

# PERCEPTIONS AND ACCEPTABILITY OF MALE CIRCUMCISION (MC) IN SOUTH AFRICA: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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## INTRODUCTION

- Male circumcision is a cultural practice which varies across cultures. It is world widely practiced but predominant in Africa where it is has been viewed as a rite of passage to manhood.
- Though the act differs across cultures, it is essentially the removal of the foreskin.
- It is a common surgical procedure undertaken for religious, cultural, social or medical reasons.
- Some studies in Southern Africa has shown male circumcision as having a partial protective effect on HIV.
- There is a need to further explore acceptability and perceptions of MC, especially among communities of mixed cultural backgrounds where some people are and some are not circumcised.

## AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The **aim** of this study was to determine the perceptions and acceptability of male circumcision in different cultural groups in South Africa.

### Objectives:

- Describe acceptability of MC among adult South Africans
- Describe perceptions about male circumcision among South Africans
- Describe the barriers to MC in South Africa

## METHODOLOGY

- This study was of a qualitative design
- It was part of the national qualitative study that explored "the social values and norms driving the HIV/AIDS epidemic in South Africa".
- Data were collected nationally from 52 focus group discussions (FGDs) held with youth and adults (same sex and heterosexual).

## DATA COLLECTION

- Of the 11 FGDs, 2 consisted of both males and females (Gauteng and Limpopo province), and 9 consisted either of male or females.
- Each FGD consisted of about 8-12 participants chosen from various communities and institutional settings with the assistance of gate-keepers, depending on the province, region, location, and the target population.
- Approximately 88 participants were involved in the study.
- Discussions were held in a language that was commonly used in that particular area
- Focus group guide was used during the group interview

## CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTICIPANTS IN FGDS

Province	Area	Participants	Ethnic group	Age range
Gauteng	Soweto	Female and male teenagers	Sotho, Venda	16-20 years
Limpopo	Sekhukhuni	Adult men and women	North-Sotho	25yrs and older
North-West	Brits	Adult women	Tswana	25 years and older
Free State	Botshabelo	Adult men	Sotho	25 yrs and older
Western Cape	Khayelitsha	Adult women	Coloureds, Xhosa	25 years and older
Kwa-Zulu Natal	Umlazi & Ashdown	Adult women	Zulu	25 years and older
Northern Cape	Galeshewe and Upinton	Female teenagers and adult men	Tswana, Coloureds, Xhosa	16-20 years and 25 years and older
Eastern Cape	Mthatha and Bisho	Young men and male teenagers	Xhosa	16-30 years and 16-20 years

## DATA ANALYSIS

- Data were analysed using thematic coding - open, axial and selective coding.
- During open coding, all the data were categorized and broken down into pieces and within each category subcategories emerged.
- Axial coding brought together related categories into themes.
- Finally, researchers examined the themes and determined if and how they relate to one another

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Acceptability of MC among different cultural groups

Most participants saw traditional MC as part of their culture. MC is a common practice and also an important cultural practice among the Xhosas, Pedis and Tsongas. Some participants said:

"We accept it as it is our culture." rural adult woman in Limpopo  
 "Circumcision is a custom and it shall remain as that" Xhosa woman in the Western Cape (WC)

Connolly, (2008) said there were strong associations between circumcision and language spoken at home, with respondents who spoke IsiNdebele, IsiXhosa, Sepedi and Tshivenda and Xitsonga all having higher rates of circumcision, followed by those who spoke English, Sesotho and other, while IsiZulu speakers had the fewest circumcised men.

## ACCEPTABILITY OF MALE CIRCUMCISION ...

- While some cultural groupings expressed acceptance of MC based on culture (mostly Pedi Women and Xhosa's in the EC), some cultural groups accepted circumcision regardless of whether it was done culturally or medically.
- But for most of participants (WC, Xhosa women, KZN, Zulu men, MC is more safer when done in the hospital. For example, as expressed by participants:  
*"It does not matter, if one chooses to be circumcised in a traditional way it does not matter as long as he do HIV tests first. Nowadays young men are not circumcised without doing HIV test first, so it does not matter whether he gets circumcised in a hospital or traditionally"* WC, Xhosa, women  
*"I also agree that there is no differences as to where one get circumcised, as long as the goal of getting him circumcised is reached"* WC, Xhosa, women

## PERCEPTIONS ABOUT HOSPITAL VERSUS TRADITIONAL CIRCUMCISION

- Among almost all ethnic groups, more preference was on traditional than hospital circumcision. A concern was more on culture than any other issue which has to do with complications, hygiene and safety
- Traditional circumcision was preferred **more among the Pedi's and Xhosa's** than other ethnic groups.
- Among the Pedi's, traditional circumcision is considered "pride of the nation".
- It is not only about the removal of the foreskin, it is a place where one learns values on how to conduct himself in a community and also an initiation into manhood.
- As expressed by the participants,  
*"I would never allow my partner to be circumcised in the hospital because I will be embarrassed when other men refuses him to join them in activities that are done by men only, just because he was circumcised in hospital. I will also be laughed at by my peers to have a partner who is circumcised in hospital..."* Xhosa woman in the WC  
*"...I favor traditional circumcision because they teach them ubuntu and how to behave."* Adult North Sotho female, Limpopo

## PERCEPTIONS ABOUT SAFETY OF MC

Most participants were worried about the safety of traditional circumcision.

*"I was circumcised in the mountain and let me tell you, it is a hell on earth. It is painful and it is cold there. And nobody cares when you are there. People say you are growing up so you must be strong"* (Adult male, South Sotho in Free State)  
*"People also die in the process..."* (Adult female, Zulu in Kwa-Zulu Natal)  
*"What is bad is when people do not make it up there in the bush, they die in the process,"* (Adult female, Xhosa, Western Cape)  
*"When my partner went for circumcision, I would worry about the use of the instrument which was used on everybody,"* (Adult female, Xhosa in Western Cape)

## BARRIERS TO MALE CIRCUMCISION

- Ancestors' permission, young age, and unfavorable weather conditions, religion and high costs were mentioned as the main barriers against circumcision. Adult Zulu females felt that peoples' religious affiliations play a role in preventing them from being circumcised.
- According to adult North Sotho males in Limpopo, permission from the ancestors to perform circumcision is necessary as this shows acknowledgement of their culture and ancestors.  
*"In our culture we talk to the ancestors first to ask for permission. I recall very clearly one time circumcision was postponed due to unsatisfactory factors laid before us."* Rural adult North Sotho male, Limpopo  
*"If kids are much younger than the satisfying age it will be postponed."* Adult North Sotho male, Limpopo

## CONCLUSION

- This study indicated some general acceptance of male circumcision. This was regardless of whether MC was performed traditionally or in hospital.
- For those who preferred traditional MC, concerns were about loosing culture whereas for those whereby culture is not of much significance, the concern was about safety and hygiene.
- Most of the women accepted that their men be circumcised provided safety is guaranteed and also when it is cost effective.