

Transformation in action: Tales from Phase II



Reflections on Phase II of the UNFPA-UNICEF
Joint Programme on Female Genital Mutilation



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UNFPA-UNICEF Joint Programme on Female Genital Mutilation

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Five-year-old Muteyan lives in Kenya's Narok county, where advocacy against FGM is bearing fruit and helping to protect girls like her.

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Cover:

Anissa, 15 years old, Syria.

© Luca Zordan, UNFPA



Build on positive cultural values

A new social norm will meet with less resistance and be more sustainable when it builds on positive intrinsic cultural values. That idea forms the basis of interventions across the 17 UNFPA-UNICEF Joint Programme on Female Genital Mutilation countries.

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Young girl and women in Kayes region of Mali.

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A wide-eyed, pony-tailed toddler looks straight towards the camera as she earnestly sings a simple and catchy tune on YouTube:

Papa, I trust you
Mama, I trust you.
You will never mutilate,
You will always educate.
You will never cut me,
you will never hurt me.
E-eh, Papa I love you,
e-eh I love you.
Mama I love you,
e-eh I love you.

When the young parents and 10-year-old sister chime in on the chorus, *E-eh, I love you, I will always love you, Oh my baby oh*, it's hard to imagine anyone being unmoved. (It's also hard to get the tune out of mind.)

The song triggers the fierce love and protectiveness parents in all cultures feel for their children.

The widely seen track (more than 11,000 YouTube views) triggers perhaps the most primal of human emotions: the fierce love and protectiveness parents across all cultures feel for their children. It also suggests the utter

betrayal that a young girl must feel upon being subjected to agonizing pain by those she so deeply trusts. The video is one of many produced by a Nigerian youth-led social media platform, **#endcuttinggirls**.

A number of Joint Programme-supported interventions tackle FGM by building on strong or unique positive cultural values shared by a community. This is the case in another video produced by **#endcuttinggirls**.

"Mothers, I beg you in the name of God, stop cutting your girls as I have stopped cutting mine," exhorts Madam Obelawo, an anti-FGM activist. She points to Nigeria's distinctive sculptures, drumming, dancing, and colourful paintings and fabrics as traditions to promote. "FGM is not a good tradition. Let us abandon it, and all will be well with us," she said.

Preserving a ritual, while leaving girls intact

Around the world, rites of passage are important rituals that cement affiliation with one's community. Among the Maasai and some other communities in Kenya, graduation into adulthood has been traditionally marked by a period of seclusion, an initiation into adult ways (including information about sexual relations), and a ceremonial reincorporation into the larger society. In some cases, cutting of hair serves as a symbolic break from the past. But in others, it is the genitals that are cut, often down to the pubic bone.



Cultural Day at a secondary technical school for girls in Umuaka, Imo State.
© UNICEF, Nigeria

Among the Maasai, these cultural rites are deep expressions of culture, and their erosion deeply unsettling, as suggested by this Maasai adage: “It takes one day to destroy a house; to build a new house will take months and perhaps years. If we abandon our way of life to construct a new one, it will take thousands of years.”

Rather than asking these groups to abandon an important cultural tradition, the Joint Programme aims to preserve positive values associated with the ritual, without subjecting girls to FGM. Alternative rites of passage replicate the traditional ritual in many ways – offering a liminal space away from family, inculcation into Maasai culture and values, lessons on sexuality and a closing ceremony witnessed by other members of the community. But they also include an emphasis on education, delaying marriage and human rights.

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Using sports as a catalyst for mobilization

Uganda has been a leader in tapping the enthusiasm of young people for sports to mobilize against FGM. Popular football and netball competitions, for instance, have taken place under banners such as Kick FGM out of Sebei. Events conducted at the matches have led to action plans and commitments by participants and community members to accelerate abandonment.

The globally acclaimed prowess of the East African runner is a particular source of pride, one leveraged by the Run to End FGM marathons, organized under the auspices of the Church of Uganda. Since 2015, the races have drawn increasing numbers of runners and participants, while sensitizing communities on FGM abandonment and linking abandonment with the positive cultural forces of church and sport.

The prowess of East African runners is a source of pride that is leveraged by the Run to End FGM marathons.

Led by the Archbishop of the Church of Uganda, Stanley Nitagali, the race has attracted over 15,000 spectators and 1,200 runners, including famous national and regional athletes from Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda. Growing awareness has encouraged other religious leaders, such as Sheik Mubaje, the Mufti of Uganda and current chairperson of the Inter Religious Council of Uganda, to commit to working towards total abandonment of FGM, including by spreading the message that it is not condoned by religion.

The race also has an important cross-border impact as the Sabiny who live in Uganda have a close relationship with their counterparts or relatives in Kenya.



A Run to End FGM marathon.
© UNFPA, Uganda





Sebei girl.

© UNFPA, Uganda



**“Mothers,
I beg you
in the name of God,
stop cutting
your girls as
I have stopped
cutting mine.”**

**Madam Obelawo,
anti-FGM activist**



Members of the Pokot community entertaining through song and dance at the First Zero Tolerance Day.

© UNFPA, Uganda

Community declarations reinforce positive values

Public declarations of abandonment can be powerful in transforming shame and uncertainty into pride and clarity. When well-timed and organized, they can feel positive: celebratory and ennobling. And the results are more likely to last over time. In Uganda, several communities see the process as an opportunity to enhance their profile; they have requested Joint Programme support for organizing community declarations.

Dealing with the emotional and collective nature of the process requires sensitivity.

Günther Lanier explained in his August 2015 report on social norms change: “Close attention needs to be paid to people’s beliefs and values. It will be especially important to stress how fundamental values – an ethical and honourable way of life, aiming for fit and healthy adults and their offspring, striving for an improved material future – remain untouched. It should become clear that, in comparison with the old tradition, the norm change provides the community with a better way of loving their girls and women and ensuring all their families’ prosperity.” (International Consultant’s Final Report Overview, FGM/C Rating Social Norms).

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Amplify the voices of girls and young women

In Phase II, the voices of courageous young women bravely speaking out against FGM have been effectively amplified in global, regional and local campaigns.

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Haneen, 14 years old, Egypt.

© Luca Zordan, UNFPA

From Kenya to Egypt, and from Burkina Faso to Ethiopia, young women and girls are claiming their power and their rights. They are standing up, sometimes to their communities, sometimes to their own parents and grandparents, refusing to be cut and exhorting others to do the same. Those already subjected to the cut, often when they were too young to protest, are finding the strength to share intimate experiences related to FGM, and to protect their younger sisters and daughters.

By the end of Phase II, these girls in every programme country had the law on their side. Most had learned about and were willing to claim their human rights. They could also talk credibly about the health problems associated with FGM, and knew health providers who could back them up. Some had community declarations of abandonment to point to. Many were provided with counselling to help them work through conflicts with their family related to their stance. Some were bolstered by positive news articles that heralded them as champions and models for a new generation. Ten-year-old Latty (see below) has become a social media star.

The authenticity of their personal experiences, their youthful innocence, and the power of the human rights principles they espouse combine to make these girls especially compelling advocates against FGM. To peers in their own communities and countries, they show that resistance to FGM is possible, even laudatory. To a wider global audience, reached through social media and other avenues, their stories provide give the issue a human face, complete with consequences and emotional force.

Using the media to amplify the message

By the end of Phase II, all Joint Programme countries had projects in place to train or engage journalists and social media practitioners. The results have been impressive: Not so long ago, FGM was a topic that was rarely discussed in mainstream media.

One of the most fertile campaigns to amplify voices of opposition to FGM has been the partnership with *The Guardian*, which began in February 2014. For three years, this major newspaper, from its base in the United Kingdom, has been building a global media network to campaign for ending FGM. It reaches African and global audiences through journalism, popular melodrama, radio, social media and animation. In its first year, the campaign amplified the grass-roots work of campaigners against FGM in the The Gambia, Kenya, the United Kingdom and the United States. It has since expanded to include Nigeria and Somalia, two of the countries with the most girls at risk.

The Guardian initiative includes trainings, workshops and internships for young media professionals to build their skills in covering FGM. An annual contest selects finalists in radio, television and print, with the overall winner having the chance to work at *The Guardian*'s London office for a month. In 2017, 11 print, radio and television journalists received Burkina Faso's newly established "Mariam Lamizana Prize for the Promotion of the Abandonment of FGM".

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Tabitha Marwa, 15 years old, Kenya.

© Luca Zordan, UNFPA



The award was established in honour of Mariam Lamizana, the first chairperson of the Permanent Secretariat of the National Council against the Practice of FGM and a leading activist for the elimination of harmful practices. Training was provided to several media outlets to encourage better coverage of the multiple consequences of the practice as well as communities' efforts to abandon FGM, and protect girls' and women's rights.

The Joint Programme has attracted the talents of internationally known photographers, such as Luca Zordan. He is contributing energy and skills to an ongoing project spotlighting champions of positive change in several Joint Programme countries, including many of the portraits featured in this report.

Defying FGM

Fourteen-year-old Latifatou (Latty) Compaoré learned the spirit of resistance from her mother, who had been subjected to FGM as a child in Burkina Faso. "She told me that one of the girls who had been cut on the same day had died following a haemorrhage that no one had taken care of," Latty explained.

Latty was 10 years old when she heard the shocking account from her mother. "I cannot understand that children can be made to suffer in such a way, that they can be mutilated under conditions with poor or no hygiene," she said.

"When she became a mom, my mother made the commitment that if she had girls, she would never cut them. And she kept her word."

Brave women and girls like Latty and her mother who take a stand against FGM sometimes risk stigma by their families and communities. But they persist.

"When she became a mom, my mother made the commitment that if she had girls, she would never cut them. And she kept her word."

Latty herself decided to become an advocate for ending the practice. A talented singer, she recorded a song called "Excision," which garnered attention and air time on national television and radio stations. It is popular on Spotify, YouTube and Latty's Facebook

page, having been played hundreds of thousands of times.

Latty has also faced backlash, however.

"There are some who congratulate me and encourage me to go forward, but there are others who bother me a lot," she said. "I also receive messages that ask me to stop, to mind my own business."

The opposition does not stop her.

"It is a cause that I will defend throughout my life."

Latty is one of thousands of courageous girls around the world calling for the elimination of FGM.

In Kenya, 17-year-old Sharleen Cherop also said no to the practice. She has managed to escape both FGM and child marriage – which are linked in some places.

"My family wanted me to be cut and get married, but I refused," Sharleen said. She ran away from home and found support and safety at a nearby school. She is now an advocate for children's rights.



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Brenda is one of the new girls at the House of Hope rescue centre in Kenya.

© UNFPA, Kenya

In Egypt, FGM remains widespread, in spite of ongoing efforts to raise awareness of its harm. Fatmah's mother heard some of these messages from a local NGO and taught them to Fatmah. Today, at 13 years old, Fatmah has rejected FGM and is a passionate advocate for its elimination.

"FGM is wrong and it has lots of harms," she said. "I convinced my sister not to cut her kids."

"FGM is wrong and it has lots of harms, I convinced my sister not to cut her kids."



And don't forget the boys and men

In many communities, men have traditionally left the issue of FGM to women. Since FGM is a sensitive and intimate subject, open discussion of it has been taboo in many places.

As studies in Somalia and Sudan have shown, women often do not know what the men in their community – even their husbands – actually think about the practice, and often overestimate support for it.

And yet, men's preferences, in terms of status, aesthetics and fidelity, are the ostensible reasons for the persistence of FGM.

Thus, the informed engagement of fathers, brothers, boyfriends, spouses, leaders and other men is a crucial component of social norm change, and essential to the Joint Programme's work in every country. In Guinea, for example, a widely disseminated poster shows a little girl in her father's arms with the headline: "I protect my daughter from FGM. And you?"

A successful digital Senegalese campaign builds on photographs of hundreds of individuals, celebrities, officials and leaders holding bold white and red banners and placards declaring: "#TouchePasAma-Soeur (Don't Touch My Sister)". In 2017 alone, the campaign reached nearly 5.8 million people on social networks. According to the 2016 national Demographic and Health Survey, 80 per cent of men in Senegal are now in favour of abandoning FGM.

Senegal is also reaching out to men through its "School of Husbands". Based on a concept piloted in Niger, this initiative encourages men's active participation in reproductive health. The men become volunteer guides and role models within their own families and in the broader community.

Many men are concerned that FGM may diminish

sexual response, an issue increasingly discussed in places where silence surrounding the practice has been broken.

Radwan Sayed Abdel Hamid, a father of four sons in the Assiut region of Egypt, explained he could no longer ignore FGM when he found how it affected his wife sexually. "I want to encourage women to abandon this practice as nothing in our religion says we need to do this. I will also tell my sons, once they are old enough, not to let it happen to their daughters. I want to end this practice in my community," he said.

He is aware that this is difficult, however, noting, "I've learned how to introduce the topic in a realistic way using my own personal experience, and not do it in a way that people will dismiss it as propaganda."

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Y-PEER students at Muslim College in Hargeisa, Somaliland.

© Georgina Goodwin, UNFPA



Change comes to Afar

Across the harsh Afar region of Ethiopia, infibulation, the most severe and debilitating form of FGM, has been almost universally practised from time immemorial. But change is coming from many directions.

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Sofia Hussen, 18 years old, Ethiopia.

© Luca Zordan, UNFPA

Change comes slowly in this vast region, where infrastructure is practically non-existent, and *dagu*, a person-to-person obligatory message relay, has served as major channel of communication for centuries. The severity of the FGM in the Afar matches the severity of life for the pastoralists who survive in this unforgiving region, one of the hottest inhabited places on earth. The ability of women to withstand the ordeal has been a source of fierce pride and tribal identification.

But change has come, through persistent, patient and holistic interventions. "It has been three years since the programme for abandonment of harmful practices (FGM and child marriage) began in the district," said Munewera Mohammed, head of the Afar Region Bureau of Women and Children's Affairs. "It was challenging to fight these practices, which were widespread in the *woreda* (district), since they were regarded as cultural practices and religious obligations. But, due to the huge and holistic programme, the practices are decreasing."

The programme, the first of its kind to formally tackle child marriage along with FGM in an integrated manner, was implemented in seven *kebeles* (villages)

in by the Afar Region Bureau of Women and Children Affairs. Three *kebeles* in the Afambo *woreda* publicly declared abandonment of both child marriage and FGM in August 2016.

In August 2016, three kebeles in the Afambo woreda publicly declared abandonment of both child marriage and FGM.

The programme is coordinated through a committee composed of representatives from the district administration, religious organizations, clans, school administration and

parent-teacher associations. Influential players at the community level that have been engaged in the effort include traditional birth attendants, excisers and health extension workers. There is also a close involvement of law enforcement bodies.

Moreover, community level structures have been put in place to teach the community about the consequences of child marriage and FGM when they see evidence of it. Community conversations involving all stakeholders and the community take place biweekly. Clubs for unmarried girls meet separately.

The programme has paid particular attention to core groups like religious figures, clan leaders, excisers and other community heads. Because they are respected, their opinions have changed the environment at the community and grass-roots levels.

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Children in Afar, Ethiopia.

© Christof Krackhardt



Mohammed Wager, clan leader

"As clan leaders, we were the ones that supported the practices of FGM and child marriage in our district. But, because of the education we have received, now we are encouraging and advocating our pastoralist societies to stop the practices. Today, our *woreda* has been declared free of these practices."

Gudela Edu, kebele head and member of community conversation group in Mille woreda

"In our locality the programme has been ongoing for four years and there are big achievements in the areas of FGM and child marriage. Due to the intensive interventions, communities are very aware on their effects. I actively engage in community conversation and share my experience to the remaining pastoralist communities at grass-roots level."

Asiya Ahmed, ex-circumciser and community conversation facilitator

"I engaged in cutting children for many years, believing that it was important way to maintain virginity, keep families' dignity and enter into adulthood. I received money or items for my services. However, I was selected to get training on facilitating community conversations for fellow excisors and other community members. I have come to understand that FGM and child marriage are harmful traditional practices which are causes of maternal death, other health consequences and diminished social interactions. Now I am volunteering as a community conversation facilitators, disseminating information and facts that I have acquired to the grass-roots level here and elsewhere in the region."

Kadijah Ali

"I am facing the consequences of FGM and talk about it with my family and siblings. I also engage in the district adolescent group discussion twice per month with my peers in our schools."

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Mohammed Ali, religious leader.

© Luca Zordan, UNFPA



"As a religious figure here in Afambo woreda, I have promoted FGM based on wrong information about the practice. However, my training by the regional Sharia taught me that FGM has no relation with religion. As a member of a community conversation I have actively shared my understanding that FGM is a harmful traditional practice. I preach in mosques, different social events and other occasions about FGM and child marriage."

Mohammed Ali, religious leader

Kedija Ali, discussion leader of adolescent girls group

"Since my training by the Bureau of Women and Children's Affairs I facilitate adolescent girls' discussion in my school on the causes and effects of FGM and child marriage. I organize various events to teach them in entertaining ways. Besides, I disseminate the information that I have got, experience and facts acquired on different occasions to my peers as well as communities. Nowadays, due to direct and indirect information and facts, the practices are stopped from our localities."

Sofia Hussen, member of adolescent girls' discussion group

"I am a living example of the consequences of FGM and child marriage. I frequently teach and advocate with my peers at school and community level on the causes and consequences of these practices. I also actively engage on adolescent girls' discussion and share my experience with my fellows."

Adnan Hussen, Mille *woreda* gender expert and programme coordinator

"It was well known that the practices are very serious in the *woreda*. But due to the intensive programme interventions, there is huge change in the attitude and norms of the pastoralist communities. The programme should continue to ensure abandonment of FGM and child marriage, especially in less accessible *kebeles*. At the end, the programme should continue to ensure effective abandonment of FGM and child marriage from the *woreda*, especially in inaccessible *kebeles*."

Doha Nuru, youth leader and participant in community conversation group

"I am a youth leader in my locality and have engaged in community conversations continuously since 2012. Thanks to these discussions, and the training I have received, I realized that FGM and child marriage are harmful traditional practices with no basis in religion. I encourage others to stop the practice and to speak to other community members about these issues."

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Asiya Ali, facilitator of discussion sessions among adolescent girls.

© Luca Zordan, UNFPA



"I have been an adolescent girls' facilitator for the last three years in the *woreda*. First, I have received training by the Bureau of Women and Children Affairs on how to facilitate discussion among married adolescent girls on harmful practices. We meet with our peers twice per month and have reached many people on information about the health, psychological, social and other consequences of FGM and child marriage."

Asiya Ali, facilitator of discussion sessions among adolescent girls



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