

FGM as a social norm: a pilot project exploring the role of gatekeeper engagement and community ownership in ending Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting in select states in Nigeria.

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AIM:

To demonstrate that by engaging with Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C) as a social norm, meaningful change can be achieved in four select states in Nigeria where FGM/C prevalence rates are particularly high.

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVE:

- To better understand – at a community level – how FGM/C functions as a social norm
- To identify opportunities to scale up FGM work in a targeted and effective way
- To create safe spaces for changing harmful social norms and shifting gender inequities.
- Scale up interventions for ending violence against women
- To witness tangible change in our four selected States - Ebonyi, Imo, Osun and Oyo

BACKGROUND:

Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting is the total or partial removal of the external female genitalia for non-medical reasons. Nigeria has 27% prevalence rates of FGM/C which is mostly in the South Western and Eastern parts of Nigeria (NDHIS, 2013).

In some communities in Nigeria, it is believed that undergoing FGM/C is a necessary way of socializing women, through a rite of passage into womanhood and controlling their sexuality, despite its potential harm to the physical, reproductive, and psychological health of the woman as well as an infringement on her rights.

This project led by young people under 30, funded by AmplifyChange UK, is aimed at transforming social norms underpinning the practice of FGM/C in four select states in Nigeria with high FGM/C prevalence namely Ebonyi, Imo, Osun and Oyo State. The project which served as a pilot scheme also studied how gatekeeper engagement in target communities can help end gender-based violence with a focus on FGM/C. It also aimed at studying the relevance of

community ownership towards changing social norms that underpin gender-based violence as well as what steps can lead to effective declarations of abandonment in these communities.

METHOD:

A mapping study was conducted across the four focal states to identify gatekeepers comprising of traditional leaders, religious leaders, women and youth leaders, ex-cutters and leaders of the Circumcisers Association of Nigeria. Following successful mapping, advocacy visits were paid to the identified gatekeepers. An interesting component of these visits was that they were led by youth. Three social norm change communications trainings were conducted by youth members of the team simultaneously across the four states. These trainings engaged leaders of the Circumcisers Association of Nigeria, ex-cutters and community members to push for a transformational intergenerational shift that will see an end to FGM/C and other forms of violence against women and girls. We also conducted knowledge sharing sessions to reinforce gatekeepers' understanding of values, sanctions and interdependent actions that produce harmful social norms such as FGM/C.

To keep in line with Global best practices, sessions were conducted on the UNICEF six elements of abandonment covering: Power through Human Rights, Non-judgemental open dialogue, Collective choice, Visible change, Active networking, and Creating an enabling environment. We also applied "Do No Harm" as part of our methodology, calling on community readiness to end FGM/C and to understand the communication analysis for social change.

Furthermore, 7 community dialogues were organized across the target communities where issues around gender-based violence and harmful traditional practices were discussed by community members. Community members gave commitments on their roles as agents of change to drive the movement to end harmful cultural practices underpinning FGM/C.

At the end of the project, I spent time in Nigeria with 10 other grantees of Amplify Change learning about social norm change at a dedicated Knowledge Sharing Workshop which gave us an opportunity to share best practices and offer solutions to cross-cutting challenges.

Photo Gallery



RESULTS/IMPACT

- The project improved our understanding of FGM/C as a social norm at community level and enabled us identify opportunities of policy change and evidence gathering to scale up our work in an effective way through gatekeeper engagement and community ownership.
- Through the project we were able to spark up discussions, creating coalitions and movements for shifting attitudes and beliefs underpinning FGM and this have created a platform for scaling up interventions in the four focal states we worked in.
- One major outcome of the project is the formation of the first ever coordinated body of youth groups working to end FGM/C in Nigeria which has yielded a cascade of anti-FGM/C activities in the focal states culminating in public declaration of abandonment by multiple communities and clans.
- As a result of the project, some members of the Circumcisers Association of Nigeria abandoned the practice and are currently engaging with their former colleagues to abandon the practice.
- The project has increased media reportage of the issue, driving awareness on the harmful effects of FGM/C and informing state-level anti-FGM/C policies in the focal states. An example was the reinforcement of the Ebonyi and Imo state anti-FGM law as a result of the project.

CONCLUSION/POLICY IMPLICATION

The results of this project show that young people's innovative application of a non-judgemental, open dialogue engagement with key influencers and gatekeepers at the community level is an important approach in changing harmful social norms such as female genital mutilation/cutting. The policy implication of the project is that it has enabled the Ebonyi and Imo state government to review their anti-FGM policies thereby, strengthening efforts to work on the issues. Oyo and Osun state are in the process of adopting the VAPP Act for state-level interventions. It will also inform the change of punitive government policies in tackling these norms which has pushed FGM/C underground. Furthermore, the results of this project will lead to shifting gender inequities, scaling up of interventions, and ending Violence against Women.