

Webinar “Empowering allies: engaging men and boys in the fight against Female Genital Mutilation”

Summary Report

Wednesday, 22nd May 2024, 10.00 hrs. (EST)



Opening remarks

Julia Bradu-Renault, head of the Regional Programme “Improving the Prevention of Female Genital Mutilation in the Horn of Africa” implemented by GIZ, welcomed all participants to the webinar, including state and civil society partners from Somalia and Ethiopia, colleagues from GIZ, and representatives from international organizations and the German Embassy in Ethiopia.

She emphasized the important involvement of men and boys in their roles as fathers, husbands, and community leaders to promote social and gender norm change and eliminate FGM practices in all forms. “Changing attitudes requires time and concerted efforts”, Bradu-Renault stated and further emphasized: “We must acknowledge the significance of this topic within our partner communities, our organization, and GIZ teams. One practical approach is to create respectful spaces for discussing the root causes and raising awareness of the consequences.” In her opening remarks, it became clear that apart from the health impacts, FGM also affects women's and girls' identity, their self-esteem, well-being, and participation in society. In this context, challenging restrictive gender norms is not solely the responsibility of girls and women.

Carlotta Preiss, Deputy Head of Cooperation at the German Embassy in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia extended a warm welcome to the webinar participants from Ethiopia and Somalia. Preiss expressed that the German government is strongly dedicated to backing all efforts to eliminate FGM. A key aspect of this mission is persuading individuals and communities that there are no valid medical, religious, or cultural reasons for performing FGM on girls. She highlighted that parents who hold significant influence must be empowered to recognize the severe consequences of FGM, such as high risks of birth complications, pain, infections, and other health issues. She also highlighted that the German feminist development policy emphasizes advancing gender equality and women's rights as essential elements of sustainable development. Preiss appreciated the aim of the webinar to examine the crucial role of men and boys as allies in challenging harmful norms and promoting gender-equitable attitudes to eradicate FGM.

Presentation Project Publication “Working for Sustainable Change – Best practices from the GIZ Regional Programme on the Prevention of Female Genital Mutilation in Ethiopia, Sudan and Somalia.”

Hanna Lena Reich, Technical Advisor GIZ FGM-Prev Project, presented the project publication and mentioned that the concept of this brochure is to showcase two successful activities from the previous project phase, namely the Generation Dialogues and the Community-Initiative Fund (COIN-Fund). These activities are significant strides towards eradicating FGM. Their success stemmed from being community-driven and initially adopting a non-judgmental approach, starting a change from within the communities. You can download the brochure here: [giz2024-en-fgm-sustainable-change.pdf](#)

Moderated Discussion

Hanna Lena Reich, GIZ Technical Advisor, and Hodan Duale, Component Manager Somalia, moderated the discussion with five panelists from Ethiopia and Somalia. The panelists were representing partner organizations from the Generation Dialogue and COIN-Fund activities as well as beneficiaries from these efforts.

Panelist:

- **Mohamed Abdirahman;** Deputy Country Representative, Tearfund Somaliland
- **Mohamed Ahmed Osman;** Youth Activist and Beneficiary of Generation Dialogue, Mogadishu
- **Mahdi Osman;** Executive Director of TAAKULO Community Development Volunteers, Puntland
- **Tagel Teshome;** Regional Bureau of Women and Social Affairs, Somali Region (Ethiopia)
- **Mohamed Badel,** Executive Director Relief and Development for Vulnerable, Somali Region (Ethiopia)

Question 1: What is the role of Men in Somali/Ethiopian Society? How is this role linked to the practice of Female Genital Mutilation?

- ✓ In the Somali region of Ethiopia, men traditionally hold positions of authority and decision-making power within their communities. As a man, there are certain expectations regarding providing for the family, upholding cultural traditions, and preserving societal norms. Unfortunately, these expectations often include endorsing practices like Female Genital Mutilation, which persists in many communities despite its harmful effects. Men have significant influence over the practice of FGM.
- ✓ Discussions among men about FGM can range widely. It might be openly debated in some communities, while in others, it remains a taboo subject. Men's opinions can span from solid support for the practice to increasing recognition of its harmful effects and a readiness to abandon it.
- ✓ In the Somali region, Kebridahar specifically, it is uncommon for boys and men to engage in discussions about harmful practices. While men are nowadays involved in awareness-raising activities, conversations about FGM are still new to many of them. Hearing male perspectives on FGM is a potentially effective approach to raising public awareness in the area on the topic. Generational dialogue has been successfully implemented in Kebridahar, with both older and younger men actively participating in dialogue sessions and public meetings throughout the project period.

Question 2: Which approaches involving men and boys have been implemented in your communities? How could they be involved more?

- ✓ Engaging male religious and community leaders is crucial in efforts to eradicate Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) because they often hold significant influence over community practices and norms. Identifying influential male figures to publicly speak about the practice and abandon it, is an important activity.
- ✓ The use of dialogue across generations (GD) has been effective in promoting mutual understanding and cooperation in addressing FGM. Younger and older men engage in discussions about FGM from different perspectives, with younger generations frequently questioning and challenging traditional beliefs and older generations offering insight into historical contexts and cultural nuances.
- ✓ Addressing FGM requires a comprehensive approach that includes education and awareness, cultural sensitivity, dialogue and collaboration, empowerment of women, religious interpretation, community mobilization, a solid legal framework, peer influence, adequate resource allocation, and long-term engagement.
- ✓ Successful activities engaged men through dialogue sessions to challenge harmful practices and promote gender equality within their communities, encouraging active participation in the fight against FGM.

Question 3: Please tell us about your personal involvement as an ally in the fight against Female Genital Mutilation in Somalia/Ethiopia.

- ✓ The biggest challenge for men speaking out against FGM is often overcoming societal expectations and confronting entrenched cultural norms. There may be resistance from other men who perceive advocacy against FGM as a threat to traditional values or masculine identity in Somalia and Ethiopia. However, allies persist in their efforts by engaging in constructive dialogue, providing education, and challenging misconceptions.
- ✓ Our advocacy strategies in the fight against FGM include personally engaging in Generation Dialogue sessions, participating in awareness campaigns, supporting community-led initiatives, and collaborating with organizations dedicated to ending FGM. We actively leverage our networks and platforms to amplify our message and mobilize support for anti-FGM efforts.

Remaining questions from the participants to be addressed:

Some questions could not be addressed during the webinar. The speakers submitted their responses to the GIZ team, who compiled the following summary:

What is the motivation for men to marry a circumcised woman? (Are they aware about the physical and mental implications and risks?)

- ✓ Often, FGM is seen as a guarantee for the girl being a virgin when she will get married. Linked to this is the idea of a girl being “clean” and “pure” when she is cut. But this issue is now slowly changing in the main towns where a lot of awareness is conducted but highly remains in the rural village.
- ✓ The other issue is lack of awareness of the effects and health hazards caused by the FGM to women and girls. Very often, it is not something that has been discussed openly with men resulting in them not being aware of the physical and psychological issues women are facing.

For the men in the project areas, what would be the most convincing arguments to accept or even prefer a woman as a wife who is not cut?

- ✓ One convincing argument could be that virginity is not ensured by cutting a woman, but it is rather a personal choice and linked to faith.
- ✓ One consequence of FGM is that especially during their periods, women face health issues and might not be able to work and lose productivity. This could lead to economic difficulties that affect the whole family.
- ✓ FGM is not rooted in Islam and using religious scholars who are well-known and could promote this view, would convince many people.
- ✓ Making clear that uncut girls are healthier than cut girls.

What is the motivation for women, especially mothers, to pass on such a harmful practice to their daughters (given their own painful experiences with FGM)?

- ✓ They believe that FGM protects them from engaging in sexual activities and therefore guarantee that they will keep their virginity till marriage.
- ✓ They believe it is rooted in Islam and use their faith as an explanation why they continue the practice.
- ✓ They believe that uncut girls will face difficulties in finding a husband. In communities where being married goes along with economic stability, this is a main motivation.

How is the prevalence of FGM among educated women in the Horn of Africa or anywhere in the world? Is there a reduction of FGM if women are more educated?

- ✓ Although we lack disaggregated data to provide concrete evidence, discussions with stakeholders throughout the project phase suggest that higher levels of education among women correlate with a reduced likelihood of becoming victims of or perpetuating the practice of FGM.

Are there any plans or activities already to include FGM in school curricula?

- ✓ Currently, no schools have incorporated FGM prevention into their curricula. Nevertheless, there have been talks within government ministries, including the Ministries of Women, Justice, and Education, regarding the inclusion of FGM prevention measures in the curriculum. However, these measures have not yet been put into effect.

Is FGM more related to culture and traditions or is there a linkage with religion? Could you describe these linkages?

- ✓ FGM is intertwined with both cultural traditions and religious beliefs, though its roots and justification vary in each local context.
- ✓ Primarily, FGM is a cultural issue. It is deeply embedded in cultural practices related to concepts of cleanliness, virginity, and the protection of girls.
- ✓ Regarding religion, the connection is more complex. While some proponents argue that FGM is rooted in Islamic tradition, there is no unanimous agreement among religious scholars. Most religious groups contend that sayings from the Prophet Muhammad on this subject are not entirely reliable or authoritative. Even if some references exist, many scholars emphasize that other more reliable teachings from the Prophet advocate for the elimination of practices that harm human life and well-being. Therefore, in this context, FGM should be viewed as incompatible with the core values of the religion, which prioritize the health and safety of individuals.

- ✓ The lack of consensus among religious authorities and the emphasis on health and well-being in religious teachings provide a strong basis for challenging and ultimately eliminating the practice.

Concluding remarks

Ronny Bechmann, Head of Section Regional Programmes Africa at GIZ, emphasized that FGM is a deeply rooted custom, often perceived as a necessary religious or cultural practice that elevates the status of girls and women in society. The religious and cultural institutions that perpetuate these beliefs, and are crucial in eradicating them, are predominantly controlled by men. This underscores the significant role men play, offering them the opportunity to contribute positively to societal change, including the elimination of FGM. Our efforts require the support of men who understand the impact of FGM on their wives, sisters, daughters, mothers, and women in general.

Ronny added that, as a man and a father, he was grateful for the opportunity to hear the speakers' insights and their experience in Ethiopia and Somalia on raising awareness on such an important topic as a man. He expressed his gratitude for the men who dare to speak up and support women in eradicating the harmful practice of FGM.

He highlighted that FGM and other forms of Gender-Based Violence are often seen as issues concerning only women. Let's encourage both men and women to unite, leveraging their strengths in the fight against FGM for a better life. He concluded by expressing hope that everyone will persist, remain resilient, and stay motivated in this effort.