed by researchers at the Norwegian Centre for Violence and Traumatic Stress Studies (NKVTS).

Eighteen women participated. Most had Somali or Gambian backgrounds. In lengthy interviews they were asked about their experiences with the circumcision ritual.

Jon-Håkon Schultz and Inger-Lise Lien, who conducted the study, recommend that programmes aiming at preventing such genital mutilation should provide education promoting critical reflection about the tradition.

Traditions and prejudices

Head of communications at NKVTS, Geir Borgen, says it’s a paradox that women who have undergone circumcision, and who have moved to a Western country and gained new insights, still want to circumcise their daughters.

A considerable mental leap is needed to change positions rooted in one’s own traditions.

“It’s hard to change a centuries-old tradition,” says Borgen.

“This tradition has deep roots in culture and is for some people an imperative. Quite a lot of prejudices are involved in the circumcision ritual? that women become pregnant more easily when they are circumcised, and that the clitoris can grow huge if they have not been circumcised.”

Somali born Safia Abdi is a nurse who has participated in the Norwegian Government’s Action Plan for Combating Female Genital Mutilation (FGM).

She says women maintain the tradition primarily to pass on their identity to the next generation.

“They don’t know why it’s done and many think this is the way things should be. Just like Norwegians don’t circumcise their children because it isn’t the tradition in Norway.”

“Norwegians used to have chastity belts but that ended as more knowledge was acquired,” says Abdi.
“There are really no arguments for female genital mutilation. No religion decrees that girls must be circumcised or subjected to forced marriage. Interpretations are involved. It hinges on ignorance.”

“Many do it with an eye to the future. They do it because they want to marry off their daughters and it’s in the best interests of their children,” says Abdi.

**Social pressure**

She thinks it’s not just a question of women changing their outlook regarding the tradition. Society as a whole must transform its position.

“When a woman is circumcised in order to be wed, society around her is making demands. The woman’s future husband wants control of what she has done prior to marriage, whether she is a ‘good girl’,,” explains Abdi.

“The ritual can also be carried out at puberty to mark the onset of adulthood. In Norway the division between childhood and adulthood has been marked by confirmation. In other countries this is marked with a knife,” says Abdi.

**High-level initiative**

Female circumcision has been illegal in Norway since 1995 after the problem was discovered among immigrants.

According to the NKVTS, preventive measures here are primarily targeted at keeping mutilation from being performed, and secondarily at limiting the damage if it has occurred.

Measures such as information, work at changing attitudes and criminalization by law involve the public health services, schools, kindergartens, the child care services and the police.

“Norway is one of the countries that fight violence against women on a very high level,” says Abdi.

“That said, we who work among the people experience a lack of continuity. Gaps in the efforts occur every time a new government is elected. New people are placed in key positions and often their approaches and way of thinking can differ.”

Abdi thinks, however, that preventive efforts are effective.

“Norway needs stronger countermeasures. But I would give kudos for the changes that have been made now. We need to be optimistic on behalf of new generations.”

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