

# Executive Summary



A gender-transformative approach to ending female genital cutting: Changing harmful gender and power imbalances

Policy Discussion Paper  
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# Introduction

200 million girls and women alive today have undergone female genital cutting (FGC), and more than four million girls are at risk of being cut every year. With progress to end the practice dwindled by the COVID-19 pandemic and the target of eliminating FGC by 2030 rapidly approaching, an alternative to the 'business as usual' approach to ending cutting is urgently needed.



Could **gender-transformative approaches (GTAs)**, which have been successful in other sectors, be the way forward? Orchid Project commissioned this policy discussion paper to understand whether gender-transformative approaches to ending FGC show promise. The evidence is not conclusive yet, but lessons from other sectors indicate that, for long-term, sustainable change, GTAs are needed.

## What do we mean by gender-transformative approaches?

Over the past few decades, gender-transformative approaches have become prominent on development agenda. GTAs have been used in programming in various sectors, including agriculture and health.

A gender-transformative approach is defined as one that actively examines, questions and changes harmful gender norms and power structures that give boys and men advantages over girls and women.

GTAs differ from gender-accommodating approaches, which recognise gender constraints but seek to work around them by solely focusing on women's empowerment, rather than rectifying power disparities between men and women.<sup>1</sup>

## Why gender-transformative approaches to female genital cutting?

We know that the root cause of female genital cutting is gender inequality. Cutting is fuelled by discriminatory gender norms that control girls' and women's sexualities, their bodies and, ultimately, their lives. It is motivated by patriarchal or traditional beliefs about proper sexual behaviour for women. However, only a few programmes address harmful gender norms and power structures in which women and girls are viewed as subordinate to men and boys, perpetuating the practice of FGC.

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<sup>1</sup>Interagency Gender Working Group (IGWG) (2017) *Gender Integration Continuum*.



Despite decades of GTA discourse, the ‘gender-transformative narrative’ is new in the FGC sector. A literature review confirms that interventions aimed at eliminating cutting have not yet adequately incorporated gender-transformative approaches. At the same time, interest in gender transformation has been growing recently in the FGC sector.

‘Changing (harmful) gender norms in our community will absolutely have an impact on FGC. It would force people to think otherwise and let women have a right to their own bodies.’

— Respondent from India

### What is the aim?

This paper aims to promote understanding of gender-transformative approaches in the context of FGC and explore the potential use of GTAs to accelerate FGC abandonment. It shares important learnings drawn from the application of GTAs in other sectors and offers recommendations for the way forward.

Importantly, it goes beyond theoretical considerations to include a practical look at GTAs brought live through the voices of grassroots organisations and frontline activists, who know best the challenges and opportunities in work against female genital cutting.



Traditional birth attendants during a workshop with SAFE Maa.

# Key Learnings

Evaluating the impact of GTAs in other sectors has revealed the following learnings, which will prove useful when designing gender-transformative interventions aimed at eliminating female genital cutting.

## MULTILEVEL APPROACHES ARE MORE EFFECTIVE

There are multiple levels of influence that can be summarised in a socio-ecological model that situates individuals within their broader environments and considers the complex interplay between individual, interpersonal, community, institutional and policy/legislation levels.<sup>2</sup> Power imbalances and harmful gender norms at every level are likely to underpin cutting and need to be addressed in order to achieve sustainable change.

## INTERSECTIONAL PERSPECTIVE NEEDED

Research shows that, to be truly transformative, interventions must use an intersectional perspective, addressing the links between gender and other social markers of difference such as class, race, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, poverty and disability.

## BOYS AND MEN SHOULD BE INVOLVED

Evidence shows that working with and supporting boys and men is necessary for promoting positive masculinity and gender equality. Programmes that are aimed at both men and women are more effective than ones aimed solely at women. In many communities it is men who are the custodians of culture, the decision-makers and the village elders, but they are also the husbands and fathers, so engaging them to help end FGC is essential.

## IT IS A LONG-TERM PROCESS

Gender transformation is possible, but change cannot happen overnight. It requires a long-term strategy. Gender transformation is, therefore, a long, complex process that cannot be achieved by a single programme.

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<sup>2</sup>See for example UNICEF, UNFPA and UN Women (2020) *Technical Note on Gender-Transformative Approaches in the Global Programme to End Child Marriage Phase II: A Summary for Practitioners*. Available at <https://www.unfpa.org/>.

# Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings of this paper show the potential in adopting GTAs in future interventions aimed at eliminating female genital cutting.

It is important to note that, while this paper provides empirical evidence of the effectiveness of gender-transformative approaches in other sectors, there is limited data on the application of GTAs to the work to end cutting. Therefore, further research is necessary to determine the most effective ways to apply GTAs to FGC-abandonment programmes.

Below we offer recommendations as to how different stakeholders can take action to gain a more conclusive understanding of the effectiveness of GTAs in the work to end cutting.



Illustration by Aktiv Studios.

## FUNDERS/DONORS

- To test and build evidence of which approaches do and do not work, allocate funding for further research into GTAs within the context of ending female genital cutting.
- Encourage grantees to adopt a programming approach to ending cutting that incorporates socio-ecological models with which to challenge unequal power relations.
- Allocate funding to grassroots organisations to support and expand new forms of programmes that incorporate GTAs.

## RESEARCHERS AND ACADEMIA

- Conduct further research into GTAs; for example, how to design, implement, monitor and evaluate gender-transformative programmes that address the root causes of female genital cutting.
- Build an evidence base by conducting further mapping exercises to understand the extent to which existing programmes and interventions aimed at ending FGC include (elements of) GTAs.
- In partnership with civil-society organisations, develop, pilot and evaluate community-based projects aimed at FGC that integrate GTAs.

## POLICY-MAKERS/ GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS

- Create a policy environment amenable to the inclusion of gender-transformative approaches in programming against FGC.
- Include, within existing FGC-elimination strategies, plans and policies, fully-costed initiatives that

address the underlying structures sustaining cutting.

- Analyse existing budget allocations from a gender-equity perspective.
- Include the voices of women and girls in general, and survivors in particular, and promote their leadership during the design of policies and initiatives.
- Review existing legal and policy frameworks and investigate to what extent gender dimensions are addressed.
- When national policies, plans of action or guidelines are developed/revised, consider the key learnings outlined in this paper.

## CIVIL-SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS, INCLUDING COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANISATIONS

- Map to what extent existing programmes and interventions aimed at eliminating female genital cutting are gender transformative.
- When developing or revising organisational strategies, theories of change and monitoring-and-evaluation frameworks, consider the learnings outlined in this paper.
- Influence governments to incorporate gender-transformative approaches in their efforts to tackle FGC.
- Integrate female genital cutting into other gender-transformative programmes on gender-based violence and sexual- and reproductive-health rights.



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