ORCHID PROJECT

WORKING TOGETHER TO END FEMALE GENITAL CUTTING

INTERSECTION BETWEEN FEMALE GENITAL CUTTING AND EDUCATION

A discussion brief for the Global Education Summit

July 2021

INTERSECTION BETWEEN FEMALE GENITAL CUTTING AND EDUCATION

A discussion brief for the Global Education Summit

The Global Education Summit: Financing GPE 2021-2025 is a pivotal moment for the global community to come together for a global action in support of quality education for all children. It comes at the time when children are facing the biggest education emergency in decades. The Covid-19 pandemic has worsened the global education crisis, with 1.3 billion children – including 650 million girls – out of education at the peak of school closures.[1]

At the same time, an alarming upsurge of a "shadow pandemic" of violence against women and girls spread alongside Covid-19, with increased rates of reporting on violence, including female genital cutting (FGC). Lockdown and school closures enabled undetected opportunities to carry out FGC, and for a girl at risk, it meant her absence from school was no longer noticed.

Education is often considered an effective instrument for abandoning the practice of FGC, at the same time, female genital cutting is also a barrier for girls' access to education. Emerging evidence illustrates a relationship between girls being cut and school dropouts, as well as confirming that education can be an effective instrument for abandoning the practice.

[1] Global Partnership for Education. UK and Kenya to host major education summit in 2021, 2020 available at https://www.globalpartnership.org/news/uk-and-kenya-host-major-education-summit-2021

Overview

Female genital cutting affects an estimated 200 million women globally. Every year another 4 million girls around the world are at risk of being cut. A human rights violation and a manifestation of gender inequality, female genital cutting is deeply grounded in social and gender norms and has significant health, social and economic impacts on women throughout their lives.

Ending female genital cutting requires challenging and changing harmful social and gender norms; this would potentially transform the lives of millions of women and girls and accelerate progress towards gender equality. Response to FGC requires a comprehensive package of strategies, including a **multi-sectoral approach, within which education takes a critical place**. We make six recommendations at the end.

Progress

The practice of female genital cutting has been declining over the last three decades, however, not all countries have made progress and the pace of decline has been uneven. Although the prevalence of the practice has declined overall, due to the rise in population growth there will be a significant increase in the number of women and girls who will undergo FGC over the next 15 years. [2]

With the Covid-10 outbreak, we have witnessed the economic and societal impacts of a pandemic undoing years of progress to end female genital cutting. UNFPA projections suggest that there could be an additional two million cases by 2030 as a result of disruption of programmes due to COVID-19. [3] There are also reports of increased numbers of girls being cut due to loss of livelihood and economic hardship that are leading some parents to decide to marry off their daughters, resulting in increased rates of FGC as a prerequisite for marriage. Imposed curfews have also resulted in the shutting down of schools, safe houses, and other forms of refuges for girls at risk of being cut.[4]

[2] UNICEF, Female Genital Mutilation, 2020, ,available at Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) Statistics)
[3] UNFPA (2020). Available at : (https://www.unfpa.org/resources/impact-covid-19-pandemic-family-planning-and-ending-gender-based-violence-female-genital)
[4] Orchid Project (2020) Impacts of Covid-19 on Female genital cutting policy briefing. Available at: Orchid Project Policy briefing: Impacts of COVID-19 on female genital cutting (FGC) - Orchid Project

Intersection between Female Genital Cutting and Education. What is the link?

The connection between education and female genital cutting is two-fold. FGC often acts as a barrier to girls' education, particularly when it serves as a precursor for child marriage. It can also lead to school dropouts because of health consequences and prolonged absences related to the cutting. At the same time, education is often considered key to help girls escape FGC and as a basis for a successful strategy for communities to abandon the practice.

The limited evidence on the intersection between education and female genital cutting however, points to the need for more research and investigation to better understand the linkages.[5]

Female Genital Cutting as a Barrier to Girls' Education

End to schooling

Female genital cutting can hinder and end a girl's education after she has been cut. Often, cutting is a prerequisite for child marriage, and after the procedure, which is considered by many as the rite of passage into womanhood, it is likely that the girl will be taken out of school to be married off.

Another reason why girls may drop out of school is that their parents, having had to pay for a costly FGC ceremony, are unable or reluctant to carry on paying for their daughter's education.[6] This points to another important consideration why states must ensure 12 years of free, safe, quality education for all.

In small-scale studies in Kenya, the majority of teachers surveyed about FGC and its relationship to school attendance reported that after a girl student has been cut, typically her education ends as she is withdrawn from her studies. Similarly, data collected from students reported that student dropout was the direct result of female genital cutting[7]

[5] International Centre for Research on Women. Leveraging Education to end Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting Worldwide. Available at: ICRW-and-WGF-FGMC-Policy-Brief_FINAL.pdf
[6] The Commonwealth (2014). Female Genital Mutilation: The Role of Education. Available at: https://www.thecommonwealth-educationhub.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/FGM-and-Education-Brief_v2.pdf
[7] Magangi M (2015) Effects of female genital cutting on school attendance and retention of primary school girls in Kuria west district, Kenya. African Journal of Education and Human Development as cited in the ICRW. Leveraging Education to end Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting Worldwide. Available at: ICRW-and-WGF-FGMC-Policy-Brief_FINAL.pdf

Affected school attendance and educational attainment

Female genital cutting also affects the school attendance and educational attainment of girls. The complications endured by girls as the result of the practice, including health issues, pain and distress, can lead to prolonged absences, less concentration and consequently poor performance and premature drop out of school.[8]

Another example that affects girls' schooling is often the longevity of the ritual; in some regions of Africa, female genital cutting is an initiation ritual that continues over a period of a few months, during which time girls are late to school or don't attend school at all, and as a consequence have trouble catching up. [9]

[8] The Commonwealth (2014). Female Genital Mutilation: The Role of Education. Available at: https://www.thecommonwealth-educationhub.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/FGM-and-Education-Brief_v2.pdf

[9] GIZ (2011) Female Genital Mutilation and Education. Available at: giz2011-en-fgm-bildung.pdf (srhr-ask-us.org)

Case study recorded by SAFE Maa

In order to accelerate the abandonment of female genital cutting, S.A.F.E. supports 28 girls (aged 14-18) from the Loita Hills in Southern Kenya, and Samburu county in Northern Kenya, to complete their secondary education and become role models for their families and communities outside the traditional gender roles assigned to them, including those that sustain the practice of female genital cutting.

Nasearian* has been a beneficiary of S.A.F.E.'s Loita Hills team, SAFE Maa, since 2018. Upon finishing her primary education with good grades at age 11 or 12 in 2018, Nasearian had hoped to move on to secondary school. Her headmistress reported that she was a hardworking, cooperative and disciplined student and that she should be given the chance to progress. Her father however, was not supportive of her education and wanted her to undergo FGC and be married, something that her mother did not support. Nasearian requested help from her teacher who put her in touch with SAFE Maa.

SAFE Maa was able to conduct one on one interventions with Nasearian's family, and convinced them to allow her to attend school. Her father agreed on the condition that he did not have to pay so with support of the Maa team, Nasearian started at Loita Girls High School in 2019. However, during the Covid-19 school closures, the Maa team became concerned about the welfare of girls, such as Nasearian, being at home for such a long time in an environment where the family were not supportive of her education and the girls were at risk of being cut.

Nasearian reached out to SAFE Maa in the summer of 2020, after the schools had been closed for four months, as she was concerned that she was at risk of a forced marriage, which FGC is a precursor to. SAFE Maa spoke to Nasearian's family to reassure them that her education would continue to be supported once schools reopened. They encouraged Nasearian's parents to allow her to continue her studies and not to force her to get married against her will.

Nasearian's experiences were shared with the rest of the SAFE Maa team who called all of the 14 girls due for sponsorship for a meeting. At this meeting, the girls were able to share their challenges and be reassured by the SAFE Maa team that their education would continue to be supported.

*Name has been changed out of privacy and safeguarding considerations.

The Transformative Power of Education in Helping End Female Genital Cutting

Impact on individual girls

Staying in school The impact of Covid-19 lockdown and school closures on increased rates of cutting indicates that girls are generally at lower risk of being cut when attending school. Reports from local partners in the survey conducted by the Orchid Project indicated that girls locked down at home are far more likely to be subjected to FGC, where communities have the opportunity to conduct ceremonies in secret.

Impact of School Closures on rates of FGC [10]

In 2020, Orchid Project conducted surveys with its grassroot partners from across West Africa, East Africa and Asia in response to them witnessing elevated rates of female genital cutting following the onset of COVID-19 pandemic.

Local reports from across the East Africa region emphasised that lockdowns are increasing the risk of girls being cut, noting that some communities are viewing the lockdown as an extended holiday to take advantage of decreased surveillance and extended recovery time for girls to avoid detection. Girls locked down at home are far more likely to be subjected to FGC, where communities have the opportunity to conduct ceremonies in secret. In Rift Valley and Samburu, Kenya, local activists have reported that communities are using male circumcision ceremonies to secretly cut girls, which is illegal.

In West Africa, similar tendencies were noted. In Abuja, Nigeria, local organisations have reported an increase in numbers of girls being cut across South-West Nigeria as a result of school closures.

“The longer girls stay home, the higher the risks for home initiation [of FGC]” – Chernor Bah, CEO & Co-Founder, Purposeful, Sierra Leone.

[10] Orchid Project (2020) Impacts of Covid-10 on Female genital cutting policy briefing. Available at: Orchid Project Policy briefing: Impacts of COVID-19 on female genital cutting (FGC) - Orchid Project

Agency and empowerment There is increasing evidence that education can be an effective instrument for abandoning the practice of female genital cutting. Access to education creates the "network effect" for girls: it provides girls with life skills and a social space that allow for the introduction of new concepts and exchange of ideas.[11] Education leads to strengthened agency and ability of girls to understand and exercise their rights, and this is particularly true for girls who manage to transition to secondary education.

School-based interventions, such as training of teachers and integration of information on risks of female genital cutting and wider gender equality notions into school curriculum, lay a strong foundation for raising girls' awareness and strengthening their decision-making abilities.

Education is particularly relevant for communities where girls are traditionally cut between the ages of 12 and 18. There is emerging evidence that girls who carry on into secondary education are at lower risk of being cut. For example, 19% of girls in Kenya who have secondary level education undergo FGC compared to 54% of girls who do not.[12] Access to education also has the potential to affect girls' decisions when they have children of their own.

Impact on generations and maternal education

While education may not prevent girls from being subjected to female genital cutting at a younger age, the majority of existing data suggests that it has the potential to positively affect future generations of girls, as educated women are less likely to support the continuation of the practice. According to an ICRW report, women's support for the FGC practice decreases as her level of education increases.[13] Maternal education is particularly transformational as mothers are often the primary decision-makers when it comes to female genital cutting.

[11] UNFPA-UNICEF. (2013). Joint Evaluation UNFPA-UNICEF Joint Programme on Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting: Accelerating Change (2008-2012). New York and Geneva
[12] 28 Too Many (2013). Country Profile:FGM in Kenya. Available at https://www.28toomany.org/blog/2013/may/14/is-education-the-most-powerful-weapon-in-the-fight-against-fgm-blog-by-louise-robertson-operations-coordinator-at-28-too-many/
[13] International Centre for Research on Women. Leveraging Education to end Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting Worldwide. Available at: ICRW-and-WGF-FGMC-Policy-Brief_FINAL.pdf

Broader community driven impact (non-formal education)

A sustainable end to female genital cutting happens only if the entire community supports the idea. Therefore, formal education settings should not be viewed as the only sphere for intervention out-of-classroom, community-based education that targets boys and girls, men and women, can play a powerful role in raising awareness on harmful effects of FGC.

Furthermore, girls' clubs and other non-formal education settings provide a lifeline for girls who are out of school and in harder to reach communities.

Recommendations

- In the efforts to address girls' access to education, ensure that the education sector considers barriers to access, including harmful practices such as female genital cutting, and puts in place preventative measures.

- Invest in 12 years of free, safe and quality education for all to prevent families from taking girls out of school due to high tuition fees, leading to FGC. Not only is investing in secondary education for girls one of the most transformative development strategies that empowers girls to develop knowledge and skills that they will need for life, the initial research also shows that girls who are in secondary education are at lower risk of being cut and as educated mothers they are highly likely to break the cycle and opt not to cut their daughters.

- Design gender transformative education systems that integrate gender equality and human rights information, including information on female genital cutting, into formal education curriculum; require training for teachers on FGC so they can detect and support girls at risk, and help those who have undergone the procedure to stay in school and receive the support necessary.

- Invest in research to allow for thorough exploration of interlinkages between female genital cutting and education and to enable formulation of better-informed strategies and actions.

- Adopt a multi-sectoral approach to ending female genital cutting, within which education takes a critical place. At the same time, increase funding to initiatives addressing cutting as a barrier to girls' education and particularly to community based organisations.

- Invest in non-formal education initiatives that help communities learn about the importance of girls' education and the risks of female genital cutting, and to allow out of school girls to have access to alternative forms of education and empowerment.

July 2021

Orchid Project is a charity registered in the UK, number 1141057