



## Public Health Paper

**Title of Paper:** A Reflexivity on Ethical Conundrum of Female Genital Mutilation/Circumcision (FGM-C) Research.

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## **Abstract**

This reflexive paper explores the ethical conundrums, methodological complexities, and researcher positionality encountered during a doctoral study on Female Genital Mutilation/Circumcision (FGM-C) among Nigerian communities in London. Drawing on a mixed-methods approach, the research critically assessed the influence of religion and culture on FGM-C perceptions and practices. Reflexivity was employed throughout the study to interrogate the researcher's dual positionality as an insider (shared ethnicity) and outsider (male researcher studying a feminist issue), with emphasis on power dynamics, gender sensitivities, and ethical obligations.

Ethical approval for the study involved prolonged negotiations, split applications for quantitative and qualitative phases, and careful documentation to meet institutional requirements. Fieldwork access was secured through collaboration with three Nigerian community-based organizations in London, with support from a trained female volunteer to address gendered interactions in data collection.

Key findings include unanticipated dynamics in focus group discussions and quantitative data analysis, insights into participant resilience, and the researcher's evolving understanding of ethical integrity, emotional resilience, and methodological rigour. The paper contributes to the growing body of literature on ethical praxis in sensitive public health research and underscores the importance of reflexivity, insider/outsider awareness, and trauma-informed methodologies. Implications for research, policy, and practice in diasporic health contexts are discussed.

**Keywords:** FGM-C, Reflexivity, Insider/Outsider Positionality, Ethical Challenges, Feminist Health Research, Nigerian Diaspora.

### **1.0. 0. Introduction**

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), referred to in some communities as Female Circumcision (FC) or 'FGM-C' used throughout the study, remains a critical global social and public health concern. A London-based NGO promoting the rights of Nigerian women and girls in the UK estimates 20 million girls and women of Nigerian heritage have experienced FGM-C at some stage in their lives, constituting 10% of the global total (28Too Many, 2020). Reports from UNICEF (2013d, 2016, 2020a, 2020b) and the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2021) affirm persistence of FGM-C in Nigeria, with a national prevalence rate of 19%, impacting around 40 million individuals in a nation with a population exceeding 200 million (Varrella, 2020). Worldwide, more than 100 million women and girls are impacted by FGM-C, with millions more enduring the procedure each year (Llamas, 2017; UNICEF, 2013d; WHO, 2021).

This reflexive study chronicles the researcher's professional doctorate in public health (DrPH) path at the University of Hertfordshire, UK, focusing on ethical issues, positionality, and methodological considerations encountered whilst investigating the perspectives of Nigerians residing in London on the subject, FGM-C. This current work provides essential insights into ethical considerations of undertaking sensitive feminist-oriented research within the context of diasporic public health, as part of a broader mixed-methods study and the researcher's positionality during the study.

### **1.0.1. Reflexive Positioning in Feminist Public Health Inquiry**

A researcher's reflexivity entails a conscious and continuous self-assessment of how one's background, identity, and assumptions affect the research process (Berger, 2015; Finlay, 2002). Considering the gendered and cultural concerns around FGM-C, reflexivity was essential in this study. As a male Nigerian researcher examining a subject primarily impacting women and girls, I consistently navigated my dual positionality as both an insider (ethnic and cultural) and outsider (gendered perspective), in accordance with the literature advocating for transparency and accountability in feminist and qualitative research (Hesse-Biber, 2012; Harding, 1987). The researcher's background shaped the research design, participants' selection/interactions, data collections and interpretation of data; all presented ethical challenges during the study. The challenges were insightful and a transformative experience for the researcher, both academically, professionally and personally.

### **1.0.2. Insights from the Ethical Process**

Researchers employing mixed method research (MMR) designs as some researchers advise, should prepare for iterative approval processes and distinct evaluations for each phase (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011a; National Institutes of Health, 2018). Phased timeline approach was used in the study to elucidate the complementarity of research methods, thereby improving communication and understanding with the ethics committee. Collaboration with ethics committee members and research supervisors was crucial for addressing the challenges of the ethics approval process of the study.

The ethical dilemmas encountered aligned with overarching concerns in sensitive research domains (Nnamuchi, 2012; Yeğın et al., 2021). It highlights the essential importance of

safeguarding participants, including the researcher, and upholding ethical accountability in reproductive/sexual health research (American Medical Association, 2018; WHO, 2018). Consequently, the investigator was prepared for the most possible ethical challenges (physical, social and emotional) during fieldwork for data collection.

### **1.0.3. Challenges in Ethics Application and Approval**

The integration of quantitative and qualitative research methods in the study underscored the complexities associated with ethical approval, particularly concerning vulnerable populations. Therefore, the ethical application was divided into two parts—quantitative and qualitative—following the recommendations of the University of Hertfordshire’s (UH) ethics committee to address the unique ethical considerations associated with each methodology. The initial quantitative data collection clearance was obtained within four months (Protocol number: HSK/PGR/UH/05163), (*see Appendix 1.1*). However, the qualitative data collection approval required over a year (Protocol number: HSK/PGR/UH/05298), and subsequent extension respectively. Principal ethical issues focused on participants’ fragility, informed consent, trauma sensitivity, and gendered relations between the researcher and participants. Ethical experience provided the researcher with valuable insights into the research phenomenon, FGM-C, and corresponds with the broader literature regarding procedural challenges of ethical governance in sensitive research issue (Suri, 2019; WHO, 2018). The insights gained from the experiences provided some unexpected outcomes (see sections 3.0.2-4.0.2) that could guide other Nigerian and African researchers embarking on similar reproductive and sexual health studies, emphasizing necessity of ethical diligence and preparedness in promoting impactful, socially and relevant research.

### **2.0.1. Ethical Review and Challenges**

As the literature suggests, FGM-C researchers must dedicate sufficient time to the ethical review process, since ethical considerations are essential for protecting both participants and researchers (Pesambili, 2024; World Health Organisation, 2022). Conducting an ethical assessment for sensitive research according to Kara (2019) necessitates careful preparation and comprehensive documentation, which for the current FGM-C study, surpassed 12,000 pages, with several supplementary materials necessary to address/mitigate legal, cultural, health and safety, and emotional risk issues. Mitigation of some anticipated ethical challenges includes the following:

- **Gender-Sensitive Collaboration:** A trained female volunteer was crucial for conducting FGDs and interviews with young female adult participants; guaranteeing according to Liamputtong (2010) and Pesambili (2024), cultural appropriateness and emotional safety of participants. The application was refined through regular meetings and conversations with stakeholders to ensure ethical compliance. This collaborative approach with all stakeholders, Pesambili (2024) posits further, streamlined clearance and encouraged open communication, essential for resolving concerns in the current FGM-C study.
- **Ethical Rigour through Reflexivity:** The maintenance of a reflective journal and participation in continuous ethical dialogues with supervisors augmented both methodological and moral rigour (Ortlipp, 2008). The researcher remained committed to maintaining ethical rigour throughout the study, even when faced with prolonged ethical approval processes or unexpected challenges before, during and after fieldwork access to data collections.

### **2.0.2. Access to Field Research and Community Involvement**

Obtaining access to fieldwork organisations was an essential phase in the study process. Three Nigerian organisations in London: two religious (God's Kingdom Society (GKS), Muslim Association of Nigeria UK) and one traditional organisation (Eku Progress Union UK & Ireland) were used to access participants during fieldwork. These enabled access to a culturally diverse participant pool of Nigerians for the current FGM-C study in London diaspora. This community-engaged methodology facilitated context-sensitive fieldwork and expression of intergenerational, religious, and cultural viewpoints on FGM-C. As a member of the Nigerian community in London, the researcher assumed both insider and outsider roles throughout data collection process during fieldwork of the study.

### **2.0.3. Dynamics of Insider/Outsider Relations and Positionality**

Managing insider/outsider status necessitated a balance between rapport and crucial distance/boundaries (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Mercer, 2007). Although the researcher's cultural familiarity with London diasporic Nigerians enabled access, it also posed risks of bias and excessive familiarity. The potential bias was mitigated by employing standardised protocols, external peer debriefing, and triangulation. Challenges from the researcher's outsider-gender status, specifically in interactions with young female participants (Chavez, 2008; Tewolde, 2023), required recruitment of a volunteer female colleague, to facilitate specific FGDs and interviews topics. The insider/outsider dichotomy, the literature suggests, is a fundamental notion in qualitative research, presenting both benefits and obstacles (Ademolu, 2024; Locot, 2022; Tewolde, 2023).

According to Asselin (2003), Chavez (2008), Dwyer and Buckle (2009), insiders may exhibit bias, thus undermining impartiality in data collection and interpretation. Dwyer and Buckle (2009) contend that "the researcher's own experiences and assumptions can affect the research process and data interpretation" (p. 58). The intersecting identities may either correspond with or diverge from those of the study participants, necessitating reflexivity to confront the related ethical and interpretive challenges (Berger, 2015; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Greene, 2014; Merriam et al., 2001). The dynamics of Insider/Outsider relations were further compounded by some essential factors encountered during fieldwork.

### **3.0.1. Essential Factors in the Insider-Outsider Role**

As a male researcher investigating a female-dominated issue, the insider/outsider dynamic necessitated careful navigation to comprehend the nuances of participant responses and the influence of gender on their willingness to engage with me. Reflexivity enabled the identification of vulnerabilities linked to this dual positionality, particularly in comprehending how my gender may have affected participants' willingness to engage, especially discussions on FGM-C. I utilised my rapport with the Nigerian community members in London, drawing on shared cultural attributes, language, and experiences to enhance participants' engagement and ensure accurate representation in the study. Nonetheless, some important factors considered in the current study as the literature suggests, include:

(i) Over-Familiarity: A significant risk for insider researchers is over-familiarity, which resulted in the researcher's assumptions of shared knowledge and oversight of subtleties in participants' experiences. For this reason, Chavez (2008) warns that "over-familiarity can cause the researcher to overlook cultural norms or practices, thereby missing essential nuances" (p. 478), and significant information or misinterpreting participants' explanations.



To address this, the researcher proactively solicited clarification from participants, consulted with colleagues and research supervisors for comment on the data analysis. The equilibrium of insider perspective and outsider analytical detachment, as Greene (2014) posits, guaranteed the rigour of the research while staying sensitive to the cultural environment.

(ii) Ethics and Role Conflicts: The dual capacity of being both a community member and a researcher presented ethical challenges concerning professional boundaries and obligations. Asselin (2003) notes that "insider researchers frequently face challenges in maintaining professional boundaries while conducting research in familiar settings" (p. 100). As a member of the Nigerian community in London, I developed trust with participants, which might have led to misunderstandings concerning confidentiality and informal communication. Maintaining professional boundaries was essential to ensure participants understood the research environment and the ethical responsibilities related to data collection (Merriam et al., 2001).

(iii) Challenges in Enquiring Probing enquiries: Insiders may encounter difficulties in posing probing enquiries due to apprehensions about compromising relationships or offending participants. Mercer (2007) posits that "the proximity of the insider can occasionally restrict the profundity of inquiry, as researchers may hesitate to investigate contentious subjects" (p. 3). Despite the sensitive nature of the research topic, FGM-C, I leveraged my insider status to cultivate trust, allowing older individuals to articulate their thoughts more freely. I effectively addressed these challenges by prioritising the participants' actual experiences over my own perceptions or expectations throughout the study process.

### **3.0.2. Challenges in Fieldwork and Unexpected Discoveries**

Focus group discussions and in-depth interviews revealed unforeseen perspectives during the research preparation phase. Unexpected occurrences, such as elderly women asserting authority in male-led focus group discussions, produced significant insights regarding gendered power in diasporic discourse. Moreover, despite the expectation of emotional distress, none of the participants, regardless of age, demonstrated observable vulnerability. This finding is consistent with existing research on resilience within Nigerian populations (UNICEF, 2021). Time constraints, participant dropouts, and the need for online adjustments highlighted according to Campbell (2017) and Bradbury-Jones (2007), the importance of methodological flexibility and emotional resilience in sensitive research contexts, as the current study's phenomenon of interest, FGM-C.

### **3.0.3. Restricted Influence of Education on Attitudes Regarding FGM-C**

Education is expected to significantly influence views on FGM-C, as evidenced by both quantitative and qualitative data analysis, with greater educational attainment typically associated with more critical attitudes towards FGM-C. However, the correlation between academic qualifications and attitudes towards FGM-C was weak and statistically insignificant, suggesting that education alone may be insufficient to alter perspectives on FGM-C. Qualitative data indicate that cultural norms, familial influence, and community pressures have a more significant impact, indicating individuals with higher education or knowledge may still maintain/holdfast unto their traditional beliefs influenced by cultural or religious factors.

#### **4.0.1. Cultural and Religious Rationales for FGM-C**

The anticipated influence of cultural and religious factors on the persistence of FGM-C was found to be minimal, as the relationship between prior experience and cultural-religious justifications did not align with initial predictions. Despite strong cultural and theological beliefs historically supporting FGM-C, findings indicate that such justifications may be declining, particularly among Nigerian parents in London.

#### **4.0.2. Emotional Impact and Participant Vulnerability**

Considering the sensitive nature of FGM-C, the researcher anticipated that participants could display emotional vulnerability or distress during the interviews and FGDs (Berger, 2015; Bradbury-Jones, 2007; Chen et al., 2021). Therefore, a support system to assist participants as needed was established to offer contact information of local organisations (NSPCC FGM Helpline: A 24-hour helpline to provide support to women and girls affected by FGM; FORWARD (Foundation for Women's Health, Research and Development, and Men Speak Out: aims to engage men in ending FGM-C and provide a platform for men to share their experiences and work towards preventing FGM-C). Despite these precautions, no participant displayed signs of emotional distress or vulnerability during the data collection process. This aligns with findings from UNICEF, which emphasise the resilience of Nigerian communities in confronting challenging issues (UNICEF, 2020; 2021). Previous studies involving Nigerian children and community members also did not reveal overt signs of emotional discomfort during comparable research interactions (UNICEF, 2020d; 2021). This indicates that, within certain cultural contexts, Nigerian participants may refrain from openly exhibiting vulnerability during qualitative research interactions, even when the subject matter is sensitive.

#### **4.0.3. Ethical Integrity and Participant Involvement**

Throughout the current study, a reflective journal was utilised, especially in data collection process to record the researcher's assumptions, thoughts, and observations for subsequent reflection after the interviews and FGDs. Ethical rigour included not only formal approval but also the provision of recorded interview copies to participants for their consent and feedback prior to and following transcription. The method of maintaining a reflective diary and gathering participant feedback on recorded interviews yielded significant advantages during the qualitative phase of the FGM-C research (Birt, 2016; Ortlipp, 2008). Furthermore, ethical integrity included sustained support through accessible resources for emotional care, as well as the ongoing assessment of participant well-being (APA, 2024).

#### **5.0.1. Conclusion and Implications**

This introspective examination considerably enhances the literature on ethical practices in feminist public health and diasporic research. Throughout the study, the researcher reflected on personal experiences and challenges encountered during the doctoral journey. I recognised that pursuing a doctoral degree is an academically rigorous and challenging endeavour in the UK, which I was prepared to undertake. The researcher's dual positionality, the amalgamation of ethical theory with experiential knowledge, and the partnership with community organisations and a trained volunteer collectively established a framework for ethical, and culturally attuned investigation into the difficult topic of FGM-C. The methodological rigour of the study, characterised by triangulation, participant validation, and collaborative data collection, guarantees that conclusions are reliable and meaningful. The results have ramifications for policy, community involvement, and the enhancement of ethical standards in international health research.

Finally, the collaborative aspect of the research, particularly the role of a female volunteer in facilitating data collection with young female adults, my research supervisors, UH Research and Development Programme (RDP) staff members and the Nigerian community leaders contributed to the achievement of the research aims and objectives. This collaboration helped address gendered dynamics and contributed to a more nuanced understanding of the meanings articulated by participants. Therefore, future researchers must be cognisant of their identity dynamics, implement transparent and trauma-informed research methodologies, and embrace a reflexive, iterative process for ethical review and fieldwork access.

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