I often feel defied by the reflection of my own body when I look in the mirror, because what I see in the mirror brings me to the realisation, whether I am conscious about it or not, that like most young African women I have little or no control over my own body and sexuality.

I still have vivid memories of my early teenage days when my sisters and I were constantly being told to pull our labia minora (inner vaginal lips). We were bombarded with multiple coercive reminders to pull our labia minora for reasons that were never clearly explained to us apart from: “Girls who do not stretch their labia minora never get married.” As if that were not enough, every now and then when my auntie was around, she would ‘inspect’ how far we had gone with pulling our labia minora, by making us lie down on our backs and conducting a physical inspection of our genitals. The problem was that each time I tried to manually tug on my labia minora, I found it very painful and I would immediately stop – leaving myself feeling ill-treated and confused.

I recall my auntie and some other female relatives explaining to me that the reason for stretching the labia minora is for sexual enhancement – but sexual enhancement that is primarily aimed at granting sexual satisfaction to the male partner. But it never excited me that my vagina had to be modified for the sexual gratification of a man. A man who I had not even met or seen yet, someone who I was not even sure I wanted to meet ever in my life. Eventually, because the practice made me feel uncomfortable, I stopped and promised myself that I would not put myself through that pain again.

But I had still been forced to experience what I consider forced bodily modification and bodily interference because my aunties made me conform to the social construct that suggested that I would not be attractive to men if my labia minora were not the ‘desirable’ length. It goes without saying that having been coerced into pulling my labia minora as a teen, I was denied my right to bodily integrity and the liberty to make my own choices about my body.

Ku-kuna imichino

The Zambian phrase ‘ku-kuna imichino’ translates as ‘pulling/stretching the labia minora’. It is a process during which a girl pulls her inner labia (labia minora) in order to make them longer. The lengthening of the labia minora is a common practice in many African cultures, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. Sporadic information can be found to confirm that several tribes and ethnic communities in Congo, Malawi, Mozambique, South Africa, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe practice labia minora stretching – a practice that is very common in Rwanda, Uganda Burundi, and Benin. 

Typically, Zambian young women are expected to get married and then they are expected to fulfil their husbands’ sexual desires – and the elongation of their labia minora is one of the ways to supposedly ensure sexual pleasure for their husbands, as prescribed by cultural norms and traditions that are often not questioned or challenged.
Supporters of labia minora elongation say that stretching the labia minora is different from female genital mutilation because the process of elongating the labia minora does not involve any cutting or wounding of a woman’s genitals whatsoever.

Pulling the labia minora is taught to many young girls in Zambia at puberty or even before puberty for the purpose of enhancing a man’s sexual pleasure and this is based on the belief that elongated labia minora increase sexual pleasure for both a man and woman during intercourse. This traditional practice is so deeply rooted in Zambian culture that it is not a question of whether a girl will begin stretching her labia minora, but when she will begin stretching. And most parents – including urban parents – ensure that their daughters are taught how to be ‘sexually appealing’ and are told to begin pulling their labia minora from as early as ten years old.

Usually, a girl’s auntie, grandmother or some other female relative, who has bought into this cultural expectation are regarded as defiant and insubordinate girls/women.

The social pressure that young women are put under to pull their labia minora is a valid basis for classifying the practice as an injustice – and a violation of a woman’s right to control their own bodies and sexualities. Indeed, I believe that this practice is done in the name of a culture that uses sex and violence to control women’s bodies in ways that force us to remain subordinate to men.

Pleasure or Pain?

Supporters of labia minora elongation say that stretching the labia minora is different from female genital mutilation because the process of elongating the labia minora does not involve any cutting or wounding of a woman’s genitals whatsoever. The practice is defended on the basis that it not only upholding ‘African’ culture, but is also ‘not harmful to women’ – and is done for the ‘positive’ purpose of increasing sexual pleasure for both men and women (unlike the more brutal forms of female genital mutilation, which severely reduce a woman’s chances of experiencing sexual pleasure).

I talked to several young women in Zambia to garner their personal views on labia minora elongation. Some said that the practice of elongating their labia minora was like an accessory to them, and confessed to believing that longer labia are likely to keep their male partners ‘faithful’ to them. Some confessed that having elongated labia minora gave them a feeling of self-satisfaction, self-worth and pride. And I know some young women who perceive their experiences of elongating their labia minora as a positive practice that offers increased sexual pleasure for them and their male partners. These women view the stretching of the labia as a way of beautifying their genitals to arouse and appease their male partners in the bedroom. They thus perceive labial elongation as a positive practice in their lives linked to sexual fulfilment.

This shows that while there are social pressures to elongate one’s labia minora, a lot of women regard the process of stretching their labia as a positive force in their lives, not for their own sexual pleasure but for the pleasure of their male partners and for the purpose of cultural identity. Even though this ‘positive’ feeling is associated with the burden of ‘keeping’ their male partners faithful to their marriage. When asked about the pain involved during the process of tugging and pulling the labia minora, some replied that the pain was worth it – illustrating how powerful the social and cultural pressures are around labia stretching. Indeed, many women see it as a cultural practice that increases social integration and maintains social cohesion.

On the other hand, opponents of labia minora elongation emphasise that the practice is detrimental to the health and wellbeing of women and describe it as a cultural form of abuse and violence against women and link it to the violation of women’s human rights. Indeed, the World Health Organisation (WHO) classifies the elongation of the labia minora as a form of female genital mutilation (FGM) – grouping it with the other FGM procedures, such as female circumcision, which pose serious health hazards.
So while supporters of labia minora elongation claim that it is a cultural practice that is aimed at increasing women’s sexual satisfaction, institutions like the WHO, health specialists, women’s rights activists, feminists and other groups condemn the practice, saying that – on the contrary – this practice lessens women’s sexual satisfaction. In particular, critics of the practice argue that stretching the labia minora reduces a woman’s sensitivity during sexual acts, stressing that ‘the more the labia minora is pulled the more the clitoris is shrunk and the clitoris eventually ends up receding inside the vagina, therefore reducing women’s chances of reaching sexual climax’ (Fekit, 1996, pages 112-113).

And although it has been stated that longer labia minora offer sexual pleasure for both the men and women, my conversations with some Zambian women about this practice have indicated that women are probably elongating their labia to appease their men in the bedroom and not for their own sexual pleasure. So is this practice really aimed at increasing the sexual pleasure of both women and men? It seems that it is more about the sexual satisfaction – and gratification – of men. That is the bottom line! And as young African women, we pay the price for this not only through the pain and irreversible bodily modifications, but also through losing control of our sexualities. This is a reflection of how sex can really be about men’s sexual pleasure and women are just there to facilitate their pleasure.

**Culture vs. bodily autonomy**

Any discourse on the cultural practice of pulling the labia minora should not ignore or omit the issue of consensual versus non-consensual engagement in this practice. As has already been alluded to, girls are usually introduced to this practice by female relatives and are not given options or asked to consent to the modifications that they are being taught to make to their bodies. Therefore, in my opinion, it is fair to say that this practice is a violation of women’s right to bodily autonomy.

If the practice of labia minora elongation was done with the full consent and agreement of young women and girls, then it may be more feasible to disassociate this cultural practice from the violation of women’s bodies and rights since women would be consenting to the practice and they would be pulling their labia minora because they want to. If this were the case, I would consider classifying labia minora elongation as a valid customary practice. However, the reality is that, like other forms of FGM practiced in other parts of Africa, young women and girls are given very little room for choice around this issue due to the powerful influences of culture and tradition.

It is also important to take cognisance of the fact that – because of our lack of choice and the powerful influence of tradition and culture – many girls in Zambia accept the practice of labia minora elongation as a necessary, and even natural, part of their lives and have adopted the rationales given for the existence of this practice. Another problematic cultural practice that has been normalised is the use of herbs to make the vagina ‘dry’, which is a practice that is based on the belief that men enjoy dry sex. It is also important to make mention that these cultural practices, which require women to make modifications to their genitals to please their male partners during sex, increase women’s chances of contracting HIV and expose them to other diseases too.

Considerable societal pressure is brought to bear on a girl who refuses to conform to the tradition of labia elongation. As has been alluded to earlier, those that do not conform to patriarchal authority and its control of female sexuality, which are the norm in communities where a woman’s lineage is traced through her father, are considered seditions and insubordinate. Among the population of young women who are educated, living in urban settings and less dependent on their male partners, some have been brave enough to resist these harmful cultural practices. They have become more and more aware of the politics that surround their bodies and the role these cultural practices play in denying them their bodily autonomy and integrity, as well as their self-worth and wellbeing.

This is when it begins to feel as though culture is an enemy of young women. Yet culture and tradition should not be the enemies of young women. Instead, they should involve a set of historical traditions, knowledge and values whose adaptation should remain relevant in contemporary society. I believe that within an African context, culture can offer us indispensable values such as communal support and universal respect, which make up the essence of ‘human rights’ as they are now globally framed. But in many cases, culture is used to entrench inequalities between men and women in ways that further subordinate women.

So can these negative aspects of culture be modified or eliminated to provide the foundation for progressive societal norms that will support the realisation of the rights of women?
Reclaiming women’s bodily autonomy

The practice of labia elongation should be construed as a means of policing the female body and should continue to be described as such as long as it continues to deny women the opportunity to make choices or exercise autonomy over their own bodies. Unfortunately, autonomy and choice are concepts that are often unavailable to women in societies that practice labia elongation and other forms of female genital mutilation. This is proven by the practice of labia elongation, which requires disfiguring of the female body for cultural reasons that are not very clear, in ways that deny women the opportunity to make autonomous choices about the shape or look of their vaginas.

It must also be mentioned that it is pointless to concentrate on whether the elongation of the labia is a ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ practice. Instead the dialogue around this controversial matter should set the stage for the creation of an effective and meaningful cross-cultural dialogue that can lead to the restoration of women’s bodily and sexual autonomy. This dialogue needs to acknowledge and address patriarchal control over women’s bodies and women’s sexualities, which are context specific, culturally defined and often reinscribed by women. Indeed, the restoration of women’s bodily autonomy and integrity calls for a long term ideological struggle against cultural practices that stimulate patriarchal domination and violate young women’s bodies and sexualities.

My observation is that mainstream initiatives or efforts against female genital mutilation – and other cultural forms of violation against women’s bodies – in sub-Saharan Africa are apolitical and do not factor in the oppression of women in more holistic terms but focus on addressing the acts of violence associated with individual practices. And although some of these efforts have dared to focus on issues of class and gender in their analysis of female genital mutilation, there has not been much attention paid to patriarchal sexual control, which is deeply rooted and clearly at play within these harmful cultural practices.

Feminist analyses of female genital mutilation and female genital modification stem from a starting point of patriarchy coupled with an understanding of the function of sex, sexuality and culture in upholding an unequal and oppressive society. This approach provides a useful framework for the analysis of female genital mutilation in sub-Saharan Africa since it focuses on the lived realities of African women and the structures that shape their lives. Of particular interest is the subjugated knowledge of marginalised women and the structures that are in place to contribute to the oppression of women in ways that deny women their bodily autonomy and the ability to control their sexualities.

Self-awareness of the body politics at play in African women’s lives is significant. Continued feminist discourses on the female body are necessary in order to provide greater insights into women’s rights to pleasure.

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