



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

Policy Discussion Paper  
October 2021



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# Preface

At the Generation Equality Forum in July 2021, global commitments were made to accelerate gender equality through the period ending 2026 by launching a five-year action plan.

Orchid Project also made two commitments:

- to reduce the prevalence of female genital cutting (FGC) in Kenya through our programmes with the Coalition on Violence Against Women (COVAW) and S.A.F.E. Kenya; and
- to support a gender-transformative approach (GTA) to ending FGC.

These commitments are particularly timely, as we see the negative impact that COVID-19 has had on female genital cutting around the world. Research carried out with our partners shows increased rates of FGC across East and West Africa as a result of lockdowns, school closures, increased economic hardship and a failure to consider FGC within COVID-19 responses. This has left girls with an increased risk of being cut and has reduced support and protection for girls and women.

We know that gender inequality is a cause of female genital cutting, yet programmes to end FGC often do not adequately address the harmful gender norms that lead to and perpetuate the practice. Recognising this and the potential for a new approach, we engaged Dr Annemarie Middelburg, a human-rights, gender and FGC expert, to work with us to explore the potential of a gender-transformative approach to ending cutting. This paper, which is the result of that collaboration, not only analyses the impact of gender-transformative approaches across different sectors, but also examines the possibilities that arise from using GTAs to end female genital cutting.

Global forecasts for FGC have predicted an increase in cutting as a result of COVID-19, and it is clear that we all need to do more if we are to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals' Target 5.3 of ending FGM/C by 2030.

We believe that this paper provides a strong starting point for exploring gender-transformative approaches as a potential way forward. We recognise that GTAs are not the only way to end cutting, though, and, as this paper shows, there is a need for more research on the use of GTAs in the work to end FGC. However, we do believe that, with further research and appropriate funding of programmes at the grassroots level, a gender-transformative approach could provide a framework that will accelerate progress towards the 2030 target.

Partnerships are critical to end cutting. We are keen to work with partners to take the findings of this paper forward, both to secure funding for research to close the current knowledge gap and to fund and integrate GTAs into programming to end cutting.

We also welcome your feedback on this paper, which you can send to [comms@orchidproject.org](mailto:comms@orchidproject.org).

**Grethe Petersen, CEO**

# Acknowledgements

Orchid Project developed this paper within the framework of our 2020–2023 Strategic Plan.<sup>1</sup>

This paper was made possible by the collective efforts of a team of different people around the world. It was authored by Dr Annemarie Middelburg. The original idea was conceived by Orchid Project former Head of Policy & Advocacy, Ebony Riddell Bamber, who worked with the author to develop the report concept. Technical guidance and coordination was provided by Ebony Riddell Bamber and Nardos Hagos (Policy and Advocacy Manager), in collaboration with Anush Aghabalyan (Head of Policy and Advocacy) and Clodagh McCarthy (Head of Programmes). Overall guidance was provided by Grethe Petersen (CEO).

Support from Emma Lightowlers was instrumental in getting this paper published.

We express our sincere gratitude to the grassroots and civil-society organisations Orchid Project works with in Africa and Asia, for contributing to this research and taking the time to complete the online survey or participate in the focus-group discussions. We appreciate the valuable insights and experiences that were shared – it is these voices and stories that brought this paper to life.

Funding, generously provided by the Wallace Global Fund, made development of this paper possible.

We wish to acknowledge and thank Dr Ann Pederson for the use of the Gender Equity Continuum and permission to adapt it for this discussion.

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<sup>1</sup>Orchid Project (2021) *Orchid Project 2020–2023 Strategic Plan*. Available at <https://www.orchidproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Strategic-Plan-2020-2023.pdf>.



# Executive Summary

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>2</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>2</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>3</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>3</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.

# List of Abbreviations

<b>CEDAW</b>	Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
<b>DEVAW</b>	Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women
<b>FGC</b>	female genital cutting
<b>FGM</b>	female genital mutilation
<b>GTA(s)</b>	gender-transformative approach(es)
<b>HRC</b>	Human Rights Council
<b>IGWG</b>	Interagency Gender Working Group
<b>SDGs</b>	Sustainable Development Goals
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNFPA</b>	United Nations Population Fund
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children's Fund
<b>VAW</b>	violence against women
<b>WHO</b>	World Health Organization

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<b>Figure 1</b>	Orchid Project Lifecycle Diagram (page 13)
<b>Figure 2</b>	Gender Equity Continuum (page 25)

# Terminology

It is essential to define terms and concepts associated with gender equality that are relevant to female genital cutting. This section summarises a few of them to ensure a common understanding of concepts and terminology.

## GENDER<sup>4</sup>

Gender refers to the roles and responsibilities of men and women that are created in our families, our societies and our cultures. The concept of gender also includes expectations held about the characteristics, aptitudes and likely behaviours of both women and men (femininity and masculinity). Gender roles and expectations are learned. They can change over time and they vary within and among cultures. Systems of social differentiation such as political status, class, ethnicity, age, physical and mental disability, and more all modify gender roles.

## GENDER EQUALITY<sup>5</sup>

Gender equality requires equal enjoyment by women and men of socially valued goods, opportunities, resources and rewards. Where gender inequality exists, it is generally women who are excluded or disadvantaged in relation to decision-making and access to economic and social resources. Therefore, a critical aspect of promoting gender equality is the empowerment of women, with a focus on identifying and redressing power imbalances and giving women more autonomy to manage their own lives.

## GENDER EQUITY<sup>6</sup>

Gender equity is the process of being fair to women and men. To ensure fairness, strategies and measures must often be available to compensate for women's historical and social disadvantages that prevent men and women from otherwise operating on a level playing field. Equity leads to equality.

<sup>4</sup>UNESCO (undated) *Gender Equality Guidelines for UNESCO publications*.

<sup>5</sup>UNFPA (2005) *Frequently asked questions about gender equality*.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*



## **GENDER IDENTITY<sup>7</sup>**

Gender identity refers to each person's deeply felt internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond with the sex they were assigned at birth.

## **GENDER MAINSTREAMING<sup>8</sup>**

Gender mainstreaming is a strategy for integrating gender concerns in the analysis, formulation and monitoring of policies, programmes and projects. It is therefore a means to an end, not an end in itself; a process, not a goal. The purpose of gender mainstreaming is to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women in population and development activities.

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<sup>7</sup>ILGA Europe (2015) *Glossary*.

<sup>8</sup>UNFPA (2005) *Frequently asked questions about gender equality*.

# Introduction

## WHAT IS FEMALE GENITAL CUTTING?

**Female Genital Cutting** (FGC), also known as female circumcision or female genital mutilation (FGM) refers to all procedures involving the partial or total removal of external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons.<sup>9</sup>

It is estimated by UNICEF that **at least 200 million girls and women alive today, in 31 countries with nationally representative data on prevalence, have experienced FGC.**<sup>10</sup> However, FGC is prevalent in over 90 countries across the globe (including in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, the Americas, Europe and Oceania), and these numbers are likely to be an underrepresentation.<sup>11</sup> Female genital cutting is a worldwide issue that requires a global response.



FGC occurs in over  
**90 countries**  
globally

A significant number of girls are subjected to FGC before the age of five, although this varies between different communities and can happen at any time from a girl's birth to her adolescence. Occasionally, adult women are also subjected to FGC (for

example, a few days before marriage, after marriage or after their first pregnancy). FGC is mostly carried out by traditional practitioners, although the practice is increasingly being medicalised.

FGC is not an obligation of any religion and has no health benefits for girls and women. Far from it – the practice can cause serious adverse physical, psychological or sexual harm or suffering, during the procedure, immediately afterwards and throughout the course of women's lives (see Figure 1 on the following page).

## AN ESTIMATED 70 MILLION GIRLS AT RISK

Looking at the worldwide prevalence of female genital cutting, it is encouraging to see a decline in prevalence over the last three decades.<sup>12</sup>

However, despite this optimistic data and the fact that progress is being made, **huge challenges remain.** If current trends continue, the number of girls and women undergoing FGC will rise significantly due to increasing population growth. More and more girls – at younger ages – are being cut.

*Opposite page: Figure 1 – How FGC can affect girls and women throughout their lives.*

<sup>9</sup>World Health Organization (2020) *Factsheet: Female Genital Mutilation*.

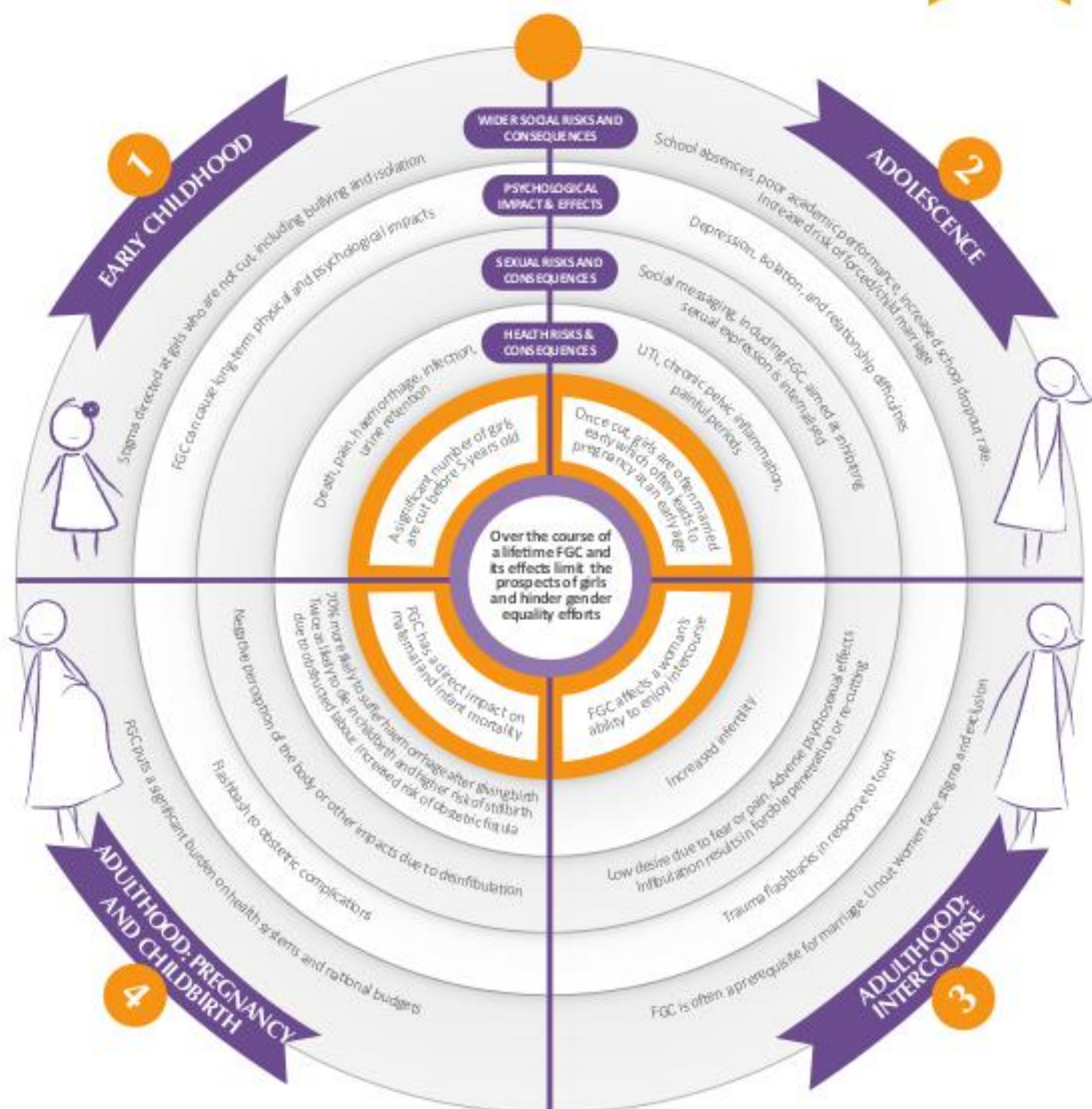
<sup>10</sup>UNICEF (2016) *Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting: A Global Concern*. New York: New York.

<sup>11</sup>End FGM EU Network, US End FGM/C Network and Equality Now (2020) *Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting: A Call for a Global Response*.

<sup>12</sup>UNICEF (2016), *op. cit.*

# HOW FEMALE GENITAL CUTTING can affect girls and women THROUGHOUT THEIR LIVES

4.1 million  
girls a year  
are at risk of  
being cut



‘We just went back 10 years or more in terms of the progress we made. Poverty, inequality and discrimination will be more evident.’

— Respondent from India

For example, an estimated **4.16 million girls are at risk of being cut in 2021** alone.<sup>13</sup> An estimated 68 million girls will be cut between 2015 and 2030 if efforts are not accelerated.<sup>14</sup> In other words, populations are growing more rapidly than FGC rates are declining.

In addition, the **COVID-19 pandemic** has made the situation worse and is disproportionately impacting the lives of girls and women. Our policy briefing highlighted the gendered impact of the pandemic and the significant challenges it has created to the movement to end FGC.<sup>15</sup> We concluded that ‘increased rates of FGC are being reported across East and West Africa, where COVID-19 related lockdowns are being seen as an opportunity to carry out FGC undetected.’<sup>16</sup>

Lockdowns and curfews have resulted in the shutting down of schools, safe houses, churches and other forms of refuge for girls at risk of FGC. The loss of livelihoods and economic hardships are leading families to marry off their daughters, resulting in increased rates of cutting as a prerequisite for marriage: ‘bride prices can then be exchanged for food and basic supplies.’<sup>17</sup>

Unfortunately, the economic and societal impacts of COVID-19 are undoing years of progress by grassroots activists and communities to end FGC.

UNFPA estimates that an additional two million cases of FGC will need to be averted as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in an estimated 70 million girls in total being put at risk of FGC in the period to 2030.<sup>18</sup>



‘These figures show how far we have to go to eliminate female genital cutting. Even before COVID-19 hindered our progress, our goal to end FGC by 2030 was an ambitious target to achieve under the SDGs. Urgent and decisive action is needed now in order to advance our mission to end this harmful practice by 2030.’

— Grethe Petersen, Orchid Project

<sup>13</sup>UN Women (2021) *Ending FGM is essential to give girls control over their own lives*.

<sup>14</sup>UNFPA (2018) *Bending the Curve: FGM Trends We Aim to Change*.

<sup>15</sup>Orchid Project (2020) *Impacts of COVID-19 on Female Genital Cutting*.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, p.1.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, p.4.

<sup>18</sup>UNFPA and UNICEF (2020) *Covid-19 Disrupting SDG5.3: Eliminating Female Genital Mutilation*. Technical Note, April 2020.



## AIM OF THIS PUBLICATION

Over the past few years, there seems to have been growing recognition that addressing the harmful **gender norms** responsible for the subordinate position of girls and women in society is key to effectively eliminating violence against women (VAW) in general and FGC specifically.<sup>19</sup>

At the same time, in practice, these gender dimensions are not (yet) sufficiently addressed in existing programmes or interventions and – more importantly – may not even be recognised by those who support and perpetuate FGC.

This paper will address that knowledge gap. It will also explore the potential of taking **gender-transformative approaches (GTAs)** in future programmes and interventions to accelerate the abandonment of FGC.

More specifically, **the objective of this paper** is as follows:

- to explain how harmful gender norms underpin FGC (see A Violation of the Rights of Girls and Women and A Manifestation of Gender Inequality);
- to promote a common understanding of gender-transformative change (see Gender-Transformative Change);
- to share evidence and learnings from other sectors that have taken GTAs (see The Evidence: What Works?); and
- to outline recommendations on how to move forward (see Conclusions and Recommendations).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For this paper, we applied a **qualitative research methodology**. The following discussions assess the potential of a gender-transformative approach to ending FGC from a theoretical or academic point of view, but, of utmost importance, they also consider the practical relevance of a GTA. To that end, the lived experiences of grassroots organisations and frontline activists were included, as they are closest to the communities where FGC is happening and know best what the challenges and opportunities for ending FGC are.

- Firstly, we conducted extensive **desk research**. We reviewed academic literature (including peer-reviewed journal articles, books and conference papers) and considered reports, evaluations and technical notes of UN agencies and relevant documents from NGOs.
- Secondly, based on the outcomes of the desk research, we developed an **online survey**. This survey was divided into various themes covering different aspects of gender norms, power imbalances, and the potential benefits and barriers of a GTA in the context of FGC programming (see Annex I). The survey was sent out via e-mail to different grassroots organisations with whom Orchid Project works. In total, 19 respondents from many different countries filled in the online survey (Table 1).

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<sup>19</sup> - World Health Organization (2019) *RESPECT Women: Preventing violence against women*.  
- World Health Organization (2016) *INSPIRE: Seven strategies for ending violence against children*.

- Finally, two **online focus-group discussions** were organised between Orchid Project and grassroots organisations with whom Orchid Project works in Kenya, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Liberia. The main purpose of the focus-group discussions was to gain an in-depth understanding of the potential value of a GTA to the work towards FGC elimination. The focus-group discussions were informal and had a conversational character. A topic guide was prepared to guide the discussion (see Annex II). With the permission of all participants, the focus-group discussions were recorded and transcribed *verbatim*.
- All participants (both to the survey and the focus-group discussions) were given the opportunity to remain anonymous.

TABLE 1: ORCHID PROJECT'S ONLINE SURVEY RESPONDENTS

	Country	Respondents
Africa	Kenya	3
	Liberia	2
	Nigeria	3
	Sierra Leone	3
Asia	Bangladesh	1
	India	1
	Indonesia	1
	Malaysia	2
	Pakistan	1
Europe	United Kingdom	1
North America	United States	1
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>19</b>

## SCOPE

This paper recognises that many intersex children are subjected to unnecessary surgical procedures that violate their human rights and have short-term and long-term physical- and mental-health consequences similar to those of FGC. However, the focus of this paper will be solely on female genital cutting performed on girls.



Tostan declaration of abandonment ceremony, Senegal, 2017.

# A Violation of the Rights of Girls and Women

Over the past decades, the discourse in relation to FGC has been positioned within the scope of human-rights law. In the 1990s, the United Nations qualified FGC as a harmful practice, a form of VAW and a human-rights violation. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995 identified ending FGC as essential to realising the rights of girls and women.



Tostan declaration of abandonment ceremony, Senegal, 2017.

## FGC AS A FORM OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

When FGC is analysed from a human-rights perspective, it is usually recognised as a form of violence against women. **Article 1** of the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (DEVAW)<sup>20</sup> provides a definition:

‘For the purposes of this Declaration, the term “violence against women” means any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, **physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering** to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.’

FGC clearly fits in this definition of VAW. As the Orchid Project lifecycle diagram<sup>21</sup> above indicates, female genital cutting is a practice that exposes girls and young women to serious physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering at every stage of their lives.

Moreover, FGC is explicitly identified as a form of VAW in **Article 2** of the Declaration.<sup>22</sup> This has been reiterated in later documents, as well; for example, in the UN Interagency Statement in 2008.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup>UN General Assembly (1993) *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women*, Article 1 [emphasis ours].

<sup>21</sup>Please see Figure 1 on page 13 of this paper.

<sup>22</sup>UN General Assembly (1993) *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women*, Article 2: ‘Violence against women shall be understood to encompass, but not be limited to, the following: (a) Physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring in the family, including battering, sexual abuse of female children in the household, dowry-related violence, marital rape, female genital mutilation and other traditional practices harmful to women, non-spousal violence and violence related to exploitation . . .’

<sup>23</sup>World Health Organization (2008) *Eliminating Female Genital Mutilation: An Interagency Statement*, p.10. OHCHR, UNAIDS, UNDP, UNECA, UNESCO, UNFPA, UNHCR, UNICEF, UNIFEM, WHO and WHO Library.



## WHICH HUMAN RIGHTS ARE VIOLATED?

FGC violates a number of well-established human rights protected by international and regional human-rights treaties, including the right to be free from gender discrimination; the right to the highest attainable standard of health; the right to physical and mental integrity; the right to bodily autonomy; the right to life (when the procedure results in death); the right to freedom from torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; and the rights of the child.<sup>24</sup>

These rights are enshrined in legally binding human-rights treaties that address states' obligations to eliminate the practice. For example, **Article 5 of the Maputo Protocol** obliges States Parties to create public awareness of harmful practices, prohibit all forms of FGC, provide support to victims and protect women who are at risk.<sup>25</sup> UN Member States have committed to eliminating the practice by 2030 as part of the Sustainable Development Goals.



Tostan social mobilisation agent, Senegal, 2015.

<sup>24</sup>UNFPA (2014) *Implementation of the International and Regional Human Rights Framework for the Elimination of Female Genital Mutilation*. New York: UNFPA.

<sup>25</sup>African Union (2003) *Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa*, Article 5.



## THE 2030 AGENDA FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development seeks to realise the human rights of all and guides Member States to transform their approaches to achieve inclusive, people-centred and sustainable development with ‘no one left behind.’<sup>26</sup> **Gender equality** is firmly on the 2030 Agenda. Goal 5 focuses on the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, which is also explicitly recognised as an important strategy underpinning all the other Goals.<sup>27</sup>



A meeting of Maasai elder women, Narok, Kenya, 2018.

The international community recognises that sustainable development cannot be achieved without prioritising the same rights for men and women. In addition, the importance of ending cutting is reflected in **Target 5.3 of SDG 5**, which specifically calls for action by all countries to eliminate FGC by 2030.<sup>28</sup>

‘We strongly believe that it is possible to reach Goal 5. But gender equality is not a stand-alone agenda[;] it is correlated with other issues.’

— Respondent from Bangladesh

‘It is necessary to reach SDG goal 5 because it will allow both men and boys and women and girls to achieve their full potential. Gender equality can be reached through continuous engagement with state parties for adequate empowerment, implementation and persecution of violators; investment in civil society organizations, especially women and girls led organizations that are vibrant in advocacy.’

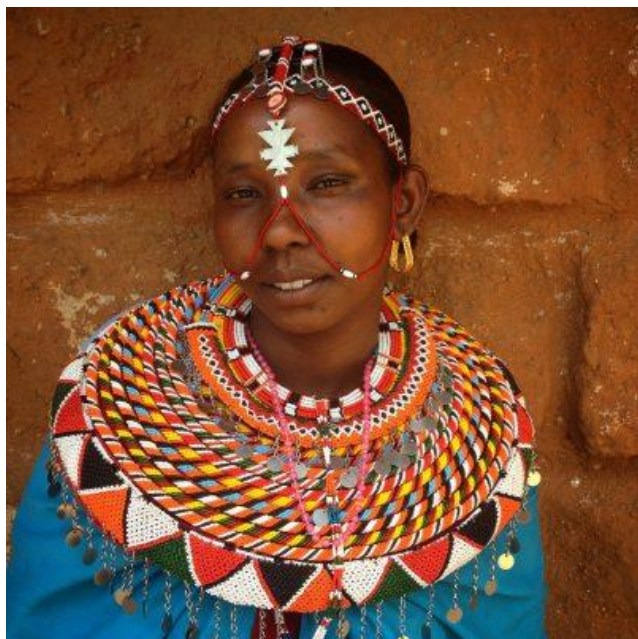
— Respondent from Liberia

<sup>26</sup>UNDP (2018) *What does it mean to leave no one behind? A UNDP discussion paper and framework for implementation*.

<sup>27</sup>UN (undated) ‘Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’, *Sustainable Development Goals Knowledge Platform*.

<sup>28</sup>United Nations Statistics Division (2021) ‘Goal 5, Target 5.3’, *SDG Indicators: Metadata repository*.

# A Manifestation of Gender Inequality



Veronica Leluata, Project Manager, S.A.F.E. Samburu.

FGC is a manifestation of deep-rooted gender inequality that assigns girls and women inferior positions in society.<sup>29</sup> It reflects an ingrained inequality between the sexes and constitutes a form of discrimination against women.<sup>30</sup>

‘FGC continues to happen because women and men are not equal in the eyes of our communities.’

— Respondent from Sierra Leone

## PATRIARCHAL POWER STRUCTURES AND DEEP- ROOTED STEREOTYPES

‘FGC is used as a tool to subordinate women and increase the power that men have on women that in turn exacerbate[s] gender inequality.’

— Respondent from the UK

The Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) noted that patriarchal attitudes and deep-rooted stereotypes regarding the roles, responsibilities and identities of women and men contribute to the persistence of female genital cutting.<sup>31</sup>

Similarly, the Human Rights Council (HRC), in its latest Resolution on the Elimination of FGC (adopted in July 2020), also highlighted the importance of addressing the root causes of gender inequality, including gender stereotypes and unequal power relations, as a result of which women and girls are viewed as subordinate to men and boys, perpetuating FGC.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup>UNICEF (2005) ‘Changing a Harmful Social Convention: Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting’, *Innocenti Digest*.

<sup>30</sup>World Health Organization (2008) *Eliminating Female Genital Mutilation: An Interagency Statement*, p.1. OHCHR, UNAIDS, UNDP, UNECA, UNESCO, UNFPA, UNHCR, UNICEF, UNIFEM, WHO and WHO Library.

<sup>31</sup>UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (2011) *Concluding observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women – Kenya*. CEDAW/C/KEN/CO/7, 2 February 2011, para.17.

<sup>32</sup>UN Human Rights Council (2020) *Resolution on the Elimination of Female Genital Mutilation*. A/HRC/44/L.20, 14 July 2020, para.9(a).

Patriarchal oppression and strong stereotypical attitudes that exist about the roles and responsibilities of women (and men) in the family and in society undermine women's social status and constitute a root cause of the disadvantaged positions of girls and women in many areas of the public and private domain.

‘Women are meant to be seen not heard. They are not actually given that right to express their feelings. They are supposed to be calm in every point of time[.] Even when they have been maltreated, even when something is going against their belief or against their right, they are supposed to be calm.’

— Respondent from Nigeria

More specifically, Radhika Coomaraswamy, former UN Special Rapporteur on VAW, its causes and consequences, explained that FGC is a result of ‘patriarchal power structures, which legitimize the need to control women's lives.’<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, she explains, ‘it arises from the stereotypical perception of women as the principal guardians of sexual morality, but with uncontrolled sexual urges.’<sup>34</sup>

‘We live in a patriarchal society. Most of the decisions are made by male members, both in the family and in society. For example, girls’ marriage [and time of] pregnancy depends on the opinion of male members.’

— Respondent from Bangladesh



Senegalese girls, Senegal, 2012.

## CONTROLLING GIRLS’ AND WOMEN’S SEXUALITY

Female genital cutting is a practice that is based on discriminatory societal attitudes and beliefs, as described in the previous section. Cutting is often considered a necessary part of raising a girl properly and preparing her for marriage and adulthood. In some communities, cutting is perceived to be a rite of passage from girlhood to womanhood and an inevitable part of ‘becoming a woman’ and obtaining a female identity.

<sup>33</sup>United Nations Commission on Human Rights (2002) *Report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, its Causes and Consequences on Cultural practices in the Family that are Violent towards Women*. E/CN.4/2002/83, 31 January 2002, para.14.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*

‘FGC is seen as a prerequisite for marriage and marriage is both economically important through the dowry, culturally important through the celebration and socially important due to the significance of the family unit within the community.’

— Respondent from Kenya

However, FGC 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: a girl needs to be ‘pure’ before marriage (which means that a girl’s virginity until marriage needs to be secured) and her sexual desire or libido needs to be reduced to avoid promiscuity. A girl or young woman who undergoes FGC is considered less likely to be promiscuous or sexually active and easier for her husband to control.

‘In my community, the reasons for the continued practice of FGC is to curb promiscuity, to beautify the women, initiate them into womanhood and get them ready for marriage.’

— Respondent from Nigeria

It is believed that FGC safeguards the morality of women and discourages them from ‘sinful’ and deviant sexual behaviour. Family honour depends on a girl’s virginity or sexual restraint. In other words, gender norms dictate that girls and women should be inquisitive and passive about their sexualities. Those local structures of power and authority continue to uphold female genital cutting in communities where it is practised.

‘FGC is done to control and reduce sexual pleasure. They believe that they remove the part of a woman that makes the sexual urge. When a woman is cut, she will not go outside to meet anybody, she will not have sexual relations outside the home and the husband will enjoy sex with her. They don’t put the women into consideration. To them, the woman does not need to enjoy sex. The woman is meant to give pleasure to the man.’

— Respondent from Nigeria



# Gender-Transformative Change

## ADDRESSING THE ROOT CAUSES OF GENDER INEQUALITY

A **gender-transformative approach** is defined as an approach that actively examines, questions and changes rigid gender norms and imbalances of power that advantage boys and men over girls and women.<sup>35</sup>

The ultimate aim of a GTA is to achieve gender equality. Programmes and interventions that shift harmful gender norms and promote an equitable environment by redressing power disparities between men and women are referred to as **gender transformative**.<sup>36</sup> In the context of female genital cutting, a GTA would mean that harmful, inequitable gender norms and (patriarchal) values (as described in the previous chapter) will be transformed into positive ones to increase gender equality and eliminate FGC.

A GTA needs to be distinguished from a **gender-accommodating approach**, which focuses more on women's empowerment. Gender-accommodating approaches aim to increase women's ability to change their behaviours or access sources of power. They do not necessarily aim to change the underlying social order that gives rise to girls' and women's disadvantage.<sup>37</sup>

A GTA moves beyond the individual empowerment of girls and women and **goes one layer deeper**, contributing to a more lasting impact for gender equality. A GTA not only acknowledges or mentions gender norms and roles, but also focuses on changing the social order and the underlying factors that cause disparities among

'Gender norms define roles for women and men and how power is exercised over women. It is about power and control.'

— Respondent from India

<sup>35</sup>This definition has been adopted by UNICEF, UNFPA, UN Women and Rutgers, among others. 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/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/Technical\\_Note\\_on\\_Gender-Transformative\\_Approaches\\_in\\_the\\_GPECM\\_Phase\\_II\\_A\\_Summary\\_for\\_Practitioners-January-2020.pdf](https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/Technical_Note_on_Gender-Transformative_Approaches_in_the_GPECM_Phase_II_A_Summary_for_Practitioners-January-2020.pdf) (accessed 24 July 2020).
- Rutgers (undated) *Rutgers' Gender Transformative Approach Toolkit*. Available at <https://www.rutgers.international/Gender-transformative-approach/resources> (accessed 24 July 2020).

<sup>36</sup>Margaret E. Greene and Andrew Levack (2010) *Synchronizing Gender Strategies: A Cooperative Model for Improving Reproductive Health and Transforming Gender Relations*, p.4. USAID, IGWG, PRB and EngenderHealth.

<sup>37</sup>FHI 360 (2012) *Gender Integration Framework: How to integrate gender in every aspect of our work*.

men and women.<sup>38</sup> As described by the CGIAR Research Program, a GTA goes beyond considering the ‘symptoms’ of gender inequality and instead **addresses the root causes** that underlie them, such as ‘social norms, attitudes, behaviors and social systems.’<sup>39</sup>

Such programmes **focus not only on changing social norms**<sup>40</sup> in relation to gender roles and expectations, but also on deconstructing the sources of (discriminatory) power that perpetuate the oppression of women.<sup>41</sup>

‘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

There are different levels of power, including individual access to information, education and skills (**knowledge**); access to economic resources

and assets, social capital and support (**resources**); and the ability to make decisions and take actions (**agency**). Gender-transformative programming aims to change the social relationships that undermine women’s access to all of these sources of power.<sup>42</sup>

‘The most important vehicle here is women’s education. When more women are educated and placed in better position[s], then will we actually talk of gender equality and, thus, [an] end to FGC.’

— Respondent from Sierra Leone

## GENDER EQUITY CONTINUUM

Gender-transformative approaches are part of a continuum of gender integration. Pederson, Greaves and Poole<sup>43</sup> developed a Gender Equity Continuum, focusing on approaches to gender and health, and a framework for gender-transformative health promotion.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>38</sup>Miranda Morgan (2014) *Measuring gender transformative change*, p.5. Penang, Malaysia: CGIAR Research Program on Aquatic Agricultural Systems. Programme Brief AAS-2014-41.

<sup>39</sup>CGIAR Research Program on Aquatic Agricultural Systems (2012) *Building Coalitions, Creating Change: An Agenda for Gender Transformative Research in Development*. Workshop Report AAS-2012-31.

<sup>40</sup>*There are important differences and similarities between social norms and gender norms. For a recent analysis, see Beniamino Cislighi and Lori Heise (2020) ‘Gender norms and social norms: differences, similarities and why they matter in prevention science’, *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 42(2), pp.407–422. Available at <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/1467-9566.13008> (accessed 24 July 2021).*

<sup>41</sup>Margaret E. Greene and Andrew Levack (2010) *Synchronizing Gender Strategies: A Cooperative Model for Improving Reproductive Health and Transforming Gender Relations*, p.4. USAID, IGWG, PRB and EngenderHealth.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*

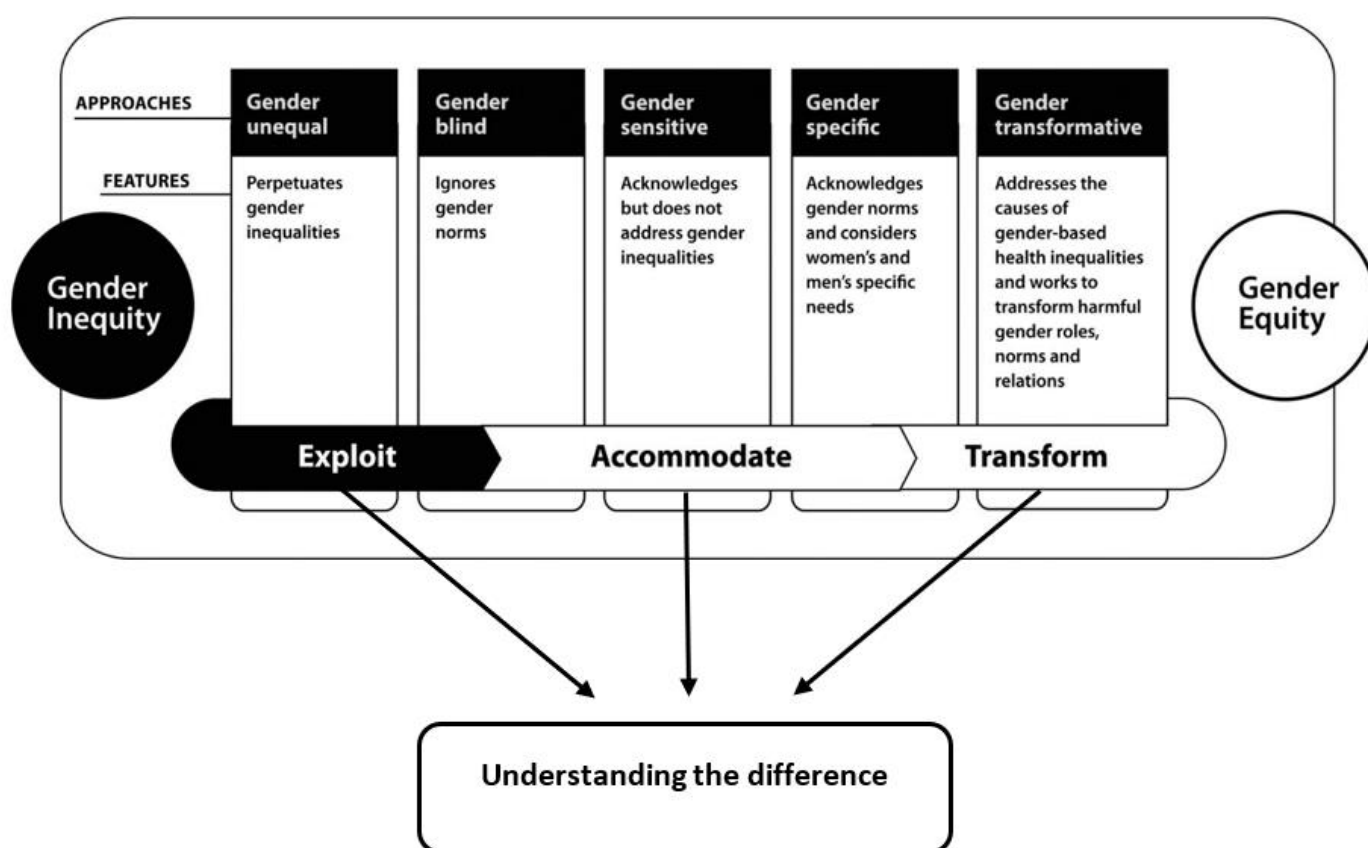
<sup>43</sup>Ann Pederson, Lorraine Greaves and Nancy Poole (2015) ‘Gender-transformative health promotion for women – a framework for action’, *Health Promotion International*, 30(1), pp.140–150.

<sup>44</sup>*This continuum is based on World Health Organization (undated) Gender Responsive Assessment Scale: criteria for assessing programmes and policies. WHO Gender Analysis Tools.*

‘More recently we have been sponsoring some girls through their secondary education, after we really noticed the difference in decision-making power of educated girls versus girls who had not had the chance to go to school. Through education, we support a number of girls and put them on an equal footing, not just in terms of decision-making about FGC, but we are putting them on the same level as boys in the community. As they are rising up, we’ll see more equality in leadership positions in the future.’

— Respondent from Kenya

Figure 2: Orchid Project Gender Equity Continuum.





Tostan declaration of abandonment ceremony, Senegal, 2017.

The tool on the previous page is to be read from left to right. It provides a clear overview of the different stages of a complex change process: from gender inequity to gender-sensitive, to gender-transformative and finally to the goal of gender equity.

According to this model, programmes should ultimately work towards transforming gender roles, norms and dynamics for positive and **sustainable change**.

Furthermore, this continuum illustrates that interventions can exploit, accommodate or transform gender roles, norms and power dynamics.

**The Continuum** can be used as a planning framework or as a diagnostic tool.<sup>45</sup>

As a **planning framework**, it can be used to determine how to design and plan interventions that move along the continuum towards gender-transformative change.

As a **diagnostic tool**, it can be used to assess if and how current interventions are identifying, examining and addressing gender considerations, and to determine how to move along the continuum towards more gender-transformative programming.<sup>46</sup>

‘The benefit of a gender-transformative approach is that it is a more sustainable way of ending FGC and improving the lives of women and girls in the community as a whole. Projects can address the other challenges that women face on account of their perceived role, creating more leadership and livelihood options for women, [and] boosting their independence from men and the marital home.’

— Respondent from Kenya

<sup>45</sup>Johns Hopkins University (2017) *SBCC and Gender: Models and Frameworks* [website].

<sup>46</sup>Johns Hopkins University (undated) *Gender and SBCC: Implementation Kit*.



## UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENCE<sup>47</sup>

### What are gender-exploitative programmes?

Programmes that (un)intentionally ‘reinforce or take advantage of gender inequalities and stereotypes in pursuit of project outcomes’ (or use approaches that exacerbate inequalities). ‘This approach is harmful and can undermine the objectives of the program in the long run.’

### What are gender-accommodating programmes?

Programmes that acknowledge existing gender norms, but work around existing gender differences and inequalities to achieve project outcomes. Although this approach can give short-term benefits and realise outcomes, it does not attempt to challenge inequitable gender norms or reduce gender inequality, nor does it address the gender systems that contribute to the differences and inequalities.

### What are gender-transformative programmes?

Programmes that seek to ‘transform gender relations to promote equity as a means to achieve program objectives.’ This approach critically examines, questions and changes rigid gender norms and imbalances of power. It addresses the causes of inequalities and works to transform gender roles, norms and relations.

## MEASURING GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE

A literature review conducted by CARE USA entitled ‘Measuring gender-transformative change: A review of literature and promising practices’<sup>48</sup> identified three broad, fundamental dimensions by which transformative change can be measured.

1. **Agency:** individual and collective capacities (knowledge and skills), attitudes, critical reflection, assets, actions, and access to services.
2. **(Gender) relations:** the expectations and cooperation or negotiation dynamics embedded within relationships between people in the home, market, community and groups/organisations.
3. **Structures:** the informal and formal institutional rules that govern collective, individual and institutional practices, such as environment, social norms, recognition and status.

These three domains offer a broad framework for understanding where change is needed to enhance gender equality. Research shows that these three key dimensions are deeply interconnected.

The next chapter provides an overview of the evidence of what works and learnings from other sectors that have taken GTAs.

<sup>47</sup>Interagency Gender Working Group (IGWG) (undated) *Gender Integration Continuum*.

<sup>48</sup>Emily Hillenbrand, Nidal Karim, Pranati Mohanraj and Diana Wu (2015) *Measuring gender-transformative change: A review of literature and promising practices*, p.5. CARE USA.

# The Evidence: What Works?

## A NEW NARRATIVE IN THE FGC SECTOR

The ‘gender-transformative narrative’ is new in the FGC sector. The literature search conducted for this paper confirmed that interventions aimed at eliminating FGC have not yet adequately incorporated gender-transformative approaches.<sup>49</sup> At the same time, there has recently been a **growing interest in gender transformation** in the FGC sector. For example, UN agencies mention GTAs in technical notes on ending child marriage<sup>50</sup> and FGC.<sup>51</sup> In addition, recent academic publications on the impact of cutting interventions are highlighting the importance of ‘transforming social and gender norms that perpetuate FGM/C’,<sup>52</sup> recommend an ‘approach that is gender-sensitive’<sup>53</sup> and suggest a need for information, education and

communication campaigns aimed at changing ‘negative gender attitudes regarding FGM/C.’<sup>54</sup>

Some important first steps have already been taken by civil-society organisations. For example, the Yes I Do programme in Ethiopia, which focuses on preventing child marriage, teenage pregnancy and female genital cutting, includes ‘Gender Transformative Thinking’ in its strategy.<sup>55</sup>

## FOUR DECADES OF EXPERIENCE IN OTHER SECTORS

Although the gender-transformative narrative is new in the field of FGC, transformative change in gender relations has been on the development agenda for more than four decades.<sup>56</sup> GTAs have been used in programming in various sectors,

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<sup>49</sup>As a consequence, no conclusive evidence exists that gender-transformative interventions can help end FGC.

<sup>50</sup>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*.

<sup>51</sup>UNICEF (2020) *Technical Note on Gender Transformative Approaches for the Elimination of Female Genital Mutilation*.

<sup>52</sup>Samuel Muhula, Anthony Mveyange, Samuel Oji Oti, Martha Bande, Hellen Kayiaa, Charles Leshore, David Kawai, Yvonne Opanga, Enock Marita, Sarah Karanja, Eefje Smet and Hilke Conradi (2021) ‘The impact of community led alternative rite of passage on eradication of female genital mutilation/cutting in Kajiado County, Kenya: A quasi-experimental study’, *PLoS ONE*, 16(4), e0249662.

<sup>53</sup>Sianga Mutola, Ngambouk Vitalis Pemunta, Ngo Valery Ngo, Ogem Irene Otang and Tabi Chama-James Tabenyang (2021) ‘The Fight against Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting among the Ejaghams of Cameroon: Kinks in the Legal Approach and Implications for Public Health Practice’, *International Journal of Sexual Health*, DOI: 10.1080/19317611.2021.1955075.

<sup>54</sup>Ameyaw, E.K., Anjorin, S., Ahinkorah, B.O. et al. (2021) ‘Women’s empowerment and female genital mutilation intention for daughters in Sierra Leone: a multilevel analysis’, *BMC Women’s Health*, 21(200).

<sup>55</sup>Lisa Juanola, Dr Abeje Kassegne, Dereje Tessema, Belayneh Worku, Almaz Mekonnen, Tensae Deneke, Dinu Abdella, Anke van der Kwaak (2020) *Endline report 2020: Preventing child marriage, teenage pregnancy and female genital mutilation/cutting in Bahir Dar Zuria and Kewet districts, Amhara region – Results of the Yes I Do programme in Ethiopia*, pp.60–61. KIT Royal Tropical Institute.

<sup>56</sup>See for example Christine Okali (2006) *Linking livelihoods and gender analysis for achieving gender transformative change*, p.29. FAO.

including the **agricultural**<sup>57</sup> and **health sectors**.<sup>58</sup> There is growing evidence of the importance of gender-transformative interventions, and research about the effectiveness of approaches for gender-integrated interventions is still expanding.

A few concrete examples of interventions that have incorporated a GTA and have proven to be successful are provided below.

The authors of these studies and systematic reviews included in this paper put forward recommendations about the effectiveness of GTAs not only in these particular sectors, but also more broadly in relation to tackling global-development challenges and achieving the SDGs. They conclude, for example, that programmes may underachieve in terms of gender equality and women's empowerment aims 'if they opt for approaches and strategies that seek to engage women but do not address underlying structural barriers, such as unequal norms and attitudes.'<sup>59</sup>

## EXAMPLE 1

### GTA in the Fisheries Sector

A study in the fisheries sector in **Zambia** showed that a GTA led to significant changes in attitudes to gender equality and women's empowerment.

Specifically, the study investigated the influence of a GTA on decision-making powers about the income generated through fishing, processing or trading fish; ownership of key value chain assets; and changes in gender attitudes within a broader harvest loss-reduction intervention.

The study concluded that using transformative approaches helped enable women to overcome social and technical barriers that constrained their lives and livelihoods.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>57</sup> - Franz Wong, Andrea Vos, Rhiannon Pyburn and Julie Newton (2019) *Implementing Gender Transformative Approaches in Agriculture*. CGIAR Collaborative Platform for Gender Research – A Discussion Paper for the European Commission.  
- Agricultural Technical Vocational Education & Training for Women Project (ATVET for Women Project) (2019) *Gender-Transformative Change in ATVET*.

<sup>58</sup> - Shegufta S. Sikder, Sneha Challa and Joan Marie Kraft (2020) *An Update on Effective Approaches for Gender-Integrated Interventions for Reproductive Health*, p.18. Population Reference Bureau.  
- Eimear Ruane-McAteer, Kathryn Gillespie, Avni Amin, Áine Aventin, Martin Robinson, Jennifer Hanratty and Rajat Khosla (2020) 'Gender-transformative programming with men and boys to improve sexual and reproductive health and rights: a systematic review of intervention studies', *BMJ Global Health* 5:e002997.

<sup>59</sup> Steven M. Cole, Alexander M. Kaminski, Cynthia McDougall, Alexander S. Kefi, Pamela A. Marinda, Modern Maliko and Johans Mtonga (2020) 'Gender accommodative versus transformative approaches: a comparative assessment within a post-harvest fish loss reduction intervention', *Gender, Technology and Development*, 24:1, pp.48–65, DOI: 10.1080/09718524.2020.1729480.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

## EXAMPLE 2

### A Gender-Transformative HIV-Prevention Intervention

A study on the effectiveness of a behaviour-change communication programme in relation to HIV prevention provided evidence of success in reducing sexually transmitted infections in women, changing men's sexual risk-taking behaviours and reducing men's use of violence. This programme aimed to improve sexual health by building stronger, more gender-equitable relationships with better communication between partners.

It was originally developed in the 1990s for use in **Uganda** and has ever since been used in more than 40 countries, adapted for different settings, and translated into different languages.<sup>61</sup>

## EXAMPLE 3

### A Gender-Transformative Intervention on Intimate Partner Violence

An evaluation of the impact of a gender-transformative intervention designed to prevent intimate partner violence in **Tanzania** provided evidence that the intervention was effective in reducing emotional abuse and positively impacting attitudes and beliefs about intimate partner violence.

The intervention aimed to empower women, prevent intimate partner violence and promote healthy relationships.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>61</sup>Rachel Jewkes, Mzikazi Nduna, Jonathan Levin, Nwabisa Jama, Kristin Dunkle, Kate Wood, Mary Koss, Adrian Puren and Nata Duvvury (2007) *Evaluation of Stepping Stones: A gender transformative HIV prevention intervention*. Witwatersrand: South African Medical Research Council.

<sup>62</sup>Sheila Harvey, Tanya Abramsky, Gerry Mshana, Christian Holm Hansen, Grace J Mtolela, Flora Madaha, Ramadhan Hashim, Imma Kapinga, Charlotte Watts, Shelley Lees, Saidi Kapiga (2021) 'A cluster randomised controlled trial to evaluate the impact of a gender transformative intervention on intimate partner violence against women in newly formed neighbourhood groups in Tanzania', *BMJ Global Health*, 6:e004555.



## KEY LEARNINGS

Various key learnings have arisen from evaluating the impact of gender-transformative programming. These can be found below.

These learnings could be considered when designing a gender-transformative programme or intervention aimed at eliminating FGC.

### Multilevel approaches are more effective

Research has shown that multilevel approaches – that is, interventions that are working simultaneously on different levels – are more effective than interventions focused at a single level.

Various systematic reviews of intervention studies in relation to GTAs in the field of sexual- and reproductive-health rights (SRHR) concluded that multilevel programming that reaches beyond target groups to mobilise the wider community and targets societal structures, including policies and institutions, to adopt egalitarian gender norms and practices are more effective and achieve longer-lasting effects.<sup>63</sup>

Similarly, a meta-evaluation by WHO provides evidence that gender-transformative SRHR

programmes that simultaneously address gender inequality at the individual, community and institutional levels have better outcomes compared to programmes that ignore the surrounding environment.<sup>64</sup> The reason is that a person's behaviour is influenced by many factors, both at the individual level and beyond.

These **levels of influence** can be summarised by a **socio-ecological model**.<sup>65</sup> A socio-ecological model considers the complex interplay between individual, interpersonal, community, institutional and policy/legislation levels.<sup>66</sup> Power imbalances and harmful gender norms at every level need to be addressed in order to achieve equality and facilitate sustainable social change.<sup>67</sup> The overlapping levels in the socio-ecological model show that they are, in reality, inseparable. They also show that (risk and protective) factors at one level influence factors at another level, and they must be viewed together to fully understand a programme's or intervention's contribution to gender equality.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Eimear Ruane-McAteer, Kathryn Gillespie, Avni Amin, Áine Aventin, Martin Robinson, Jennifer Hanratty and Rajat Khosla (2020) 'Gender-transformative programming with men and boys to improve sexual and reproductive health and rights: a systematic review of intervention studies', *BMJ Global Health*, 5:e002997.

- Anna Kågesten, Venkatraman Chandra-Mouli (2020) 'Gender-transformative programmes: implications for research and action', *The Lancet Global Health*, 8(2), pp.159–160.

<sup>64</sup> Rutgers (2018) *Gender Transformative Approaches – Knowledge File*, p.4.

<sup>65</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/>.

<sup>66</sup> See also Etienne G. Krug, Linda L. Dahlberg, James A. Mercy, Anthony B. Zwi and Rafael Lozano (eds.) (2002) *World report on violence and health*. World Health Organization. Available at [https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/42495/9241545615\\_eng.pdf?sequence=1](https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/42495/9241545615_eng.pdf?sequence=1) (accessed 24 July 2021).

<sup>67</sup> Rutgers (undated) *Rutger's Gender Transformative Approach Toolkit*.

<sup>68</sup> For more information, see also the risk and protective factors in the WHO RESPECT Women Framework that is based on the socio-ecological model: World Health Organization (2019) *RESPECT Women: Preventing violence against women*, pp.6–7. Available at <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/312261/WHO-RHR-18.19-eng.pdf?ua=1> (accessed 24 July 2021).

‘It is very necessary to work on different levels at the same time. You can start in the community, be a change agent, an example. But successful change can only happen when you also focus outside your community and try to influence all different levels. That is why we also work with the government.’

— Respondent from Kenya

### Intersectional perspective is needed

Research shows that, to be truly transformative, interventions and programmes must use an intersectional perspective to address the links between gender and other social markers of difference, such as class, race, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, poverty and disability.<sup>69</sup> The overlapping effects of different aspects of status and identity can magnify the results of gender inequalities and restrictive gender norms.

### Boys and men should be involved

Evidence shows that failing to involve men in gender-transformative interventions can lead to resentment and a worsening of gender attitudes and relations. Working with and supporting boys and men is necessary to embrace positive masculinities and to promote gender equality. Programmes that are aimed at both men and women are more effective than those aimed solely at women. For example, historically, family-planning programmes were often directed only towards women. However, positive male engagement in SRHR interventions improves partner communication and brings about more gender-equitable attitudes.<sup>70</sup>

‘Men and boys can play a vital role in challenging gender norms and roles in our community, both as educators as well as change makers. . . . They hold the power as well as the resources.’

— Respondent from the UK

<sup>69</sup> - Anna Kågesten, Venkatraman Chandra-Mouli (2020) ‘Gender-transformative programmes: implications for research and action’, *The Lancet Global Health*, 8(2), pp.159–160.

- Jessica K. Levy, Gary L. Darmstadt, Caitlin Ashby, Mary Quandt, Erika Halsey, Aishwarya Nagar and Margaret E. Greene (2020) ‘Characteristics of successful programmes targeting gender inequality and restrictive gender norms for the health and wellbeing of children, adolescents, and young adults: a systematic review’, *The Lancet Global Health*, 8(2).

- Rutgers (2018) *Gender Transformative Approaches – Knowledge File*, p.4

- Women’s Health Victoria (2019) ‘Towards Gender Transformative Change: A Guide For Practitioners’, *Women’s Health Victoria Knowledge Paper*, Issue 3, December 2019.

<sup>70</sup>USAID (2013) *From family planning to fatherhood: Analysis of recent male involvement initiatives and scale-up potential*. Institute for Reproductive Health, Georgetown University.

‘Both men and women are responsible for protecting our girls against FGC.’  
— Respondent from Kenya



Tostan declaration of abandonment ceremony, Senegal, 2017.

### It is a long-term strategy

True gender transformation is possible, but it is clearly a long-term strategy. It requires sustained effort, time and investments to change harmful gender norms and imbalances of power that advantage boys and men rather than girls and women. The GTA seeks to tackle the root causes of gender inequality and – as already highlighted by several UN agencies – this ‘may take generations and cannot be achieved by a single programme.’<sup>71</sup>

<sup>71</sup>UNFPA and UNICEF (2020) *Technical Note on Gender Norms*. UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage.

# Conclusions and Recommendations

## GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL

This paper has explored the potential of a gender-transformative approach (GTA) in future programmes and interventions aimed at accelerating the abandonment of FGC.

The literature search conducted for this paper provided empirical evidence of the effectiveness of gender-transformative interventions in other sectors.

Promising examples of programmes from around the world showed how a GTA moves beyond instrumentalist interventions and **addresses the underlying causes of gender inequality**.

Interventions with GTAs work successfully to transform power dynamics and structures that reinforce gender inequality.

The UNFPA-UNICEF Joint Programme concluded the following in the joint evaluation of Phase I and II (Conclusion 4: Gender Transformation):<sup>72</sup>

‘There is significant potential to better define its gender equality approach and to use this clarity to further secure international resources dedicated towards gender equality and gender transformation.’

The potential of GTAs lies in the proposition of addressing the foundations of gender inequity. Gender-transformative programmes and interventions include concerted efforts to make **deeper, wider and more lasting contributions** for gender equality, not just for individual women.<sup>73</sup>

Considering that gender inequality is a root cause and driver of FGC, specific gender-transformative interventions that acknowledge and address harmful gender norms seem to be required to **achieve sustained, positive change** for women and to realise SDG Target 5.3 to end FGC by 2030.

Within a relatively new field, it is important to acknowledge that we still need to understand better how gender-transformative approaches, which require long-term strategies and commitment to achieving sustainable change, fit together with programmes that aim to end FGC, which are often short-term.

<sup>72</sup>UNFPA-UNICEF Joint Programme (2019) *Joint Evaluation of the UNFPA-UNICEF Joint Programme on the Abandonment of Female Genital Mutilation: Accelerating Change Phase I and Phase II (2008–2017): Evaluation Report*. Volume 1, pp.XI–XII.

<sup>73</sup>Emily Hillenbrand, Nidal Karim, Pranati Mohanraj and Diana Wu (2015) *Measuring gender-transformative change: A review of literature and promising practices*, p.5. CARE USA.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper showed the potential of adopting GTAs in future programmes and interventions aimed at eliminating female genital cutting and achieving lasting change. However, further research is necessary to truly understand how gender-transformative interventions and programmes can shift harmful gender norms and promote equitable environments in the context of FGC.

To this end, we offer recommendations as to how different stakeholders can take action and address the research gap, so that a more conclusive understanding of the impact of gender-transformative approaches to ending cutting can be gained.

### Funders/Donors

- To test and build evidence of what 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 to end FGC that incorporate GTAs.

### Researchers and Academia

- Conduct further research into GTAs; for example, on how to design, implement, monitor and evaluate gender-transformative programming that addresses 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 ending FGC that integrate GTAs (longitudinal studies).

### Policymakers/Government Institutions

Because a gender-transformative approach will challenge power dynamics, it is inherently a political process that requires a political commitment to the process.

- 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, to ensure interventions acknowledge and address harmful gender norms and power structures identified by girls and women.
- 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 (or 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 key learnings outlined in this paper.
- Influence governments to incorporate gender-transformative approaches in their efforts to tackle female genital cutting.
- Integrate female genital cutting into other gender-transformative programmes on gender-based violence and sexual- and reproductive-health rights.

## NEXT STEPS

The successful integration of gender-transformative approaches in future programmes and interventions to eliminate female genital cutting requires technical knowledge and understanding of the gender-specific realities of women and men in the context of FGC.

We therefore propose to organise an **expert consultation** entitled ‘Integrating a gender-transformative approach to FGC programming’, to transform knowledge into good practice. This consultation could bring together experts from the fields of gender, health and development. Participants could review existing interventions aimed at ending FGC, draw upon the key learnings in this paper and suggest a set of practical recommendations and guidelines for different types of stakeholders to address gender effectively within future FGC programmes and interventions.

### Reflections of a grassroots organisation in Kenya

‘We are already doing something that is similar to a gender-transformative approach. We have adapted our methods and interventions[;] it is a journey that evolves.

‘For example, when we go to the community to talk about the issue of men and women and address gender, the male and female project managers of our organization always go together. We have an equal role to play, not separate from one another: we are leading by example.’



*Realizing gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls will make a crucial contribution to progress across all the Goals and targets. The achievement of full human potential and of sustainable development is not possible if one half of humanity continues to be denied its full human rights and opportunities.\**



\* United Nations (undated) 'Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development', *Sustainable Development Goals Knowledge Platform*, para. 20.

# Annex I

## Online Survey

### GENDER NORMS & FGC

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this online survey focused on gender norms and FGC. As a frontline activist working with communities to end FGC, your lived experiences are incredibly valuable to help shape future programmes.

Your feedback will be included in a policy paper Orchid Project is writing outlining how a gender-transformative approach (GTA) could be used within FGC programmes to help change the gender norms that often drive forward the practice of FGC. This policy paper will be shared on Orchid Project's website, social media and in upcoming events.

The survey should take approximately 30-45 mins and is divided into 9 key themes. You can choose to answer anonymously by simply leaving the 'name' and 'organisation' field blank.

*\*\*\*A gender-transformative approach (GTA) is defined as an approach which 'examines, questions and changes rigid gender norms and imbalances of power that advantage boys and men over girls and women.'\*\*\**

\*Required

### SECTION 1: PERSONAL INFORMATION

In this section we would like to know a little more about you. You do not have to share your name or contact information if you do not want to, but we would like to know the country you are based in.

**Name**

Your answer

**Organisation**

Your answer

**Contact email**

Your answer

**Country you are based in \***

Your answer

**Do you want your responses to be anonymous (i.e. we may still quote you in the policy paper but will not include your name or organisation)? \***

Choose

**Would you like to participate in a follow-up focus group discussion? \***

Yes

No

**If yes, to the question above please provide us your name and email address. We will use this information to invite you to an online focus group discussion.**

Your answer

## **SECTION 2: GENDER NORMS AND POWER IN YOUR COMMUNITY**

In this section we want to understand the power and gender dynamics that exist in your community and how that affects behaviours and decisions.

**In your community are there roles for people depending on their gender? Could you give examples of those roles? \***

Your answer

**What are the behaviour expectations of women in your community/society? \***

Your answer

**What are the behaviour expectations of men in your community/society? \***

Your answer

**What are the power dynamics between genders in your community? Who holds power in the community? \***

Your answer

**Do you speak about gender in your community? If so, how often? \***

Your answer

## **SECTION 3: EXPERIENCE IN WORKING ON FGC AND GENDER**

In this section we would like to hear more about your experience of working to end female genital cutting and how you engage on issues like gender in your community.

**In your work to end FGC, how do you actively talk about gender norms and gender roles with people in your community? \***

Your answer

## **SECTION 4: LINKS BETWEEN GENDER NORMS AND FGC**

In this section we would like to hear your opinion about the links between gender norms and FGC and whether gender norms play a part in driving the practice of FGC.



**In your community, what are the reasons for the continued practice of FGC? \***

Your answer

**Are there any links between gender norms, gender roles and the practice of FGC in your community? If so, what are they? Could you give examples? \***

Your answer

**What is to your mind the link between gender inequality and FGC? \***

Your answer

## **SECTION 5: BENEFITS OF A GENDER TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACH TO ENDING FGC**

In this section we would like to hear your opinion on whether actively challenging gender norms in your community could have a positive impact on ending FGC.

*\*\*\*A gender-transformative approach (GTA) is defined as an approach which 'examines, questions and changes rigid gender norms and imbalances of power that advantage boys and men over girls and women.'\*\*\**

**Would changing gender norms in your community have an impact on FGC? If so, how? \***

Your answer

**Do you think there are any benefits in using an approach that specifically challenges gender roles in efforts to end FGC in your community? If so, what are they? \***

Your answer

## **SECTION 6: BARRIERS OF USING A GENDER TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACH TO ENDING FGC**

In this section we want to hear from you what you think could be the barriers of using an approach that is specifically trying to challenge gender norms and power dynamics in the community.

**What might be some of the challenges in trying to change gender norms, gender roles, power dynamics in your community? What do you think could help overcome these challenges? \***

Your answer

## **SECTION 7: ROLE OF MEN AND BOYS IN ENDING FGC**

In this section we would like to hear what role you think men and boys can play in ending FGC in your community and your experience of engaging men and boys in your work.

**Is there a role for men and boys engaged in challenging gender norms, gender roles and ending FGC in your community/society? \***

Your answer

**What impact would engaging men and boys have on ending FGC? \***

Your answer

**How do you engage men and boys in your work to end FGC? \***

Your answer

## **SECTION 8: THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON GENDER NORMS, GENDER ROLES AND FGC IN YOUR COMMUNITY**

As we face unprecedented times with the COVID-19 pandemic, we know that the pandemic and restrictions that have been put in place have had an adverse effect on people's lives. In this section, we would like to hear your experience and opinions on how the pandemic has affected gender roles within your community/society.

**What impact has the COVID-19 pandemic had on the power dynamics in your local community? \***

Your answer

**Have there been differences in how men and women, girls and boys have been affected by the pandemic? \***

Your answer

**How has the practice of FGC been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic? \***

Your answer

## **SECTION 9: ACHIEVEMENT OF GENDER EQUALITY**

In this final section, we want to hear your opinions on what is needed for us to achieve gender equality.

**The 2030 Agenda and SDG goal 5 focuses on the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. What do you think is necessary to reach this goal? How do you think gender-equality can be reached? \***

Your answer

\*\*\*Thank you\*\*\*

## Annex II

# Topic Guide: Focus Group Discussions

**Date:** [...]

**Time:** [...]

**Facilitators:** [...]

**Participants:** [...]

### 1. INTRODUCTIONS (10 MINS)

- Thank everyone for their time today and for completing the online survey
- A brief overview of the GTA paper:
  - Exploring whether a gender-transformative approach could prove beneficial in accelerating abandonment of FGC; exploring how GTA has been used by other sectors (e.g. VAW)
  - The final product is a paper that outlines key recommendations for the sector to consider - want this paper to be useful to a range of stakeholders from grassroots organisations to research bodies and policy-makers
- Emphasise critical role of grassroots organisations:
  - Often closest to the issues and communities where FGC is happening
  - Often on the cusp of transformative change
  - Know better than most the challenges and opportunities for ending FGC
- Overview of the focus group discussion:
  - Conversational - want to hear perspectives and ideas from the group
- Checklist:
  - Permission to record - would be used to review and ensure we've captured key points and quotes
  - Permission to include quotes in the final paper
  - Any questions from participants

### 2. THEME: POWER DYNAMICS IN THE COMMUNITY (20 MINS)

- Unpacking power dynamics within the community
- How has this evolved over time?
- Has the role of men/women changed? Why? How?

### 3. THEME: POTENTIAL OF GTA ON ACCELERATING AN END TO FGC (20 MINS)

- What is your perception of the gender transformative approach?
- What impact could GTA have on ending FGC? How can we realise that?

### 4. THEME: SOLUTIONS FOR TO ACCELERATE CHANGE (20 MINS)

- How are grassroots organisations seeing change happen?
- What needs to happen next to accelerate an end to FGC and achieve SDG5 (gender equality)?
- Bring in socio-ecological model - change at different levels

### 5. CLOSE & NEXT STEPS (20 MINS)

# Here's how you can help

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## JOIN OUR COMMUNITY

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## GET IN TOUCH



[www.orchidproject.org](https://www.orchidproject.org)



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WORKING TOGETHER TO END  
FEMALE GENITAL CUTTING